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Article 1.

The Washington Post

Looking for a Syrian endgame

[David Ignatius](#)

July 18 -- As Syria veers toward a violent political transition, U.S. officials are hoping to avoid a dangerous vacuum like the one that followed the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq and triggered a sectarian civil war.

President Obama is seeking a “managed transition” in Syria with the twin goals of removing President Bashar al-Assad as soon as possible and doing so without the evaporation of the authority of the Syrian state.

The need to safeguard Syria’s chemical-weapons arsenal is one reason why the United States is stressing an orderly transfer in which the opposition works with acceptable elements of the regime and army. The slow-and-steady U.S. approach has angered some militant Sunni opposition leaders, who prefer a decapitation of the regime and a revolutionary transition.

U.S. officials believe that Syria is nearing the tipping point, after a [bombing on Wednesday killed Asef Shawkat](#), Assad’s brother-in-law and one of the regime’s most notorious henchmen, and Dawoud Rajha, the defense minister who was the regime’s most prominent Christian. Fighting had raged Tuesday in the Damascus suburbs, with Syrian tanks and helicopter gunships attacking opposition forces a few miles from downtown.

A U.S. official this week described Syria as a Levantine version of the “Wild West.” Assad’s forces have lost control of many parts of the country: “They cannot hold what they clear,” is how one U.S. official put it, using a buzz phrase of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. Syria’s borders have become porous, turning parts of the country into what one observer describes as “Opposition-stan.”

In this chaotic environment, “every intelligence service is gaming it out,” trying to understand the opposition and its leadership and structure, the U.S. official said.

The CIA has been working with the Syrian opposition for several weeks under a non-lethal directive that allows the United States to evaluate groups and assist them with command and control. Scores of Israeli intelligence officers are also operating along Syria’s border, though they are keeping a low profile.

The main transit routes into Syria come from the four points of the compass — Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The two key axes, in terms of Western assistance, are Turkey and Jordan, both close allies of the United States. The two potential flash points for spreading the sectarian fighting are Lebanon and Iraq, both of which have substantial Shiite militias allied with Iran, which backs Assad.

The most urgent question for CIA officers is how potent are al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the Syrian opposition. The answer seems to be that, while al-Qaeda is a factor, other opposition groups are promising the United States that they will root it out — once they have disposed of the Assad regime. That's somewhat reassuring, similar to the alliance Gen. David Petraeus formed in Iraq with Sunni militias against al-Qaeda.

Another U.S. message to the Sunni opposition is that it must reach out to the Syrian minorities allied with the regime — Alawites, Christians and Druze — and reassure them that they will have substantial representation in any new post-Assad government. So far, this inter-communal dialogue has gotten more lip service than real action.

In dealing with Syria's substantial chemical-weapons arsenal, the United States will have two goals: preventing Assad from using them against his own people and preventing extremist members of the opposition from capturing these weapons of mass destruction and gaining operational control of them.

Libya was a test case for controlling chemical weapons amid revolutionary chaos. CIA officers on the ground helped the Libyan opposition secure the main chemical-weapons bunker at Waddan. The CIA also helped connect the new Libyan government with officials from the deposed regime of Col. Moammar Gaddafi who were knowledgeable about the location of the weapons.

The CIA team, working with the Libyans, discovered that in addition to the Waddan stockpile, the regime had imported — perhaps from Iran — chemical-weapons artillery shells that were hidden in Sabha, a town in the central desert that is Gaddafi's ancestral home. These were moved to Waddan, where they are now awaiting disposal, under international supervision.

The Syrian denouement promises to be much bloodier and more destabilizing than what happened in Libya. It's a measure of U.S. caution that officials speak not of preventing sectarian violence after Assad is toppled but of keeping it from spinning out of control.

The United States still wants Russian help in managing the Syrian transition, but officials warn that as the situation becomes more violent, the window for effective international cooperation may be closing.

The Wall Street Journal

Syria's War Hits the House Of Assad

[Fouad Ajami](#)

July 18, 2012 -- It has to come to this in Damascus: Wednesday's rebel bomb attack on a meeting of Bashar al-Assad's top lieutenants, killing at least three. The war has come to the House of Assad itself. Syria's dictatorship had rested on a dynasty, and the terror had to be visited on the dynasty. There could be no airtight security for the rulers.

Asef Shawkat, the ruler's brother-in-law and deputy chief of staff of the armed forces, was a big player in the regime. He was of a piece with this sordid lot. He had risen from poverty, an Alawite soldier who came to power and fortune when he married the late dictator Hafez Assad's only daughter. In the politics of this secretive cabal, it was said that Shawkat was a rival of Maher al-Assad, the younger brother of the ruler, who commands its killer brigade.

A maternal cousin, Hafez Makhoul, was also struck down. The specialty of the Makhoul cousins was large-scale plunder. They sat astride the crony economy, greedy caterpillars of the realm and bag-men of the House of Assad.

The killing of the defense minister, Daoud Rajha, is of a lower order of importance. A Christian, he was a figurehead in a regime that exalted and trusted only the dominant sect, the Alawites.

The Assads can be said to have brought the Alawites both spoils and peril. They took them—a historically despised community—from the destitution of the mountains, and gave them a dominion of four decades. The edifice was unnatural, a majority Sunni society with pride as to its place in Islamic history submitting to the rule of a "godless" bunch of schismatics.

A merchant-military nexus gave the regime some cover. Sunni and Christian businessmen bought into the Assad enterprise, seeing it as a way of keeping Syria's fissures from getting worse. The rebellion that broke out some 17 months ago came out of the neglected countryside, the rural Sunni society that had been marginalized and robbed in the rapacious economy of

the Makhloufs and the Assads. The regime held on, believing that every new dose of terror would do the trick.

For the good length of this rebellion, Damascus itself was kept out of the fight. There was no love lost for the regime in the warrens and the mosques of that old, broken city. Fear did the trick: The crack units of the regime were based in Damascus. This was, inevitably, where the regime would stand or fall.

An early resolution of this grim war would have kept intact the institutions of the Syrian state, such as they are. It would have enabled the Alawites to walk away from the wreckage, dissociate themselves from the crimes of the Assads, and reach an accommodation with the Sunni majority. But Bashar al-Assad has been sly: He made sure that the Alawites, as a community, were implicated in the recent massacres that have poisoned the well between these two communities.

Alawite villagers were unleashed on their neighbors. They killed at close range. The survivors knew the killers, they had gone to school with them. The fiction that this was regime violence was shredded in the recent horrific massacres. There was method in the cruelty, and this will make itself felt in the phase to come: The Alawite-based regime was rounding out the borders of an Alawite homeland.

The recent killings in the villages of Houla and Tremseh were done on the fault-line between the Alawite mountains and the Sunni plains. In this script, the Alawites would make a run for it, quit Damascus and Homs—cities where their presence had been negligible in past decades—and make a stand in the Alawite mountains and the coast adjoining them. In this scenario, there would be a horrific fight for Damascus. The Alawite military barons and the enforcers alike have grown used to the ease of urban life. The fabled mountains could no longer sustain them.

Forgotten in this descent of Syria into the abyss are the hopes once pinned on Assad. He had married well—a Sunni woman of Homs background, London-born—and he had talked of reform. His country was desperate to believe him and grant him time. The protesters had started out with graffiti and placards, pleading for reform. A handful of boys in the forlorn southern town of Deraa had started it all: Inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, they scribbled anti-regime graffiti on the walls.

But this regime only knew the rule of the gun. Some 27 "torture centers" cover the country, according to Human Rights Watch. In this first YouTube civil war in our time, the videos tell of a regime that grew more cruel as official panic set in. The Syrians had crossed the Rubicon, for them there would be no return to the servitude of the past.

Mr. Ajami is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and the author most recently of "The Syrian Rebellion," just published by Hoover Press.

Article 3.

[The Washington Institute](#)

What to Do with Syria's Chemical Weapons

[Michael Eisenstadt](#)

July 18, 2012 -- Growing violence in Syria has raised concerns that the Assad regime might use its massive stockpile of chemical weapons (CW) against the opposition, or that antiregime insurgents, al-Qaeda, Hizballah, or other states might divert some of these arms for their own use. Just yesterday, Nawaf al-Fares -- Syria's former ambassador to Iraq who recently defected to the opposition -- warned that the regime would use CW if cornered. Such concerns have prompted calls for action to deal with this threat. Yet past experience in Iraq and Libya demonstrates the complex nature of this operational and policy problem.

Syria's Chemical Program

Syria has probably the largest and most advanced chemical warfare program in the Arab world, reportedly including thousands of tube and rocket artillery rounds filled with mustard-type blister agents, thousands of bombs filled with the nerve agents sarin and possibly VX , and binary-type and cluster CW warheads filled with nerve agents for all its major missile systems. Its CW infrastructure is believed to include several production facilities and numerous storage sites, mostly dispersed throughout the western half of the country. (Syria is also believed to have a biological warfare research and development program, though it is not believed to have produced biological weapons.)

Possible Scenarios

The Syrian regime is not known to have used CW in the past; there is no evidence for longstanding rumors that it did so in Hama in 1982. Yet other governments in the region used CW against domestic opponents -- Yemen during its civil war in the 1960s, and Iraq against Kurdish and Shiite rebels in 1988 and 1991, respectively -- so such a scenario is not implausible in Syria. More likely, Damascus would increase its use of heavy artillery and aircraft before resorting to CW, though the growing role of shabbiha paramilitaries in the fighting complicates efforts to assess Syrian calculations regarding CW use.

Other scenarios presuppose the breakdown of security at CW storage facilities. For example, Syrian insurgents could use captured CW munitions against regime forces (just as some Iraqi insurgents used derelict CW munitions in improvised explosive devices against U.S. forces). Parts of the chemical stockpile could also be diverted by al-Qaeda, Hizballah, or even Iran, which reportedly destroyed its own CW stocks in the early 1990s prior to acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Diversion by nonstate actors could be difficult and dangerous if they lacked proper protective gear, training, and logistical support. Bulk agent is stored in large containers that may be hard to move, and filled munitions might leak if they were of poor quality or inadequately maintained.

Moreover, binary-type munitions require two chemical components that are likely stored separately, so diverted weapons of this sort would be useless unless both components were acquired. Due to these complexities, local insurgent groups might not consider CW worth the effort to obtain.

In the event of security breakdowns at storage facilities, the diversion of small numbers of munitions by local insurgents willing to accept the risks involved might not attract notice. Yet Israel and the United States are reportedly keeping many of Syria's CW-related facilities under surveillance, so larger diversions could prove difficult to accomplish without detection. Such a diversion would require trained personnel and a significant logistical effort -- therefore, it would likely be noticed, especially if it aimed to remove CW from the country (e.g., to Lebanon).

Military Options

Israel, the United States, and other concerned countries could prevent the diversion or use of chemical weapons by launching airstrikes on CW bunkers (to deny access to the facilities or destroy munitions), or by

sending in ground troops to physically secure storage facilities. Either option would require the neutralization or suppression of Syrian air defenses, further complicating an already difficult undertaking.

* **Airstrikes:** The effectiveness of airstrikes would depend, in part, on the quality of the intelligence guiding them. In this regard, Iraq and Libya provide a cautionary lesson -- U.S. intelligence mischaracterized the scope and sophistication of CW programs in both countries. Thus, most of Iraq's then-extant CW arsenal survived the 1991 Gulf War because the United States lacked accurate intelligence on the regime's CW infrastructure, and because many munitions had been removed from storage bunkers and dispersed into open fields prior to the conflict. They were subsequently destroyed by the Iraqis and UN weapons inspectors.

Although direct aerial bombing might destroy large numbers of Syria's CW munitions, some chemical agents would likely be released into the air, endangering nearby civilians (though the downwind hazard could be mitigated by striking during favorable weather conditions). Moreover, many munitions would probably survive the strikes, leaving them vulnerable to pilferage -- presuming that looters had the proper protective gear to function in a contaminated environment. Alternatively, the entrances to mountainside CW bunkers could be obstructed by bombing and then mined from the air with cluster munitions. This would reduce the likelihood of any unintended release of agent while hindering access to entombed munitions.

Despite these limitations on airstrikes, Israel might be prompted to bomb particular CW storage facilities if it believed that Hizballah or al-Qaeda were in the process of pilfering munitions from them. It might also strike a Hizballah convoy transferring such munitions to Lebanon.

* **Boots on the ground:** A more systematic approach to preventing diversion or use would be to insert special operations and conventional forces to seize and secure at-risk CW facilities. Depending on the scope of the effort, this could require thousands if not tens of thousands of troops and significant intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and air support -- though the 75,000 figure that some media outlets have attributed to Defense Department planners seems excessive. Such a force would need to be able to defend itself against both insurgent and regime forces. It must

also be capable of operating in a contaminated environment should regime forces bombard CW sites in order to complicate its mission. Although U.S. allies could contribute important assets to such an effort (e.g., Jordan's Special Forces Brigade), it would have to be a U.S.-led effort, as few other countries have the forces and expertise required for such a mission.

Securing at-risk CW facilities would be only the beginning of a protracted accounting and elimination process that could take years. CW elimination is difficult enough to accomplish in a permissive environment (e.g., it took several years to destroy the bulk of Iraq's CW program in the early 1990s), even more so in a country still at war. Furthermore, the regime could inadvertently lose track of part of its CW inventory, mingling chemical with conventional munitions, as occurred in Iraq. This is especially true if it moves the weapons around to better secure them from the chaos of civil war.

Alternatively, if the regime uses its CW, the United States may be forced to deal with the consequences of a mass-casualty incident. This could include the insertion of small numbers of U.S. personnel into Syria to help create humanitarian enclaves or corridors and facilitate the provision of medical assistance to those affected.

Conclusion

Given these complexities, the preferred means of dealing with the problem of Syrian CW are deterrence, assistance, containment, and elimination.

* **Deterrence:** Washington must convince the Assad regime that the use of CW is a game-changer that could prompt international military action. It should also spread the word among regime security forces that those complicit in the use of CW will be sought out and punished, while those who refuse orders to use CW will be assisted if they choose to escape the country, or shielded from retribution should the regime fall.

* **Assistance:** To deal with the threat of diversion, the United States should quietly work with Russia, building on their history of cooperation on a variety of threat-reduction initiatives in order to offer Syria various means of maintaining accountability and control over its CW stockpile. While the United States does not have an interest in strengthening Assad, it does have an interest in the regime retaining control over its CW for as long as it is around (just as the United States offered the Soviet Union technology to

help secure its nuclear arsenal during the Cold War, to avoid accidental or unauthorized use).

* **Containment:** The United States should continue to work with Syria's neighbors to tighten border security and ensure that CW do not leak out of Syria. This includes being ready to support military efforts by allies to prevent the organized transfer of chemical munitions out of the country.

* **Elimination:** Finally, if it has not done so already, Washington should begin planning to locate, secure, and eliminate Syria's chemical stockpile and infrastructure should the regime lose control of CW facilities or fall outright. It should also build on the lessons of Iraq and Libya in three ways: first, by preparing for the possibility that existing intelligence on Syria's CW is incorrect in fundamental ways; second, by realizing that the elimination of Syria's CW stockpile and infrastructure may have to be carried out under unsettled, perhaps even violent circumstances prior to or following the regime's fall; and third, by considering ways to find gainful employment for key Syrian CW engineers and scientists (as has been done for their counterparts in Russia, Iraq, and Libya) so that they are not recruited by other states of concern.

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Article 4.

The National Interest

Erdogan vs. The Kurds

[Aliza Marcus](#)

July 18, 2012 -- In early June, when Erdogan visited Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurdish southeast, shops closed in protest. A few weeks later, when he announced that schools would be allowed to offer elective Kurdish language classes, opposition Kurdish politicians accused him of denying their identity by refusing mother-tongue education for Kurds. Even Kurdish Islamists aren't fans. "Turks and Kurds fought together to create the state, but somehow, we were then left behind," said Kurdish lawyer Huseyin Yilmaz, who heads the Hezbollah-rooted

Mustazaf-Der association (no relation to Hezbollah in Lebanon). “We have our own language, our own identity. We have something we want.” Erdogan’s unpopularity among Kurds is hardly a surprise. Since his Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an unprecedented third parliamentary majority in June of last year, Erdogan appears to have abandoned the democratic-reform plans that initially gained him respect from Kurds and the backing of Turkish liberals. The prime minister’s campaign pledge to overhaul the constitution—drawn up by the 1980–1983 military junta—is moribund. Kurdish politicians in Ankara from the main political parties say any package he produces is unlikely to answer Kurdish demands that their identity and language be recognized in the constitution. And instead of changing restrictive penal-code laws used for decades to repress Kurdish identity and muzzle demands, he’s now using them to silence those who question his policies or advocate for change.

Almost four hundred officials from the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) party are in prison, among them thirty-six elected mayors and thirteen deputy mayors, along with six hundred-plus Kurdish civil-society activists, including human-rights workers, trade unionists and people who did no more than attend their meetings. Many have been held in prison for upwards of three years while the trials progress. Charges center on alleged membership in the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), which prosecutors say was set up by the PKK rebel force to control the Kurdish southeast. The evidence against defendants, including press conferences they called and legal briefs they wrote, is shoddy even by Turkey’s notoriously lax judicial standards.

Meanwhile, the number of journalists jailed—the majority of them Kurds—has skyrocketed to a level not seen since the 1990s, when a broad antiterror law made writing about the Kurdish insurgency a crime. And more than seven hundred university students are in prison, the highest number since the 1980 military coup, many charged with aiding the PKK rebel group through its urban KCK political wing. The evidence, again, usually rests on nonviolent acts or speeches promoting Kurdish identity or criticizing government policies, including the cost of tuition. While the space for legal Kurdish politics narrows, the PKK shows no signs of weakness; in June, rebels killed some twenty Turkish soldiers, including

eight in an assault on a fortified Turkish outpost close to the border with Iraq.

Erdogan denies that he's backed off from his reform agenda and frequently cites the changes he has made in his terms in office: he opened a twenty-four-hour state-run Kurdish television channel; allowed graduate Kurdish-language programs at university; opened the way for elective Kurdish-language classes in primary and secondary schools; and made it possible for families to speak to their imprisoned children in Kurdish. The bottleneck isn't him, he claims, it's the Kurds. He notes that the BDP, which won thirty-six seats in last year's national parliamentary elections, won't join him in condemning PKK "terrorist" attacks and won't acknowledge the Kurdish reforms he's done. He also accuses them of not being able to even go to the toilet unless the PKK first "[loosens the strings](#) [3]."

Erdogan's not wholly wrong. The BDP won't take his side. It's not because they are afraid of the PKK or because they are spiteful. It's because, from the perspective of many Kurds, the PKK's fight is still legitimate given the judicial assault on democratic activism and the lack of a formal peace process. At the same time, Erdogan's reforms may be new for Turks, but for Kurds, these changes are either irrelevant to main concerns or twenty years behind the demand curve. Take Kurdish-language television: a nice idea, which is why pro-PKK activists in Europe started their own satellite programming in 1995. The graduate programs in Kurdish-language studies were not poorly received, it's just that with so many students and some professors in prison, it's hard to know who will teach the classes—or take them. Elective Kurdish-language courses might be a good idea for Turkish students, but Kurds want their children to learn in their own language, not learn about it. And allowing families to speak Kurdish to their children on visiting day in prison is great. But letting them out of prison would be even better.

It's not that Kurds aren't clear what they want. It's more like Turks don't want to hear it. In a public statement last year, leading Kurdish political parties and organizations demanded "democratic autonomy" and a realistic plan for ending the PKK's war and demobilizing the some eight thousand rebels whose home base is in the remote Kandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. In a June interview with the liberal Turkish daily Taraf, BDP

cochairman Selahattin Demirtas laid out a framework for getting to the solution: Halt the arrests of Kurdish officials and activists, and release them from prison; ease conditions for imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who hasn't had any visits, including from his lawyers, in almost a year; and create a mechanism for dialogue.

Erdogan's Intransigence

Unfortunately, like those who ruled before him, Erdogan's having a hard time accepting Kurdish nationalism and the popular hold the PKK exerts over Kurdish opinion. As a result, he remains wedded to the idea that if he can do away with the PKK and outspoken Kurdish activists, he can find someone who will be perfectly content with the changes he's made to date. But that's not a way to make peace. If he wants to end the fighting, he has to talk to those who have the guns. And if he wants a political settlement with the Kurds, he needs to negotiate with their political party. Anything short of that is just wasting time.

It's popular to suggest that Erdogan wants a deal, but he has to move slowly because of the nationalist wing in his party and within his voting base. Yet convincing the Turkish public may not be as hard as it seems. When word leaked out about secret talks between the PKK and the head of Turkey's national intelligence agency, MIT, last year, Erdogan's government didn't fall, and his ratings in the polls didn't drop. When Erdogan announced the new Kurdish-language reform package, the most amazing thing was the lack of reaction among AKP voters. Erdogan's strength is that he has won the support of the Turkish public—again, again and again. His weakness is that he still hasn't decided how to use this political capital to solve Turkey's most fundamental problem.

The Kurdish issue isn't a matter of selling something to the voters. It's a matter of selling it to Erdogan.

Aliza Marcus is a writer in Washington, DC, and the author of [Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence](#).

Article 5.

The Council on Foreign Relations

Unsettled Times in Israel

An interview with [Elliott Abrams](#)

July 18, 2012 -- *Israel's coalition government is collapsing and its leaders remain concerned about U.S. policies toward Syria and Iran. CFR Middle East expert Elliott Abrams calls it an unsettled time in the country. In the wake of the [Kadima Party quitting the coalition with Likud](#) over the issue of ultra-Orthodox serving in the military or national service, there could be new elections in Israel as early as next January, he says. In many ways, Israel is "watching and waiting" to see who wins the U.S. presidential election before dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues, says Abrams, though it's possible that Israel could decide that in Iran, "the window is closing fast and they really need to make a decision to act even before the U.S. election."*

What was the mood like in Israel on your latest trip?

On foreign policy matters, I'd describe them as almost wistful in wishing the United States would take a greater role in Syria and with respect to Iran's uranium nuclear program. It was wistful in the sense that the United States has so much more power than the Israelis, yet we don't seem to be willing to use it, either with regard to Iran or Syria. When I was there a couple of weeks ago there was not much being said about domestic policy issues, but that has heated up recently.

Yes, the new coalition government is in the midst of [collapse](#).

There are two big issues. One is the old question of social and economic equity, which led to some big demonstrations last summer. This summer had been quieter until an individual actually [immolated](#) himself in a protest last weekend [July 14]. Now the question is whether that will spur large demonstrations again, or [if] that is going to be seen as the act of a disturbed man. The other question is the so called [Tal Law](#)--the law that exempts ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service, or alternative service. The Israeli High Court said it must be changed by the end of July, and there [had] been a dispute between Shaul Mofaz--the leader of the Kadima Party, who recently joined in a coalition government with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party.

What are the differences?

When Mofaz led Kadima into the coalition, the main issue he said needed fast action was the exemption given almost all ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service. The majority of Israelis, and certainly the majority of Kadima voters, see this as unfair: Why should these young men not carry part of the burden of defending the state? The debate is over the number or percentage of ultra-Orthodox young men who are not required to serve. Mofaz, as a former IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] chief of staff, feels strongly about this. Netanyahu probably agrees with him, but Netanyahu needs the support of the religious parties--and they do not agree. Efforts to hammer out a Mofaz-Netanyahu deal have failed, so Mofaz seems to feel he had no choice; he felt Bibi made him a promise and did not keep it.

What does the collapse of the coalition government mean for Israel's political future? Will there be an early election?

The withdrawal of Kadima from the coalition does will not bring down the government, which still has a majority. But it probably means that elections, which were expected in the fall of 2013, will come sooner; there is talk of elections in January or February. It probably also hurts the reputations of both Shaul Mofaz and Benjamin Netanyahu, who could not make the coalition work, and it makes Netanyahu more reliant on the support of the religious parties. A January election only gives Mofaz seven months as the leader of Kadima to strengthen its poor results in opinion polls.

What's still missing is a strong alternative candidate who can beat Netanyahu next year. Polls over the last few months have always had him winning re-election against all comers. I doubt that will change.

Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) was just in Israel for the first time in two years. Would Israel like to see American military forces involved somehow in Syria?

No, what they would like to see is an end of the Syrian crisis. It's been dragging on for some fifteen months, in the Israeli view, partly because the United States has failed to do much. President Obama called for the [departure](#) of President Bashar al-Assad as long ago as the summer of 2011,

but we did not follow it up with the required kind of action--for example, arming and financing the Syrian opposition--that might have led to the regime's downfall. So it drags on and drags on, which has an impact on Turkey and on Lebanon, and on Jordan. Israeli leaders are asking: "What is the United States doing? Why do we seem to be sitting on our hands? Why are we making speeches about Syria but not providing any leadership?" For many years they've been happy with the stability in Syria under the Assad regime, because the Golan Heights border between Israel and Syria was quiet. They now see the border as unstable.

In their view, if the United States had provided leadership, the Saudis, the Qataris, the Turks--all of whom want the Syrian regime to fall--would've joined with us in more support for the opposition. Each of these countries is providing some support, [but] what you don't have is a concerted effort to get rid of Assad. The Israeli view is that only the United States could have led such an effort, that we should have done so and should be doing so now.

The \$64 million question still remains: What is Israel going to do about Iran's nuclear program? Is Israel more anxious now about Iran, or are they still willing to let this diplomatic track continue?

They are not more anxious. They are almost resigned to the situation in which they find themselves. I believe they're not prepared to see Iran develop a nuclear weapon. They know that the United States and the Security Council and the IAEA have all said they are opposed to it and that it would be unacceptable. They're not sure whether we mean it. The Israelis would like to postpone having to make a decision as long as possible, on the off chance that the diplomatic track reinforced by sanctions will work, or on the off chance that the United States would at some point strike the Iranian nuclear program. They know the United States has far more power that it can bring to bear than they do. Also they're going to suffer from any Iranian counter-attack, particularly if they lead the strike instead of the United States. So they are not anxious to hit Iran, but there's a view in Israel that at a certain point, the window closes, and they will have to make that decision. The \$64 million question may be: What is that point? A year

ago, people were saying, "It's the summer of 2012." It isn't clear to me when that window closes.

No country follows the American elections more closely than Israel. What is their view of Romney? Do they know him well?

You're certainly right that they're following the election closely. I was asked by most people I spoke with, "What is happening? Who's going to win? What will a reelected Obama's Middle East policy be? What would Romney's Middle East policies be?" They don't know Romney well; he isn't someone who, for example, has been a senator for twenty years and has been in touch with Israeli officials through that period. So they have a million questions. And, as you know, polling data suggests that President Obama is not very popular in Israel.

What about the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, which was featured as a major Obama initiative in 2009?

What is striking is that we have been discussing Syria and Iran, not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and what is striking in talking to Israelis--and for that matter in talking to Arab diplomats--is that they do want to talk about Syria, and Iran, and Egypt, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict doesn't arise, or arises only very late in the conversation. Secretary Clinton's visit was her first to Israel and the West Bank in two years, which is remarkable. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Israel as national security adviser or secretary of state more than twenty times. Some of her predecessors also made numerous trips to the region, so it's striking that Secretary Clinton has not. I don't say that critically. It seems to me to reflect the policy [of] George Mitchell, later Dennis Ross, [who] were the lead diplomats on that conflict, and partly a judgment on her part that it wasn't moving anywhere, that she would be wasting time and that she needed to address other world problems. Most people in Israel would agree that the Israeli-Palestinian situation is not going to change until after the U.S. elections and the elaboration of a policy by President Obama or President Romney.

I guess Israelis are in a watch-and-wait mode over the U.S. elections.

Israelis and Palestinians, with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, are in a watch-and-wait situation. There isn't really anything the Israelis can do about Syria, so they are watching the Americans, the Turks, the Arabs. When it comes to Egypt and Sinai, the Israelis are actually doing one significant thing; they are building a very elaborate security fence separating Israel from Sinai, in an effort to prevent both illegal immigration and smuggling on the one hand, and to prevent terrorist attacks on the other. And they are trying to prevent any kind of confrontation with Egyptian security officials. So when it comes to Egypt, though they're generally watching to see what the new Morsi government will do. On security in Sinai, they are able to act on their own and are doing so. And when it comes to Iran, the Israelis are indeed watching and waiting, unless they reach the conclusion that the window is closing fast and they really need to make a decision to act even before the U.S. election. I think that's still possible.

[Elliott Abrams](#), Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies.

Article 6.

The Washington Post

Israel at a cultural crossroads

[Ruth Marcus](#)

July 19 – Jerusalem -- The issue convulsing this country, and splintering its governing coalition, is not a nuclear-armed Iran or a moribund peace process. It is the question, as wrenching as it is unique to the Jewish state, of whether the country's fast-growing ultra-Orthodox population should continue to be exempt from compulsory military service.

The debate came to a head this week, with Shaul Mofaz's announcement that his Kadima party would quit, after a scant 70 days, [the broad coalition](#) assembled by Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Likud retains a majority without the centrist Kadima, although one now torn between religious parties resistant to weakening the exemption and

ultranationalists demanding an immediate draft for both ultra-Orthodox and Arabs.

But the real threat is to Israel's prospects, not Netanyahu's. How the uproar over service is resolved will shape the nation's economic and social future. Strangely, this is a matter on which Likud and Kadima essentially agree. They agree, as well, that the exemption, declared unconstitutional by the Israeli Supreme Court and set to expire Aug. 1, must be substantially pared back.

The argument is over the scope and pace of change, and the ramifications of adjusting either too fast or too slowly.

Too fast, warn Likud and its allies, and the ultra-Orthodox will stage an ugly revolt that will cleave Israeli society.

"The integration of the ultra-Orthodox into Israeli society is of enormous importance. The question is how you do it," says Ron Dermer, a top Netanyahu aide. "If you pull on the rope too hard, the whole thing is going to snap."

Too slowly, warn Kadima and its allies, and the revolt will come from a secular majority fed up with being freierim — suckers. They not only serve in the military but pay taxes that support religious schools and fund a social safety net that enables an astonishing 55 percent of ultra-Orthodox men to remain outside the workforce.

"We're verging on a trajectory of Israel slipping toward a third-world economy, and a third-world economy can't sustain a first-world military," says Yohanan Plesner, a Kadima member who chaired a committee to rewrite the exemption. "I see this as no less than an existential threat."

The roots of today's controversy date to Israel's founding in 1948. In the raw aftermath of the Holocaust, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion agreed to excuse students in yeshivot (religious schools) from military service. Then, there were 400 such students. Now, the number has soared to 40,000. The ultra-Orthodox — known as the Haredim, those who tremble before God — make up about 10 percent of the population. More significantly, one-fourth of Israeli first-graders come from Haredi families observing the biblical commandment to be fruitful. With an Arab population of 20 percent, and growing quickly, the burden of service — allowed but not mandatory for Arabs — will fall increasingly on the secular population.

The argument is nominally about military service; it is about much more. The military exemption is contingent on ultra-Orthodox men continuing to study, making them unable to work legally. Meantime, their separate, state-funded schools offer scant preparation for decent jobs; secular subjects such as math and science are not taught to boys after eighth grade.

Currently, 60 percent of Haredi families live in poverty.

This situation is unhealthy and unsustainable. Low workforce participation by Haredi men — and Arab women — “will not only result in a further increase in poverty but also undermine Israel’s overall growth potential and fiscal sustainability,” the International Monetary Fund warned recently. Bringing the ultra-Orthodox into the military would offer a glide path for integrating them into regular society.

This assimilation is, from the ultra-Orthodox perspective, precisely the problem: the threat of losing youth to the lure of secular life. Some extreme elements are anti-Zionist; others believe they serve the state, and protect troops, with Torah study and prayer. The more pragmatic recognize that more service is inevitable, but they want to postpone the day of reckoning as long as possible, to age 23 or even 26 instead of the usual 18.

A walk around the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim underscores the Haredi sense of being under siege from modernity, with wall posters in Hebrew warning of the dangers of the iPhone and inveighing against forced conscription.

From the American vantage point, this argument seems remote and esoteric. But its continued festering matters to the United States because it is so crucial to Israel’s future strength. And the failure of the short-lived national unity government to forge a solution is, consequently, bad news for both countries.