

Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics International Crisis Group 24
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The Syrian crisis may or may not have entered its final phase, but it undoubtedly has entered its most dangerous one to date. The current stage is defined by an explosive mix of heightened strategic stakes tying into a regional and wider international competition on the one hand and emotionally charged attitudes, communal polarisation and political wishful thinking on the other. As dynamics in both Syria and the broader international arena turn squarely against the regime, reactions are ranging from hysterical defiance on the part of its supporters, optimism among protesters that a bloody stalemate finally might end and fears of sectarian retribution or even civil war shared by many, through to triumphalism among those who view the crisis as an historic opportunity to decisively tilt the regional balance of power. Yet, almost entirely missing is a sober assessment of the challenges provoked by these shifts and the very real risk that they could derail or even foreclose the possibility of a successful transition. In particular, five issues likely to shape events have been absent from the public debate:

the fate of the Alawite community the connection between Syria and Lebanon; the nature and implications of heightened international involvement;

the long-term impact of the protest movement's growing militarisation; and

the legacy of creeping social, economic and institutional decay.

Many in Syria and abroad are now banking on the regime's imminent collapse and wagering that all then will be for the better. That is a luxury and an optimism they cannot afford. Instead, it is high time to squarely confront and address the difficulties before it is too late. In the "draft political program" it released on 20 November, the Syrian National Council – an opposition umbrella group – presented the image of an entirely peaceful movement enduring savage repression. The regime and its allies regularly describe the crisis solely as the local manifestation of a vicious regional and international struggle. The two black-and-white narratives are in every way contradictory and mutually exclusive. Both miss a central point: that successful management of this increasingly internationalised crisis depends on a clear-eyed understanding of the grey zone that lies between.

This briefing analyses and in its Conclusion presents recommendations for handling the pivotal issues.

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