THE CRISIS IN SYRIA
Chair’s Summary

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University (LISD) convened a special seminar, “The Crisis in Syria,” in Triesenberg, Principality of Liechtenstein, November 15-17, 2013. Representatives and experts from 20 states, as well as Christian religious leaders from Syria and neighboring states were present at this private meeting. Participants included Archbishop Diego Cauero, Apostolic Nuncio to Liechtenstein and Switzerland; Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate, Moscow; Prince Hans Adam II, Reigning Prince of Liechtenstein; Ambassador Prince Nikolaus of Liechtenstein, Representative of the Principality of Liechtenstein to the Holy See; Ambassador Alexander Aksenyonok, Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow; Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, joint UN Representative for Syria; Colonel Sam Gardiner, United States Air Force (retired); Ambassador Gabriela von Habsburg, Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies; Ambassador Christian Wenaweser, Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the UN; Ambassador Volkmar Wenzel, Representative for the Middle East, German Foreign Office, Berlin. The seminar was chaired by Professor Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, Director of LISD.

Discussions focused on the development of new ideas and strategies for the planned Geneva II peace conference, and how to bring about an end to hostilities in Syria. Specifically, participants engaged in a simulation of possible strategic developments and potential results in the overall situation; analyzed challenges to create an effective ceasefire and end of hostilities through multiple levels of analysis; and addressed the issues of human security, kidnappings, starvation and refugees, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and radicalization, and the impact of regional neighbors and concerned international powers.

THE SYRIA CONFLICT PUZZLE

The dearth of international political will is a defining element of the Syria conflict puzzle. Comprised of manifold actors on multiple levels, this is a high-stakes conflict for many, not least of which is the Assad government. Most observers agree that it has approached the conflict with little concern for humanitarian consequences or material costs or time. While the conflict is less of an immediate priority for some actors, the reality is that there are many involved states, groups, and non-state actors. Each brings with it its own, often competing objectives and ambitions. Added to the Syria puzzle is a situation on the ground wherein the armed opposition is increasingly divided, fragmented, and radicalized. Most importantly, however, is the dramatic humanitarian suffering that exists, with more than 2.5 million official refugees in the region and more than 6.5 million internally displaced peoples within Syria. Concern is particularly...
within Syria and its neighborhood, and for the spillover effects of the conflict on Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. Human security challenges are mounting with kidnappings and sexual crimes rampant, critical shortages of food, medicine, electricity and heating materials, and denial of access for those attempting to supply humanitarian aid. A serious humanitarian disaster with far reaching political, geographic, and religious-cultural ramifications is in the making.

The international community is at a loss for how to approach such an intractable crisis, leaving policymakers searching for fresh ideas. Great power rivalry, the fight for survival by the government and its associates, the absolute ambition of some to win the conflict, increasing radicalization, and competition by other crises elsewhere has only served to forestall effective negotiations, continue and even prolong the suffering, and diminish hopes for an effective solution in the near term. The longer the crisis continues, the higher the attraction for radical forces outside Syria and the appeal for young recruits, including Europeans, to participate.

The difficulties faced by the international community in arranging talks between groups representing the opposition and the government in the lead up to Geneva II underscores the lack of effective and cohesive leadership on the ground that has greatly increased the complexity of the situation. Within government forces, militias are forming around prominent commanders, dampening the level of control that the government reliably maintains within its ranks. It is likely that this trend can be expected to continue, particularly the current strategic stalemate between government and opposition forces, as long as the crisis continues. Within the opposition, some rebel battalions are beginning to enter pragmatic alliances with one another, and there is also infighting among them, which only adds to the many dimensions already constituting the undefined and disparate Syrian opposition. At the same time, the rise of extremist elements continues to drive a wedge between these groups vying for political influence and physical power. Their gains have further stoked regional and international fears of a possible safe-haven from which Al-Qaeda affiliated groups can conduct acts of international terrorism.

Citing a lack of options, and the misperception fostered by other Arab Spring states that Assad would quickly fall, the United States and other members of the international community have played a waiting game, while
there is also great crisis fatigue. The current model for a diplomatic solution hails from elements of the successes of the 1990s, most notably the 1995 Dayton Accords, which brought an end to the Bosnian War, though in a totally different international system than exists today.

As the humanitarian situation worsens dramatically and extremist groups pose an international threat, the stakes will increase for all players, potentially bringing them to the negotiating table. A framework for understanding, approaching, and most of all dealing with the crisis in Syria must incorporate at least these two key challenges to stand any chance at providing a solution to the ever increasingly dire conflict.

POINTS OF DISCUSSION

As one participant noted, paraphrasing Henry Kissinger, “In conflict, the government loses if it does not win. The opposition wins if they do not lose.” But as the crisis in Syria shows, the longer the conflict continues, the neighborhood, the region, and indeed all involved will lose.

HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS

The historical dimensions and the role of the state in Arab countries were a point of contention and frame differing points of view expressed in the seminar. Some suggested that the conflict is developing increasingly along sectarian, essentialist lines. A participant stated that the future of Syria was not with the state but rather with sectarian division, militias, and religious extremism. Others argued that while the state was shattered and under threat, it should not be hastily cast aside. Syrian nationalism remains a salient identity and should not be discounted.

Participants also noted that the Syrian government remains vigorously committed to exercising the mechanisms of sovereignty, including diplomacy, the judiciary, and the economy. The state has fought back with overwhelming violence to defend itself domestically and has vehemently defended its sovereignty in the international arena. At the end of 2013 the Assad government seemed to be more settled and indeed on the offensive both militarily and diplomatically. The Syrian state, nationalist identity, and the implications of the exercise of state sovereignty remain essential to the government’s strategy, which has to date seen strong support by Russia and Iran.

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

The chemical attacks documented in summer 2013 elevated the Syria crisis with the prospect of U.S. intervention in the conflict. They also presented an opportunity to allow the Assad government, supported by Russia, to cooperate with the international community in a manner that could potentially allow the United States to walk back its long-standing demand that “Assad must go.” Continued cooperation on the removal of chemical weapons from Syria is critical both to diffusing the potential for escalation of the crisis over the issue, as well as to build momentum within the international community for an agreement to end the fighting, with the Assad government as a potential partner in this and to lend some truth to the “red line.” The chemical weapons issue and the so-called “Russian Proposal,” based upon a suggestion by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, restored some measure of Bashar al-Assad’s international legitimacy.

Although the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria proceeds, albeit slowly, even with the dismantling of Syria’s weapons of mass destruction, the specter of biological warfare looms as a potential issue. United States Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently stated that Syria has the potential to arm its Scud missiles with biological weapons such as ricin, which would represent a significant threat to all neighboring states. Participants questioned the credibility of this claim, noting the advanced scientific knowledge required for aerosol dispersal of such weapons, the degradation over time of any Syrian biological program, and the feasibility of arming said weapons with biological weapons. But given the level of attention the use of chemical weapons received, as well as the potential threats posed by
biological weapons in the conflict, discussants recommend a greater focus on the issue in advance of any potential operational use. What, for example, should be done about the deployment of barrel bombs used with devastating efficiency?

Destroying chemical weapons might still endanger people and/or the environment. Further, it remains uncertain how real the intent of the Assad government is to fulfill its obligations to turn over and destroy all the chemical weapons and production facilities in a timely manner. Participants discussed the likelihood of a scenario in which the removal of chemical weapons stalls and delegations from the United States and Russia offer competing narratives blaming the government or the opposition for the breakdown in the agreement. Such a potential development should be anticipated, and plans should be made in advance to avoid such a result.

**Borders**

Seminar participants agreed on the fundamental role of Syria’s external boundaries, but questioned the extent to which they can be controlled as the conflict escalates. Borders are politically central for defining the state of Syria and will therefore play a major role in shaping any type of international negotiations, as well as in addressing the spillover effects in the region. Despite the recognized importance of these boundaries, Syria’s borders are becoming increasingly porous.

All of Syria’s borders are characterized by varying degrees of permeability, notwithstanding the relative stability

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**PHASES OF THE SYRIA CONFLICT**

**Phase I (Spring 2011)**
- Civic Opposition Begins
- Brutal Response by Assad Government against Civilians

**Phase II (Summer 2012)**
- Bashar al-Assad Supposedly Losing
- United States Demands Assad Exit
  - Geneva I

**Phase III (Fall 2012)**
- Military Stalemate
- Intensification of Government Response to Opposition Forces
- Possible Use of Chemical Weapons

**Phase IV (Spring 2013)**
- Strengthening of Iranian, Hezbollah Support for Assad Government and Regionalization of the Conflict
- Slow Turning of the Tide against Opposition Forces

**Phase V (Summer 2013)**
- Intensification of Fighting
- Confirmed Use of Chemical Weapons

**Phase VI (Fall 2013)**
- Chemical Weapons Agreement
- Measured Re-legitimiz ation of Bashar al-Assad

**Phase VII (Winter 2013/2014)**
- Geneva II
- Competing International Crises
of the border with Jordan. The border with Lebanon is a significant concern in terms of the ease with which radical actors or weaponry can travel or be transferred. While the border with Turkey is well defined, in many areas it more closely resembles a porous and dangerous “no-man’s land.” The refugee crisis is also a major issue in addressing the humanitarian aspects of displaced populations along Syrian borders in general.

Overall, the control of Syria’s borders is an increasingly crucial issue that all actors agree must be resolved in order to help stabilize the internal situation as well as address the humanitarian dimension. The unstable condition of Syria’s borders has direct bearing on the country’s territorial integrity.

**International Involvement or International Absence**

It has become clear that the longer the conflict goes on, the more intense the fighting, destruction, death, fleeing, and rates of radicalization will become. The absence of effective humanitarian and other assistance on the ground from the West enables others to become the “feeding hand” and earn concomitant influence and gratitude. But international involvement hinges on complexities and internal and external competing interests, including attention and resources diverted away by other crises elsewhere. There are powers who really want to decide the Syria situation to their advantage and hence have a real national interest in it, namely Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran. But they do not necessarily work in tandem with each other, and potentially have competing interests. Then there are neighboring states whose concerns are more immediate, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Israel, and, again, Turkey. France and the United Kingdom, former regional colonial powers, Germany as a state which has been connected with Syria for decades, as well as powers who have no direct national interest including the United States and Italy, are all concerned with the outcome. Finally, there are important non-state actors, some considered to be of radical orientation like...

### KEY DIPLOMATIC MISSTEPS IN THE SYRIA CRISIS

- Great powers’ suggestions and promises regarding a no-fly zone and protective zones without appropriate military analysis or back-up.
- Underestimating leadership and crisis capacities due to lack of expertise concerning the country of interest.
- Declaring a leader a “dead man” too quickly.
- Ignoring the realities of (great) power interests, relevance of great power politics, and importance of non-state actors.
- Ignoring the interests and stakes of certain leaders ad personam.
- Taking steps without considering and respecting their potential and unintended consequences, and not being ready to react appropriately in case of failure.
- Ignoring the sequence of time, stakes, and potential costs in a given crisis and for other issues.
- Ignoring the ramifications of failed policies elsewhere and of multiple, potentially mutually reinforcing crises.
- Ignoring the power of “crisis fatigue” and “numbness to suffering,” and being overwhelmed by crises.
- Denying appropriate backing to one’s key voice abroad due to domestic political competition.
- Exacerbating the relevance of one kind of weapons (for political expedience) while ignoring other devastating kinds and the overall conduct of war.
- Inappropriately conflating high diplomacy, show business, and social media.
- Ignoring past political lessons, especially those made in the same region.
- Lack of a grand vision and development of a grand strategy.
Hezbollah, and powerful individual actors to consider. Then too exists the possibility of massive assistance coming in from even more radical elements from Islamic states and communities.

**Christians and Positive Neutrality**

The presence of senior Christian clergy at the seminar brought to the fore the deteriorating situation of Christians in the Middle East. Clergy largely expressed a stance of “positive neutrality” towards the conflict but decried the killing and bloodshed and an uncertain future under extremist groups. Christians in Syria have enjoyed equal protections under the Assad government and refuse the term “minority” groups and any associated connotation that they are disadvantaged. It was debated whether the Christians are now experiencing a genocide in Syria, but it was clearly evident how much the Christian community is under duress. For example, unknown forces kidnapped Bishops Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi in April 2013, two highly visible Christian community leaders in Syria. Although deliberate attacks on Christian communities have been limited to date, much of Syria’s historic Christian architecture has been damaged or destroyed. For centuries Christians have been an amalgam in Syrian society between the various ethnic religious groups. Now there seems to be an effort by some to make them leave. It is desirable that the Christians remain in Syria and that they receive sufficient aid and protection in order to be able to do so.

**Women and Demographics**

The Syria conflict is marked by astounding levels of suffering by women and children from causes ranging from the sheer brutality of the fighting to rape, starvation, and denial of basic humanitarian assistance. With this as a backdrop, participants discussed women as political agents and as independent social actors. Excepting the case of Tunisia and its Code of Personal Status which raised the legal marriage age and granted women greater social and legal rights, the political and social status of women in the Arab Middle East of late has been largely stagnant. This has important immediate consequences related to women’s participation, especially in the political realm, and longer-term consequences as related to the “youth bulge” in the region. Importantly, women must be participants in any future peace negotiations.

**Critical Objectives and Recommendations**

Any possible way forward must recognize that it is first imperative to stop the fighting in Syria and provide necessary humanitarian assistance. Based on these overarching considerations, the seminar produced five critical objectives and eight recommendations for new initiatives.

**Critical Objectives**

- Stop the fighting, establish a ceasefire, and ascertain effective humanitarian assistance and supplies. Enforcement of a ceasefire may range from public naming and shaming of transgressors of any agreement to more rigorous, military-based actions.

- Stop the radicalization and inflow of militants, as well as the inflow of financial support, weapons, and ammunition.

- Stop the use of heavy weaponry and weapons of mass destruction, and hold to account those who continue their use.

- Ensure continuing territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria.

- Do not lose focus and relent on efforts for Syria because of other crises that develop elsewhere.
Recommendations

1. Develop a framework to appreciate and systematize the multidimensional character of the conflict and to prioritize issues, challenges, and parties involved.

2. Strengthen the position of the UN Special Representative and permit him to talk to as many actors as possible.

3. Facilitate the provision of effective humanitarian aid to those in all areas of the country and in neighboring states. This is not only a human obligation but potentially works to counteract radicalization.

4. Develop and implement effective and substantive initiatives while highlighting the increasingly grave humanitarian crisis, Syria's chemical and biological weapons capabilities, the specter of Syria becoming a breeding ground for international terrorist groups, and increasing the potential appeal for young ones in the region and Europe to join the fighting. These initiatives must ensure:
   a) that negotiations take place with as many parties from the ground as possible;
   b) that all concerned parties feel involved and with buy-in;
   c) that a ceasefire and cessation of humanitarian carnage can be reached and sustained, and effective humanitarian assistance created;
   d) that an international or outside force is willing and ready to stabilize and keep the peace.
   e) that the possibility of presidential elections, called for by the Assad government, are anticipated.

5. Encourage sponsoring countries to effectively coordinate their funding and support of opposition groups through a “Friends of Syria” group and encourage neighboring states to rethink their relationship to the conflicting parties and address and coordinate border controls, transit, infiltration, and smuggling accordingly.

6. Because concomitant crises have the potential to induce fatigue and numbness to suffering, develop a strategic approach which ascertains continuous support and involvement even in view of the strategic shadow created by other crises and/or mutually reinforcing multiple crises—including events in regional states like Egypt and ongoing events in states outside the region including Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the situation of contested islands in the South China Sea.

7. Establish an initiative of Great Power Arrangement, including Russia and China, with buy-in from the Syrian diaspora, following on the experiences of previous multiple crises.

8. Mobilize senior religious leaders of all faiths and denominations to influence key stakeholders and bring about a recognition that it is a human moral imperative to stop the killing and assist all civilians in Syria and the region.
“The Crisis in Syria” was a meeting sponsored under the aegis of the Liechtenstein Colloquium on European and International Affairs (LCM). The LCM is a platform for crisis management, conflict resolution, and education. It maintains an ongoing series of private colloquia, workshops, and seminars devoted to informed and frank discussions of specific topics with the goal of advancing peace and prosperity in the world. The LCM is independent, international, intergenerational, interdisciplinary, innovative, and educative with equal participation independent of gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion. The LCM provides a neutral forum for discussion and exchanges of ideas among a variety of stakeholders. The meetings are private, off the record, and by invitation only. The first LCM was held in 1989, and since there have been over forty meetings.