

Testimony of  
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**Regional Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran**

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Representatives, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss the implications of a possible nuclear agreement with Iran.

Obviously, at this moment in time, we do not have a nuclear deal and while it seems more likely than not that we will have one at some point this summer, it is certainly not a sure thing. Moreover, with any such agreement, the devil will be in the proverbial details and we simply do not know how such an agreement will treat key details such as the access rights of inspectors, the lifting of sanctions, and the process of reapplying sanctions (or other punitive action) if Iran is caught cheating on the terms of an accord. All of this makes me very wary of commenting on the advantages or disadvantages of a deal where so many key uncertainties remain.

More than that, I believe that the terms of such a deal are of less importance to America's national interests than how the nations of the Middle East respond to it. Since the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran, I have believed that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, concluded that he did not need an actual nuclear arsenal because he calculated that there was little likelihood of either an American or Israeli attack and perhaps that Iran was far enough along toward being able to build a nuclear weapon as it needed to be given that threat environment. I also believe that Rouhani's election convinced him that relieving the pressure of the sanctions on Iran's economy was a higher priority than making further progress toward fielding a nuclear arsenal—so long as Iran did not have to give up its nuclear capability entirely and forever in return for the lifting of sanctions. Based on this analysis, I suspect that the Iranian government does not intend to cheat on any nuclear agreement or to use it as a cover to covertly acquire nuclear weapons as North Korea did, at least not for now or for the foreseeable future.

Consequently, I plan to focus my remarks primarily on the regional impact of an Iranian nuclear agreement, both because I see that as the issue where such a deal could have the greatest impact on American interests, and where its developments could ultimately shape the implementation of the deal—including Iran's willingness to abide by its terms.

Even here, the real questions are not those about regional proliferation which has dominated discussion of this matter to date, but about the civil and proxy wars currently roiling the Middle East, and the likely role of the United States in the region after a nuclear accord with Iran. It is

those issues that are likely to determine whether a nuclear deal with Iran leads to greater stability or greater instability in the Middle East, and thus whether it ultimately benefits or undermines American national security.

## **Iran**

It is important to begin any assessment of regional dynamics in the wake of an Iranian nuclear agreement by asking how Iran itself is likely to behave. As always, we need to be very humble about our ability to predict Iran's future behavior. Iran has an opaque and convoluted political system, riven by factions and presided over by a Supreme Leader who has often made decisions by not making decisions or by splitting the Solomonic baby. Indeed, it seems most likely that following any nuclear deal there will be a debate in Tehran over Iranian foreign policy (as there always is) with moderates and reformists arguing for Iran to use the deal as the start of a larger process of re-opening to the world and even rapprochement with the United States, while various hardliners and conservatives argue that a deal makes such moves unnecessary and that instead Iran can and must redouble its efforts to export Khomeini's revolution and drive the U.S. and its allies out of the Middle East altogether.

Based on his various statements over the years, it seems most likely that Khamene'i's perspective on a nuclear deal is purely transactional. If he ultimately agrees to one, it seems likely that it will be solely to get the sanctions removed. Nothing more and nothing less. It seems unlikely he will countenance a wider rapprochement with the United States—whatever Foreign Minister Zarif and possibly President Rouhani may want.

Iran has always seemed to fashion discrete policies toward different states of the region. In each case, it has a certain set of interests in a country and engages in a policy debate over how to act toward that country—in which Iran's complicated domestic politics interact with various strategic perspectives to produce a policy toward that country. Right now, Iran probably has a Syria policy based on its interests and its politics as they relate to Syria. It appears to have an Iraq policy based on its interests and its politics as they relate to Iraq. And the same for Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, etc. Neither those interests nor those politics appear likely to change much, if at all, as a result of the nuclear deal. Instead, Iranian actions toward all of those places seem precisely calibrated to what Iran is trying to achieve there, and that is unlikely to be affected by the nuclear deal one way or the other.

It is also worth noting that, across the region, the Iranians seem pretty comfortable with the status quo. Their Shi'a allies are dominant in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. In Syria, the Asad regime is embattled and has suffered some setbacks, but it remains in power and Iran continues to commit its own resources and the troops of its Iraqi and Hizballah allies shore up the Alawi position there. Most reports indicate that the Iranians exert far greater control over Asad's rump Syrian state than they ever have in the past, Iran may feel its position has improved in Damascus, even if Damascus's control over Syria has taken a beating. Tehran may also feel it could be doing better in Bahrain, but of the countries in play in the region, that's the only one Iran cares about where Tehran may not believe it is "winning." So there is no particular reason to believe that Iran is looking to increase its aggressive involvement in any of these states but has been somehow constrained from doing so by the nuclear negotiations.

Moreover, while it is impossible to prove, there is strong circumstantial evidence that Khamene'i and the Iranian establishment believe they have far more at stake in Iraq and possibly Lebanon than they do in a nuclear deal. They have poured resources into Iraq over the years, which is deeply bound up with Iranian society economically, socially and politically—as well as having constituted a dire security threat in the past. Likewise, Iran's alliance with Hizballah is part of the bedrock of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, and brings Iran a coveted role in the events of the Levant. Because of Syria's relationship to both Iraq and Lebanon, it too might be more important to Tehran than a nuclear deal if the Iranian leadership were ever forced to choose between the two. The point I am making here is simply that I cannot see Iran changing its policy in any of these countries because of a nuclear deal because I don't think that Iran values a nuclear deal as much as it does its positions in these various countries.

In short, all other things being equal, it seems unlikely that Iranian policy toward the region will change merely as a result of a nuclear agreement with the P-5+1.

But all other things may not prove equal. It may be that Khamene'i will feel that a nuclear deal is a major concession to Rouhani and the Iranian Left, and so he may feel the need to demonstrate to the hardliners of the Iranian Right that a nuclear deal does not mean that Tehran has abandoned Khomeini's ideology by giving up its enmity with the United States. If that is the case, Iran may ratchet up some of its anti-status quo activities in certain selected venues.

- Israel is the obvious case in point: Iran may try to convince Hizballah, Hamas, PIJ and others to mount attacks on Israel. That's almost a "freebie" for Iran. Israel is unlikely to retaliate directly against Iran, everyone will know that Tehran is behind the attacks, and since the Netanyahu government has managed to isolate Israel in ways that the Palestinians never could, Tehran will be playing to a popular cause. The problem here is that Iran may not be able to pull the trigger on such a campaign. Hizballah and Hamas are both extremely wary of picking a fight with Israel, as demonstrated by the fact that neither has done so in the face of multiple Israeli provocations. The events of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war has estranged Hamas from Iran, and tied Hizballah down in intense combat such that neither may be willing to heed a hypothetical Iranian call for new attacks on Israel. For their part, PIJ and other Palestinian proxy groups are weaker than in the past, and may have a hard time penetrating Israel's ever more sophisticated defenses.
- Bahrain is another possibility. Because Bahrain is a majority Shi'a state, whose people have been disenfranchised and oppressed by the regime—and their Saudi allies—it is another arena where Iran may be able to burnish its revolutionary credentials in a relatively popular international cause. But here too, there are limits. Some Bahraini Shi'a clearly accept aid from Iran, but the majority appear to prefer not to. They recognize that the more that they can be dismissed as Iranian agents the harder it is for them to get international pressure on the regime to reform. In addition, Bahrain is a very sensitive issue for the Saudis, and the Iranians have to worry that if they press on Bahrain, the Saudis might push back somewhere else where they are more vulnerable.

- A last possibility is Yemen. Iran has few direct stakes in Yemen and their nominal allies, the Houthis, are dominant at the moment. So Iran has little to lose there and a powerful (relatively) ally. But once again, Iran's ties to the Houthis have been exaggerated, and it is another very sensitive spot for the Saudis.

Consequently, it may prove difficult for Iran to make much mischief in any of these arenas—more difficult than it may be worth for them.

As this analysis suggests, I believe that Iran's most likely course after a nuclear agreement will be to continue to pursue the same regional strategy it has pursued over the past three years. That strategy is inimical to the interests of the United States and its allies in many ways. However, there is a much greater danger: the danger that Iran will interpret American behavior after a nuclear agreement as a sign of further disengagement from the Middle East. If that is the case, it is highly likely that Iranian goals will become more expansive and its policy more aggressive as it believes that the U.S. will not be as willing (or able) to block Iranian moves. Thus, the most important variable in Iranian regional behavior after a deal may well prove to be the U.S. reaction, rather than anything derived from Iranian strategy or politics itself.

## **Israel**

Let me now turn to the question of likely Israeli responses to a nuclear deal. I think it important to address the elephant in the living room first: it is highly unlikely that Israel will mount a military attack against Iran after a nuclear deal has been struck between Iran and the P-5+1. (Or in the run up to one). As I have laid out in greater detail elsewhere, Israel does not have a good military option against Iran for both military-technical and political reasons.<sup>1</sup> That's why Israel has uncharacteristically abstained from a strike, despite repeated threats to do so since the late 1990s.

In this case, the political circumstances would be even worse. Consider the context: Iran will have just signed a deal with the United States and the other great powers agreeing to limits on its nuclear program, accepting more intrusive inspections than in the past, and reaffirming that it will not try to build a nuclear weapon. If the Israelis were to attack at that point, an already anti-Israeli international climate would almost certainly turn wholeheartedly against them.

That question is of more than academic interest to the Israelis. If Israel attacks Iran, there is a very real risk that Iran would respond by withdrawing from the deal, withdrawing from the NPT, evicting the inspectors and announcing that it will acquire nuclear weapons since its own conventional forces and the word of the international community were clearly inadequate to deter an unprovoked Israeli attack. The Iranians will doubtless also demand an end to the sanctions (and/or the imposition of sanctions on Israel), and if that is not forthcoming will set about busting the sanctions. And the problem for the Israelis is that in those circumstances, with the entire world furious at them for committing aggression and destroying a deal that most will see as having been the best way to keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, there is likely to be very little will to preserve the sanctions on Iran. It's hard to imagine a scenario in which Iran has a better chance to break out of the sanctions cage than this one.

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular, Kenneth M. Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb and American Strategy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2013), esp. pp. 183-223.

Thus, an Israeli military strike in these circumstances would be unlikely to help prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and regaining its freedom of maneuver. It is more likely to ensure an Iranian nuclear weapon and jeopardize the international containment of Iran.

While this set of problems makes an Israeli military response unlikely, that doesn't mean that Jerusalem will just roll over and accept the deal. First, I suspect that the Israelis will ramp up their covert campaign against Iran and its nuclear program. More Iranian scientists may get mysteriously assassinated in Tehran. More sensitive Iranian facilities might blow up. More computer viruses might plague Iranian networks. More money might find its way to Iranian democracy activists and ethnic minorities. Of course, even then, the Israelis may show some restraint: the Iranians are believed to have greatly improved their own cyberwar capabilities, and even a right-wing Israeli government might not want to provoke a harsh Iranian response that affected Israel's civilian economy.

Second, I think it pretty much a foregone conclusion that the Israelis will also seek greatly expanded U.S. aid in response to a nuclear deal with Iran. In particular, it will look to improve its capability to strike Iranian targets, to defeat retaliatory missile and rocket attacks by Iran or its allies, and to ensure that Israel has a secure second-strike capability. More F-35s, greater funding for Israel's Arrow anti-ballistic missile and Iron Dome anti-rocket systems, more capable bunker-busting munitions—these all seem like certain Israeli requests. But Jerusalem may well ask for other weapons and capabilities previously denied it, both because it may feel a strategic need for such enhanced capabilities and because it may believe that the U.S. will be more willing to provide them to secure Jerusalem's (grudging) acquiescence to the deal.

Finally, a nuclear deal with Iran could push Israel to become more aggressive in its own neighborhood—or to take advantage of the situation to do so. The Israelis will doubtless argue that the deal has made them feel less safe, and therefore less willing to take risks on other security matters, particularly developments with the Palestinians, but potentially in Syria and Lebanon as well. (The Israelis are very comfortable with the Egyptian and Jordanian governments and are unlikely to take actions that would undermine them or diminish their cooperation with Israel.) For instance, in the wake of a nuclear deal, Israel may look to smash Hizballah and/or Hamas in Gaza again to convince them not to mount new attacks against Israel once their old Iranian allies (a strained relationship in the case of Hamas) begin coming out from under the sanctions and possibly flexing their muscles across the region.

It is worth noting that some Israelis may favor such actions out of a genuine belief that this is what is necessary to guarantee their security after what they will likely consider an imperfect Iran deal. Others may do so cynically, using their well-known unhappiness with a deal to justify doing a bunch of things that they believe that the U.S. and international communities would be loath to condone otherwise.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Especially in light of these assessments of likely Iranian and Israeli behavior after a nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia is the real wild card we must consider. The Saudis aren't exactly fans of a nuclear deal with Iran. And certainly, Saudi Arabia is the most likely candidate to acquire nuclear

weapons if Iran were to do so.<sup>2</sup> In private, Saudi officials have repeatedly warned American officials (including this author) that if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, Saudi Arabia will follow suit—and nothing will stop them—because they will not live in a world where Iran has a nuclear weapon and they do not. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi Intelligence Chief, has gone so far as to repeat that warning in public.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in 2011, Turki commented that, “It is in our interest that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon, for its doing so would compel Saudi Arabia, whose foreign relations are now so fully measured and well assessed, to pursue policies that could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet the Saudis are often far more subtle and creative than others give them credit for. Even if Iran were to acquire an actual weapon or a near-term breakout capability, the Saudis might not simply take the obvious path forward and buy a nuclear weapon itself. There are many ways that the Saudis could take actions that would create ambiguity and make Iran (and others) wonder whether the Saudis had acquired a nuclear capability without declaring that the Kingdom had joined the nuclear club. Riyadh could build a nuclear plant of its own and begin to enrich uranium, perhaps even hiring large numbers of Pakistanis and other foreigners to do so very quickly, in almost exactly the same manner that the Iranians have proceeded. A favorite Israeli scenario is that one day, satellite imagery of Saudi Arabia suddenly reveals the presence of a half-dozen nuclear-capable Pakistani F-16s at a Saudi air base. Pakistan has long contributed military support, equipment and even whole formations to Saudi defense, so this would not be anything extraordinary. Everyone would wonder whether the F-16s had brought nuclear weapons with them and the Saudis could studiously avoid answering the question. The Iranians, and the whole world, would not know. There would be no proof that the Kingdom had acquired a nuclear weapon and therefore no particular basis to impose sanctions on Riyadh. Yet overnight, the Iranians would have to calculate that the Kingdom had acquired a nuclear weapon, but it would be very difficult for anyone to punish the Saudis because there would be no evidence that they had.

But all of that lies in the realm of hypotheticals inappropriate to the current context. If Iran signs a nuclear agreement, it will be publicly pledging not to acquire a nuclear weapon—and it will have the entire international community (except Israel) giving them the benefit of the doubt. In that context, we should *not* expect the Saudis to acquire a nuclear weapon of their own in response.

The Saudis have had good reasons for not acquiring one all of these years (and the Paks good reasons for not giving it to them). More than that, the optics would be all wrong for the Saudis. Iran will have just signed a deal with the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Russia and China agreeing never to build a nuclear weapon and accepting limits on its enrichment program to reassure the world that it won't/can't get a nuclear weapon. In that context, if Saudi Arabia goes out and buys a bomb from the Pakistanis, suddenly both Riyadh and Islamabad will become the international pariahs. All of the sympathy will swing to Iran, which will be seen as having behaved well, whereas there will be worldwide demands to sanction the Saudis (and Paks) for

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<sup>2</sup> For a concurring Israeli assessment, see Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, “A Nuclear Iran: The Spur to a Regional Arms Race?” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (October 2012), pp. 7-12.

<sup>3</sup> “Prince Hints Saudi Arabia May Join Nuclear Arms Race,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Solomon, “Saudi Suggests ‘Squeezing’ Iran over Nuclear Ambitions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2011.

doing exactly what Iran had agreed not to. None of this makes sense for the Saudis and probably explains at least part of why Islamabad is already distancing itself from Riyadh on military matters.

That said, the Saudis may react in other ways. First, we should expect that soon after a nuclear deal with Iran, the Saudis will announce that they are going to build-up a nuclear program of their own to whatever levels Iran is allowed. So if, for instance, Iran is allowed to keep 6,500 first-generation centrifuges and 150 kg of uranium enriched to 3.5 percent purity, then the Saudis are likely to announce that they will acquire 6,500 first-generation centrifuges and 150 kg of uranium enriched to 3.5 percent purity. Doing so would be an important warning both to the Iranians (that the Saudis will match their nuclear capabilities at every step) and to the West (that they will have further proliferation in the Middle East if they do not force Iran to live up to its new commitments).

Second, the Saudis may choose to ramp up their support to various Sunni groups fighting Iran's allies and proxies around the region. The Saudis seem to agree with the Iranians that Tehran is "winning" in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Syria is a more uncertain affair, but Iran's allies are hardly defeated there and Iran is amping up its support for them. And the Saudis also seem to believe that Iran is making important inroads in Oman and with various Shi'a communities elsewhere in the Gulf. So while the Iranians may want to hold to a steady course, the Saudis may choose to double down, and they may choose to do so after a nuclear deal both to signal to the Iranians that they should not take advantage of it to inflict more damage on the "Sunni" side.

Unfortunately, there is a greater danger still. The Saudis and their Sunni Arab allies may fear that the U.S. intends to use a nuclear deal with Iran as a "Get Out of the Middle East Free" card. The Gulf states are convinced that is the Obama Administration's intent. Across the board in private, Gulf officials damn the Administration for its weak response to Iran, brought to a head at the May 2015 summit at Camp David, where the claim that the United States offered nothing new as reassurance that Washington would push back on Iran. The danger here is that, far from accommodating Tehran as some have feared, the Gulf states are far more likely to get in Tehran's face to try to deter the Iranians. The GCC air campaign in Yemen is a perfect example of this. It represents a stunning departure from past GCC practice—they never intervened directly with their own armed forces against another state, except behind a massive American force as in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91.

The ultimate problem is that the Gulf states are not strong enough to take on Iran alone, and if they act provocatively toward Iran, even if intended to deter Iranian aggression, they could easily provoke just such aggression and/or overstretch their own limited capabilities with potentially dire consequences for their own political stability. If the U.S. is not there to reassure the Gulf states and deter Iran, things could get very ugly.

### **The American Role**

Inevitably with any question related to the geo-politics of the Middle East, the question eventually turns to the United States. The preceding analysis all points to the centrality of the American response to a nuclear agreement with Iran as potentially determining whether such a deal is beneficial or detrimental to regional stability, and thus to American interests themselves.

As always, the United States is master of its own fate to a much greater extent than any country on earth, even in the turbulent and unpredictable Middle East.

Two points seem to stand out to me from the preceding analysis and the modern history of the region. The first is that while Iranian strategy is anti-American, anti-status quo, anti-Semitic, aggressive and expansionist, it is not reckless and typically quite wary of American power. When the U.S. exerts itself, the Iranians typically retreat. The exception that proves the rule was in Iraq in 2007, when initially the Iranians did not back down from their support to various anti-American Iraqi militias, only to have those militias crushed and driven from Iraq particularly during Operation Charge of the Knights and subsequent Iraqi-American campaigns along the lower Tigris. As we see in Iraq today, the Iranians apparently recognize that they misjudged both America's will and its capacity to act then, and are once again content to battle Washington for political influence in Baghdad, but unwilling to challenge U.S. power militarily, even by proxy.

The second is the other side of the coin from the first. In the absence of American engagement, leadership and military involvement, the GCC states (led, as always, by the Saudis) become frightened and their tendency is to lash out and overextend themselves. Again, the unprecedented GCC air campaign in Yemen is a striking example of this. As the Gulf Arabs see it, they have never seen the United States so disengaged from the region—at least not in 35 years—and so they feel that they have had to take equally exceptional action to make up for it. I continue to see the GCC intervention in Yemen as a wholly unnecessary and unhelpful move, a rash decision meant to check what the GCC sees as a looming Iranian "conquest" of Yemen. In private, GCC officials make no bones in saying that they felt compelled to do so because the United States was embracing Iran rather than deterring or defeating it. While all of that is a set of overstatements and exaggerations, it drives home the point that in the absence of a strong American role in pushing back on Iran, the GCC's default mode is to attack on their own, and that only makes the situation worse, not better.

So, what the Obama Administration offered the Gulf states at Camp David failed to allay their fears or reassure them that the United States was ready to help them address their security concerns. That too is understandable: Washington did not offer a new defense pact or even an explicit nuclear umbrella—just more of the same. Some new weapons. Some new training. Nothing categorically different that was really likely to convince the Gulf states that the United States was making a qualitatively different commitment to Gulf security to ensure the region that a nuclear deal with Iran would not mean American abandonment of the region, let alone a shift toward Iran.

In truth, there is only one way that the United States is going to reassure the Gulf States that it does share their interests and is not going to leave the field open to the Iranians. Not coincidentally, it may be the only way to demonstrate to the Iranians that the U.S. is not abandoning the region—or too fearful of jeopardizing the nuclear agreement to block Iran's continued aggressive activities around the Middle East. Indeed, it is probably what will prove necessary to force Iran to abandon its aggressively opportunistic regional policy. And that, is to pick a place and take the Iranians on.

Here there are three possibilities, but ultimately only one conclusion. Yemen is the wrong place for the United States to confront Iran. Yemen is simply not consequential enough to justify making any American investment there; in fact, Washington should be doing everything it can to help the Saudis and the GCC end their own intervention in Yemen, not reinforcing it. Iraq is also the wrong choice. The Iranians are too strong in Iraq now, Iraq is too important to Iran, the Iraqis have a chance of solving their problems and regaining stability, but theirs is a fragile polity, one that probably could not survive a U.S.-Iranian war on their territory. Both we and the Iranians need the Iraqis to sort out their problems, and Iraq will probably need both of our help to do so. Thus, Iraq is also the wrong place at the wrong time.

That leaves Syria. If the U.S. is going to push back on Iran in the aftermath of a nuclear deal, to demonstrate to both Tehran and our regional allies that we are not abandoning the field and allowing (or enabling) the Iranians to make greater gains, Syria is unquestionably the place to do it. Iran's allies in Syria have been considerably weakened in recent months. Our Arab allies are eager to have the U.S. take the lead there, and President Obama has committed the U.S. to just such a course, even if his actions have fallen woefully short of his rhetoric. This is not the place to describe how the United States might mount such an effort, not the likelihood that it would succeed if the U.S. were willing to commit the necessary resources (which would likely include a heavier air campaign but not ground combat troops).<sup>5</sup> It is simply to point out that in the aftermath of an Iranian nuclear deal, finally executing the Administration's proclaimed strategy for Syria, may be the best and only way to regain control over the dangerous confrontation escalating between Iran and America's Arab allies.

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<sup>5</sup> For the fullest explanation of the Administration's Syria strategy, see the testimony by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 16, 2014. A transcript is available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html). For an outside assessment along similar lines, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "An Army to Defeat Assad: How to Turn Syria's Opposition Into a Real Fighting Force," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 110-124.