Syria's relationship with the U.S. is at a historic low. Most recently, the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad and his Ba’ath Party has killed thousands of people in an effort to crush domestic unrest that began as part of the Arab Spring. Since August 2011, President Obama has been calling for Assad to relinquish power.

Syria is a state sponsor of terrorism and receives significant financial and military assistance from Iran. Since 1979, Syria has maintained deep relationships with HAMAS, Hizbollah, and other terror groups. Since Syria is Iran's only major ally in the region, the Assad regime's survival remains extremely important to Tehran. The senior U.S. military commander for the Middle East, General James Mattis, said Syria's collapse would be the single largest strategic setback for Iran in 20 years.

The relationship wasn’t always so bad. Assad's father, Hafez, cooperated with the U.S. during the 1991 Gulf War, and Syria has maintained relative stability along the border with Israel since 1973. But U.S.-Syria relations have been strained ever since Operation Iraqi Freedom, which Syria opposed. Assad's brutality in dealing with the uprising could prove to be the last straw.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Syrian government is violently repressing its own people. Despite international efforts to halt the bloodshed, Syria has continued to fight various insurgent groups throughout the country, with some success. But Assad's gains have come only with an ever-increasing level of brutality, including the shelling of neighborhoods by Syrian troops and truly barbaric attacks on civilians—including children—by the “Shabiha” thugs who support the regime. This violence has created a large humanitarian crisis, as tens of thousands of refugees have fled into neighboring countries. Syria's political instability is also beginning to spill into neighboring Lebanon.
• However, the conflict in Syria remains complex and dangerous with few easy solutions. Since Syria poses no direct threat to the U.S, there is little basis in international law for unilateral American military intervention. While events may rapidly change, the allies have not used military force for several reasons:

  - **The international community is divided about how to proceed.** The Arab League does not support the use of force or arming the Syrian rebels, stating that the best course of action is to implement a (so far largely ignored) United Nations (UN) ceasefire plan. But the UN Security Council is hamstrung because China and Russia are unwilling to authorize a direct intervention in the country.

  - **The Syrian rebels are not a cohesive fighting force, and we remain unsure about their reliability and political allegiances.** The U.S. military reports there are more than 100 separate anti-government groups, such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council. Arming and training rebels in such an environment can have severe post-conflict consequences. Indeed, some Islamists and al Qaeda-affiliated fighters may be working with other Syrian rebel groups.

  - **Direct military intervention could make the situation worse.** While U.S-led military options remain on the table, Syria remains a densely populated country—two-thirds of Iraq’s population in 40% of the area—and the potential for drawn-out, urban combat and ever greater bloodshed on all sides remains a real possibility.

  - **Syria is awash in unconventional weapons.** Syria has one of the largest chemical and biological weapons stockpiles in the world—invading the country without simultaneously securing all the stockpiles could lead to catastrophe.

• **Senior U.S. military leaders believe Assad will fall—eventually.** Despite Damascus’ current advantages over the fractured rebellion, Syria has become diplomatically and financially isolated, even from the rest of the Middle East. The UN, EU, and the Arab League have condemned Damascus for its brutality. Importantly, the Arab League suspended Syria late last year from its organization.

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The U.S. continues to work with it’s allies and regional partners to quell the violence and end Assad’s regime.

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11 Statement by Leon E. Panetta, p. 18.

12 Statement by General James N. Mattis, p. 11.


14 Ibid, p. 11.