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**Research Report**

## Syria's sectarian quandary: Without solving Sunni dispossession, the Geneva talks skirt around the conflict

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## Syria's Sectarian Quandary

Without Solving Sunni Dispossession, the Geneva Talks Skirt around the Conflict

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

**A U.S. missile strike against the Assad regime in response to a suspected chemical weapons attack may have lessened a fear of Russia among countries that nominally back the Syrian opposition. Renewed U.S. diplomatic engagement in Syria could relieve pressure on the opposition to accept a settlement at the Geneva talks, which would be little more than a facelift of the Alawite-dominated regime. The international environment has lacked the balance to redress the disenfranchisement of Syria's majority Sunni population – a root cause of the war. European states hope to employ their reconstruction funding capacity. But stabilization remains far-fetched without a political transition and an inclusive system that can end the Assad clan's monopoly on power.**

Had the Syrian revolt toppled the Assad regime, it would have ushered in the political ascendancy of the country's Sunni majority. Since the 1960s, members of the Alawite minority have dominated the Soviet-styled security state – the lynchpin of Moscow's influence in Syria. Russia's military intervention since September 2015 has been marked by cycles of bombing, paper ceasefires and new talks. During every round of negotiations, the regime and its mostly Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia allies continued to empty largely Sunni population centers that have been at the heart of the rebellion. The Russian air campaign hit the non-jihadist rebels hard and robbed them of backers. It helped the al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly known as Nusra Front) absorb other components of the armed opposition.

After bombing the non-jihadists into near submission, Russia – profiting from the diplomatic slumber in Washington – organized talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The Astana talks split the rebels but might have freed up the main U.N. process in Geneva to pursue a political transition. The United States struck an Assad regime air base in April 2017, after chemical weapons killed at least 70 people – many of them children – in the rebel town of Khan Sheikhoun in northern Syria. Some U.S. officials called the strike “a one-off.” It has not been followed, as of yet, by any previously mooted U.S. measures, such as no-fly or safe zones. However, it signals that the United States might no longer be willing to cede Syria to Moscow and Tehran. The unchecked supremacy of the two countries in Syria has dampened the prospects for an inclusive

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political arrangement capable of ending the sectarian conundrum.

### **Russia Overshadows Geneva**

In December 2015, three months after the start of the Russian military intervention, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 superseded the Geneva Communiqué – an international agreement for a political solution reached by Russia, the United States and other world powers in 2012.

Resolution 2254 repeated the need for a transition but arguably diluted the focus of the Geneva Communiqué on setting up a Transitional Governing Body (TGB) with full executive powers, including control over the security apparatus. In addition to mentioning the TGB, the resolution called for the establishment of “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” and the drafting of a new constitution ahead of U.N.-supervised elections. It also called for the release of arbitrarily arrested detainees but dropped specific references in the Geneva Communiqué to provide lists of names and access to them, as well as the release of those detained for non-violent political activities. Practically nothing was achieved for those prisoners still alive – even after a report by Amnesty International that said between 5,000 to 13,000 prisoners were hanged in a single regime jail alone between 2011 and 2015.

The U.N. resolution provided possible room for the regime to wiggle out of the TGB. However, U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura said in a television interview in March 2017 – prompting the regime to refuse him a visit to Damascus – that his mission was to bring about concrete power-sharing. He acknowledged that a transition would not be achieved if the current Syrian leadership remained in power and more people were simply added to the government. Without battlefield and/or Russian pressure on the regime though, few in the opposition expect the current talks in Geneva to bring about any real change to the power structure, in which largely Alawite elites hold

power under the veneer of a rubber-stamp parliament and cabinet. Throughout the Geneva process, the mainstream opposition has continued to speak in the name of the revolt, but few harbored any illusion that the more the talks dragged on, the further they were from achieving the revolt’s goal of a democratic transformation. The opposition could not boycott the talks and appear intransigent in front of the international powers. Still, it expects to obtain little to assuage the Sunnis, who have borne the brunt of the killings and destruction in the regime’s crackdown on the protest movement and the civil war.

### **Demise of Cross-Sectarianism**

The cross-sectarian nature of the revolt, when it broke out in March 2011, gradually gave way to an armed Sunni backlash. The mass killings of peaceful demonstrators and the deployment of a mainly Alawite militia to help crush protests fueled sectarian mobilization. It opened the way to other massacres and more transgressions, such as sieges on mainly Sunni communities in strategic regions, but also sieges on several loyalist towns inhabited by Shi’ites in northern Syria.

The growing expansion of Iran in the region reinforced a sense of Sunni besiegement. From this perspective, Shi’ite political ascendancy in the post-Saddam Hussein era in Iraq was seen as having literally wiped the Sunnis off the Iraqi political map through collusion with Iran. The Sunnis of Lebanon were dealt a blow by the 2005 killing of Rafiq al-Hariri, the country’s best-connected figure in international politics and business. A U.N. special tribunal in The Hague indicted five Hezbollah militiamen in the killing. In Syria, an Iranian “Shi’itization” drive even before the revolt was viewed by many Sunnis as a threat to what they regarded as Syria’s core religious identity. The proselytization focused on converting poor Sunnis, whose lot was made worse by economic liberalization that had mainly benefited the Alawite elite and their often Sunni business cronies.

The leaders of the initial protest movement, which included women and activists from different sects, argued that the revolt should remain non-violent and non-sectarian. However, paramount among many protestors was a determination not be dealt the same fate of the Hama uprising in 1982 against Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, which was led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, masses of civilians – mainly Sunni, but also some prominent Alawites and Christians – were killed, jailed, disappeared or forced to leave the country without mounting much of an armed resistance. By the second half of 2011, anti-Assad Sunnis across Syria took up arms.

### Radicals Play on Sunni Identity

Sunni attitudes hardened as Salafist radicals, as well as some less hardline brigades backed by the Gulf, instrumentalized Sunni grievances. They highlighted Sunni disenfranchisement and promised to redress the sectarian-tinged repression of Assad family rule. Still, many armed opposition groups made efforts to portray the revolt as “the revolution of all Syrians” (*thaurat kull as-suriyyin*). As recently as March 2017, the head of the mainstream opposition delegation at the Geneva talks made a point of saying he was proud to have met an Alawite tank specialist fighting on the side of the rebels in Syria.

On the pro-regime side, sectarian rhetoric abounded from the Islamist Shi'ite militias that Iran poured into Syria. The Sunni-Shi'ite divide widened across the Middle East, propping up the internal support bases of the regimes both in Iran and in the Sunni Gulf states.

The Wahhabi clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia as well as clerics linked to other Gulf monarchies contributed to the weakening of the civil core of the Syrian revolt by supporting Salafist rebels. These Salafists did not share the international jihadist ambitions of al-Qaeda, but they shoved off more moderate brigades. Among the most influential Syrian Salafists was the

late Zahran Alloush, a skilled manipulator of religious symbolism. Alloush was among the senior jihadists and Salafist clerics released in mid-2011 by the regime. Upon his release, he founded, with Saudi backing, what became the Army of Islam (Jaish al-Islam) in Eastern Ghouta, an expanse of suburbs and farmland on the edge of Damascus. The group's outreach on social media projected themes of Sunni dispossession by what it regarded as the apostate Alawites and their Shi'ite backers. Alloush rejected democracy outright. He was widely suspected of involvement in the 2013 kidnapping and disappearance of the “Douma Four” – secular activists who had taken refuge from the regime in the town of Douma, a Jaish al-Islam stronghold. Seeking to bury the civic activism in favor of a religious narrative, Jaish al-Islam's propaganda footage, spread on YouTube and on sympathetic Gulf television channels, invoked the Umayyad Empire as the zenith of a just Sunni rule. In order to rally more Sunnis, it falsely claimed that the Umayyads were a bulwark against an expansive Shi'ism. As Russian strikes hit residential areas in Eastern Ghouta, rebels briefly paraded captured Alawite civilians and soldiers in cages in the streets of Douma. Hit by a drop in support from Saudi Arabia, which came under U.S. pressure to lessen its role in Syria, Alloush dialed back his sectarian and anti-democratic rhetoric and met U.S.-backed moderate rebels in Jordan. A Russian strike killed Alloush in late 2015, shortly after Jaish al-Islam had broken a siege on Eastern Ghouta and captured strategic hills overlooking Damascus. On Facebook, some pro-Jaish al-Islam posts prematurely celebrated the awakening of a regional “Sunni giant” and appealed to the Gulf states to do more to stop Iran and its militia proxies in Syria.

But not all Sunnis are anti-Assad. The so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) has struck particular fear among what is left of Syria's middle class. Many of them would rather have relative stability under Assad family rule than all-out chaos. An unknown

proportion of Sunnis who had remained in or fled to regime areas might have interests that align with Assad and/or prefer him to what they regard as an inevitable Islamist alternative. Others have been sitting on the sidelines or have chosen not to express distaste for the regime for fear of retribution.

### **Role of External Sunni Players**

Cowed by Moscow's intervention, Sunni powers that initially backed the revolt all but dropped the rebels. The fickleness of the backing from Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states demonstrated that they regarded the rebels as instruments of geopolitics and not as allies in transnational Sunni identity. As soon as the ends of the external actors could be achieved by other means, the rebels would lose value in the power calculations and could be easily dropped. This contrasts with the more consistent support the regime has received from Iran and Russia.

### **Turkey**

Ankara projected itself as the main champion of Syria's Sunnis but shifted toward Moscow in the second half of 2016. The shift, which remains marred by Turkish-Russian differences over Syria, was aimed at securing Russia's approval to prevent the militia of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian subsidiary of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey – from creating contiguous areas under its control to the south of Turkey's border with Syria. Maintaining access to the Russian market and the ex-Soviet Turkic states also figured into the mending of ties. Relations between the two countries had deteriorated after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, which prompted Russian retaliatory trade measures. With the ice thawing between Moscow and Ankara, Turkey pushed the rebels to attend the Astana talks and abandoned its insistence that a political solution would be impossible as long as

Assad remained in power. Militarily, Ankara tried to steer the rebels away from fighting Assad. It prodded them to join the Euphrates Shield, a proxy force Ankara had set up around Syrian Turkmen rebels to contain the PYD militia. In 2016–2017 the Euphrates Shield captured the Syrian town of Jarablus on the border with Turkey and other areas held by the Islamic State northeast of Aleppo during a push by different powers to take territory from the group. Jarablus became a resettlement outpost for refugees as well as rebels and civilians deported under surrender deals from central Syria and elsewhere. Still, the regime advanced under Russian air cover in areas south of Jarablus, in apparent cooperation with PYD militia. The Islamic State operates mainly along the Euphrates basin in eastern Syria. The region, which had accounted for most of Syria's wheat and oil production, is away from the main north-south highway, along which much of Syria's population and commerce is concentrated.

### **Saudi Arabia**

By late 2016, the Saudi role in Syria went into deep freeze. Turkey filled the vacuum, attracting rebels who had relied on Saudi support.

The Saudi inaction appeared due to the power struggles within the Saudi hierarchy, as well as Riyadh's involvement in Yemen and a lack of clarity about the direction of the new American administration. U.S. President Donald Trump's more aggressive stance toward Iran was music to the ears of many in the Gulf monarchies. The policy on Syria – other than fighting the Islamic State – had remained vague and unpredictable. Only days before the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun, American officials said that Washington's policy was no longer "getting Assad out" and that his fate should be "decided by the Syrian people."

## **Jordan**

The kingdom had been a reluctant hub for Syria's southern rebels. Its political and business elite broadly saw the Syrian revolt as a destabilizing element that could empower the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Jordan. The counterrevolutions to the Arab Spring, as well as admiration for Russia's ruthless use of its military in Syria, made the tribal-based Jordanian establishment's grip on power more tenacious. The authorities pursued a more security-oriented internal agenda, pointing to the presence of local Syrian brigades that had pledged loyalty to the Islamic State near the border. Jordan pushed the Southern Front – a coalition of far less hardline rebels operating between Damascus and the Jordanian border – to send representatives to the Astana talks. In rare public remarks, the head of the Jordanian armed forces made it clear that Jordan would not stand in the way of Assad's forces taking border posts that were captured by the rebels in the border province of Deraa. His remarks apparently were interpreted by the Syrian regime as a signal to increase penetration attacks against rebel defenses in Deraa. However, in a change of the de facto pro-Assad tone, Jordan said that it approved of the U.S. strike as a "necessary and appropriate response" to the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun.

## **Sunni Disunity Marks New Scene**

### **Weak Opposition in Geneva**

Turkish pressure on the rebels to adhere to Moscow-led negotiations weakened its delegation in Geneva. In late 2015, a High Negotiations Committee (HNC) had been formed in Riyadh to represent the mainstream opposition. The HNC is headed by Riad Hijab, a former prime minister who defected in August 2012. A strong personality, Hijab instilled rare discipline in the opposition. As Saudi Arabia withdrew from the Syria scene, the balance in the HNC shifted toward Turkish-backed brigades.

Nonetheless, Hijab remains influential.

The most powerful group to make the transition from Saudi Arabia to Turkey was Jaish al-Islam. A little more than a year after Alloush was killed, one of Alloush's cousins, an official in Jaish al-Islam, was in Astana serving as head of the opposition delegation. The rebels attended two of three Astana rounds held by March 2017. They harbored no illusions about what they regard as Moscow's intention to perpetuate the regime. At best, they had hoped to decrease the amount of bombardment on their areas, but any slack in Russian raids appears to have been taken up by the regime.

### **Rebel Splits**

Turkish tutelage over the opposition deepened splits among the brigades on the ground. By March 2017 al-Qaeda-leaning commanders left the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham, the largest rebel group, and joined the former Nusra Front in a new alliance called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, Association for the Liberation of the Levant). Officials in Ahrar al-Sham put the number of defectors at 800, out of an estimated 17,000 fighters. But the defectors, who took with them an arsenal of armor and heavy weapons, comprised a battle-hardened core. Ahrar al-Sham's leadership resisted pressure from Ankara to go to Astana to preserve the group's remaining ranks, but they did not oppose the talks outright. Some in the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham saw the split as ending a sclerosis in decision-making that had been brought about by the schism between its al-Qaeda sympathizers and more nationalistic members. They argued that Ahrar al-Sham was now freer to join the mainstream political opposition, identify squarely with the revolt and draw a democratic vision for a future Syria that could lessen the group's stigma in the West. However, the group's overall command has balked at adopting such a vision publicly.

### Jihadist Takeover Moves

The freezing of support and popular disaffection with a revolt seen as beholden to its enemies provided a ripe environment for piecemeal jihadist takeovers of other rebels. The opposition's failure at Astana to secure a significant reprieve from the air raids harmed the moderates. HTS painted itself as the last standard bearer of the rebellion. It used what it termed the opposition's sellout to Turkey and Russia to rally its cadres for liquidating other rebel brigades, as well as local figures whose presence had been crucial in helping curb Nusra Front's heavy hand. Among them is Ahmad al-Alwan, a cleric in the town of Ma'rat al-Nu'man in Idlib. Members of HTS vowed in early 2017 to kill Alwan, who had stood against the Nusra Front's attempts to ban certain religious practices for not conforming to its interpretation of Islam. A unifying figure, Alwan had links with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the umbrella group of rebel brigades formed mostly by officers who had defected from Assad's army. He is also a main figure in Failaq al-Sham (Legion of the Levant), a rebel brigade linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was represented in Astana. Ma'rat al-Nu'man became vulnerable to a complete takeover by HTS after the group defeated FSA units in the rugged Jabal al-Zawiya region of Idlib in February 2017. HTS's advances set the scene for a major confrontation with Ahrar al-Sham, but they came to a halt after HTS became mired in unexpected battles with another jihadist group with links to the Islamic State.

### Scenarios for Sunnis

The course of the Syrian conflict has given rise to the following three scenarios. They are not forecasts, and the scene could develop into an amalgamation of all three.

**Assad takes all, but no stability:** U.S. action against Assad would remain limited. The new U.S. administration would continue to cooperate tacitly with Tehran against the

Islamic State at the expense of the rebels. An increase in inter-rebel fighting in the north could allow the regime to capture another key highway straddling the province of Idlib that links Aleppo and the port city of Latakia. Under this scenario, Iran would affirm its position as the biggest winner from the upheaval in the Levant. The PYD militia would be in control of swathes of eastern Syria, but it would continue to cooperate with Assad. A jihadist takeover of the rest of the rebels would deal Syria's Sunnis a similar fate as their Iraqi co-religionists. Little international attention was paid to the violence and abuse Iraqi Sunnis received from the state and its assortment of militias. The United States made vague proposals in March 2017 for "interim zones of stability" in the context of the fight against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Such zones would do little to loosen the grip of Assad and Iran if they were confined to the Islamic State's main area of operation, which is in the east of Syria.

If Assad regains the whole of the strategic axis from north to south, Syria's sectarian conflict is unlikely to end. In March 2017, a pinpointed attack on a military intelligence compound in the central city of Homs killed a senior regime operative and scores of other people. The attack indicated that HTS is laying the foundations for a hard-nosed guerrilla insurgency focused on suicide bombings and hit-and-run attacks. The former Nusra Front (nowadays the HTS) accumulated popular resentment in rebel areas for its religious dogma, heavy-handed intrusion into people's lives as well as its launching of turf warfare in Idlib. However, HTS would have no shortage of recruits among Sunnis whose communities were brutalized by the regime and Russia's bombing.

**Stalemate:** Another scenario, made more plausible by the U.S. strike in April 2017, is for non-jihadists to reemerge with Arab and Western support. Washington might pursue a two-prong strategy against Assad as well as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Many

Sunnis were incensed at the Obama administration's military focus on eradicating terrorism by Islamist militants while taking no direct action against what they regard as the state terrorism of the Assad regime. The issue of Assad led to mistrust between the United States and the rebels. It limited broader Sunni support for the U.S.-led effort against the Islamic State in eastern Syria, which is centered on support for the Kurdish militia. However, U.S. apathy toward the FSA has worked to the advantage of Iran and could affect Israel, which had struck Hezbollah in areas in Syria near the Golan Heights and close to the border with Lebanon. In central Syria, rebels have been holding out against the regime and Russian bombing in the besieged Houla Plain. The fall of the region would allow Hezbollah to firm its grip on the province of Homs, which borders Hezbollah bases in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, in a further marginalization of the Sunnis.

**Russia delivers Assad:** The least likely outcome is for Russia to engineer the departure of Assad and support a serious transition. After the gassing of Khan Sheikhoun, the West appears to have adopted a more hardnosed position toward Assad, and the United States could resurface as a heavy-weight player in Geneva. Russia might be able to remove Assad and replace him with another Alawite figure. But the risk to its prestige and investment would remain too great if the Alawite-centric regime were not to last without Assad or amid democratic change. Russian support for the regime, however, could become too costly, forcing Moscow to look for an exit. The Kremlin appears to be underreporting to the public the number of Russian casualties in Syria. An increase in casualties, coupled with a deterioration of living standards in Russia and/or domestic discontent, could force a rethink by Moscow. If things go wrong for Russia, it could attempt a more willing accommodation of the rebels. Yet, it has continued to bomb them while it supposedly brokers a peace. A Russian raid in early

2017 against an outpost for Jaish al-Islam near Turkey appeared to have been a warning to the group for its boycott of the latest round of talks in Astana. However, the rebels have their hardline rivals and constituencies to consider, as well as the legacy of the revolt. They have largely stuck to the revolt's demand for the removal of Assad, which – short of a change in U.S. policy – only Moscow could enforce. The opposition had signaled it was willing to cooperate with Moscow if it delivers Assad, such as leasing military bases in Syria. Constitutional, parliamentary and transitional justice arrangements would also need to be negotiated to preserve the Alawites and other minorities under a Sunni ascendancy.

### European Strategy

A new European Commission strategy document, adopted by the Council of the European Union in April 2017, foresees funding reconstruction if the Geneva talks produce a “genuine and inclusive political transition.” It does not define what such a transition should entail. Instead, the E.U. commission cited U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué, which have no mandate to strip the Assad family or the Alawite elite from their pervasive tools of control. These include security, the official media, the business and smuggling monopolies, identification and property records, and the country's kangaroo courts [for further reading on the Alawite crux of Assad's rule see SWP Comments 52/2015]. The European strategy document ignores Iran, which few European officials believe is interested in any transition. The reconstruction offer risks a return to the European approach in Syria before the revolt. In 2008, three years after the Hariri assassination, European countries, one by one, began rehabilitating the regime as it touted paper reforms and played on its relationship with Iran and militant groups. A fundamental change in the regime and its plethora of frontmen and laundering outfits would also need to



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take place. Otherwise, the contracts would go to the same officials and business actors responsible for the corruption and catastrophic governance before the revolt. Assad has indicated that he expects to have his cake and eat it. As the international conference convened in early April in Brussels to discuss expanding aid in Syria and post-settlement support to the regime, the regime's planes supposedly carried out the suspected chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun. The Brussels conference was co-chaired by Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the European Union.

Europe could end up contributing to Sunni abandonment through a rehabilitation of Assad, starting with construction contracts that go to his cohorts. However, stability will not be achieved if Europe and other powers continue to regard Syria as a mere power struggle without considering the Sunni grievances that underpin the conflict. International concerns about the welfare of minorities in Syria have often ignored the Sunni majority, who should be the main group tied to the international commitment for an inclusive transition. In this regard, European countries could signal to the Sunnis that the EU's cozying up to Iran is not open-ended, and that it would not reward Iran economically, regardless of the conduct of its militia in the Syrian war. European countries could sanction some of the numerous Iranian and pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias involved in the fighting on the side of Assad. It would send a rare message that Europe does not regard terrorism in the Middle East as being exclusively Sunni. The U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, for example, lists among the foreign militias that overran eastern Aleppo in late 2016: Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, its al-Quds Force, Hezbollah, Afghan militias and the Iraqi al-Nujabaa and al-Fatimiyyoon militias.

In Germany there has been official debate on whether non-humanitarian aid should extend to regime areas as part of a "stabilization" effort. The chemical attack on Khan

Sheikhoun might have dampened reception for this view. Nonetheless, a current in European circles in favor of the rehabilitation of Assad has remained strong, despite the previous use of chemical weapons, including a nerve gas attack on rebel suburbs of Damascus that killed hundreds in 2013.

In a transition scenario, any aid offer should be conditional on strengthening local structures that operate at a distance from the regime, and under which management and staffing of German-funded projects could operate relatively freely. Tight control on the local level and a chain of corruption that extends from the highest echelons to the streets have been indispensable in fueling the repressive nature of the regime as well as a major source of income for its cohorts. The regime would seek to restore its micro-control as Assad appears set to remain intact during a transition, and possibly afterwards.

Although technical aid can be carefully crafted to avoid emboldening the current business elite, who are in bed with the regime, any political overtures toward Assad would have more far-reaching consequences. It would imply renewed acceptance of the security state and, thus, would feed jihadism in Syria and possibly encourage radicalism among the refugees, estimated to be mostly Sunni, who have made their way to Germany.