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# In Syria, U.S. Banks On A Rebel Victory

**BY BRADLEY KLAPPER**  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With Syrian diplomacy all but dead, the Obama administration is shifting its focus on the civil war away from political transition and toward helping the rebels defeat the Syrian regime on the battlefield.

The U.S. still wants to avoid any military involvement, banking on a complicated policy of indirect assistance to the rebels and hope that the ragtag alliance of militias can demoralize President Bashar Assad's better-armed forces and end the war without far greater casualties.

It's a scenario analysts see as unlikely, even as the opposition gains ground in Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere, and as the cadre of high-level defections from Assad's government grows. Prime Minister Riad Hijab became the latest to abandon Assad on Monday, rebels said.

The defections are "the latest indication that Assad has lost control of Syria and that the momentum is with the opposition forces and the Syrian people," White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said.

"The regime is crumbling," State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell said.

In Aleppo, the rebels are exceeding the expectations of military experts. Despite intense bombardment from warplanes, they've now withstood two weeks of regime counterattacks and are clawing toward the city center. Militiamen also are stepping up guerrilla-like forays in central districts of Damascus once firmly in Assad's hands.

Those gains have given the Obama administration hope that the tide of the war is turning — and without the need for the U.S. to reconsider its opposition to airstrikes, no-fly zones or even weapons sales to the anti-Assad forces.

And with U.N. special envoy Kofi Annan quitting his diplomatic efforts and the rebels starting to carve out larger footholds in Syrian territory, the U.S. focus has changed accordingly.

Whereas once the U.S. hoped to see a cease-fire to end the fighting and then Assad leave office eventually on his own, the talk now is of the rebels driving him out of power by winning the war — or of Assad's loyalists, in the face of more military setbacks, turning on their leader.

As the rebels gain ground and weaponry, the U.S. has increased its humanitarian aid to \$74 million and its "nonlethal" communications assistance to \$25 million. The administration has eased restrictions for rebel fundraising in the United States.

It also has softened its support for the transitional plan crafted by Annan, and agreed to by both the United

States and Russia after a conference in Geneva in June. The document aimed at establishing an interim government of individuals chosen by both the Assad regime and the opposition. Each would be able to veto candidates.

The arrangement was rejected immediately by many in the Syrian opposition, and Ventrell relegated it on Monday to a "basis for a good framework." He said the transitional authority should be chosen by the opposition and "remnants of the regime that don't have blood on their hands" — cutting out Assad and his senior government officials.

"The future of Syria is going to be for the Syrians to decide," he said.

Speaking last week, Ventrell said: "We are not at a point where we are negotiating with the Assad regime. We are at a point where the opposition is gaining ground and making plans for the day after."

The statements follow more than a year of Obama administration officials speaking of bringing international diplomatic pressure to drive Assad from office and meeting with multinational groups like the Friends of Syria.

While officials maintain that they'd prefer a "peaceful political transition" take place, they concede privately that the deaths of at least 19,000 Syrians over the past 17 months, the utter refusal by Assad to compromise and the failure of diplomacy means more bloodshed may lie ahead.

With mediation efforts cut off, a rebel victory now appears among the most feasible path forward for an end to Syria's war. And U.S. officials are trying to plan for messier regime change scenarios than the six-point plan advocated by Annan and adopted by no one in Syria.

The U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, held meetings with opposition leaders in Cairo last week. Those followed consultations that the State Department's Syria envoy, Fred Hof, held with activists and likeminded governments in Europe a week before. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton will talk to Syrian activists and Turkish officials in Istanbul this weekend, rejecting proposals to turn her visit into another international diplomatic forum.

Ventrell said the goal of much of the recent diplomacy was to help the opposition come up with a post-Assad plan that would be as cohesive as possible.

"There still has to be water, electricity and all the basic services," Ventrell said. "What will the government look like? How it will function the day after? How will we ensure that (Syria) doesn't descend into further sectarian chaos? How do we make it work? That's some of the things we're working on."

rockets to brake. In a Hollywood-style finish, cables delicately lowered it to the ground at 2 mph.

At the end of what NASA called "seven minutes of terror," the vehicle settled into place almost perfectly flat in the crater it was aiming for.

"We have ended one phase of the mission much to our enjoyment," mission manager Mike Watkins said. "But another part has just begun."

The nuclear-powered Curiosity will dig into the Martian surface to analyze what's there and hunt for some of the molecular building blocks of life, including carbon.

It won't start moving for a couple of weeks, because all the systems on the \$2.5 billion rover have to be checked out. Color photos and panoramas will start coming in the next few days.

But first NASA had to use tiny cameras designed to spot hazards in front of Curiosity's wheels. So early images of gravel and shadows abounded. The pictures were fuzzy, but scientists were delighted.

The photos show "a new Mars we have never seen before," Watkins said. "So every one of those pictures is the most beautiful picture I have ever seen."

In one of the photos from the close-to-the-ground hazard cameras, if you squinted and looked the right way, you could see "a silhouette of Mount Sharp in the set-

ting sun," said an excited John Grotzinger, chief mission scientist from the California Institute of Technology.

A high-resolution camera on the orbiting 7-year-old Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, flying 211 miles directly above the plummeting Curiosity, snapped a photo of the rover dangling from its parachute about a minute from touchdown. The parachute's design can be made out in the photo.

"It's just mind-boggling to me," said Miguel San Martin, chief engineer for the landing team.

Curiosity is the heaviest piece of machinery NASA has landed on Mars, and the success gave the space agency confidence that it can unload equipment that astronauts may need in a future manned trip to the red planet.

The landing technique was hatched in 1999 in the wake of devastating back-to-back Mars spacecraft losses. Back then, engineers had no clue how to land super-heavy spacecraft. They brainstormed different possibilities, consulting Apollo-era engineers and pilots of heavy-lift helicopters.

"I think its engineering at its finest. What engineers do is they make the impossible possible," said former NASA chief technologist Bobby Braun. "This thing is elegant. People say it looks crazy. Each system was designed for a very specific function."

## Survivor Describes New Mass Killing In Syria

ANADAN, Syria (AP) — The guards pulled him from his cell before dawn on Monday, bound his hands, blindfolded him and drove him to an empty lot in the Syrian city of Aleppo. They sat him in a row with 10 other captives, he said, then cocked their guns and opened fire.

"They sprayed us," recalled 21-year-old Mahmoud, the lone survivor of the latest mass killing of Syria's civil war. "The first bullet hit my chest, then one hit my foot, then my head. As soon as my head got hit, I thought, 'I'm dead.'"

Reports of such killings have surfaced frequently during the 17 months of deadly violence that activists seeking to topple President Bashar Assad say has killed more than 19,000 people. But details are usually scarce — no more than activist reports or amateur videos of bloodied bodies or mass graves posted on YouTube.

Mahmoud related his grisly ordeal to The Associated Press hours after it happened. Struggling to speak, he lay in a bed in a makeshift rebel-run field hospital set up in a wedding hall in this town 13 miles (20 kilometers) north of Aleppo. Bandages covered his foot, head and chest. Plastic vines and colored lights adorned the walls of the darkened building, and two red velvet chairs once used by brides and grooms sat on a small stage.

Mahmoud gave only his first name to protect his family who still live in the area.

## Romney Trumps Obama In Fundraising Again

STAMFORD, Conn. (AP) — Can President Barack Obama raise the money he needs to hold onto the White House?

Money wasn't supposed to be a worry for the president's campaign, which smashed fundraising records in 2008. But Mitt Romney's team has hauled in more than Obama and his allies for a third straight month, raising the once-unthinkable question.

While the race for voter support is tight, according to polls, Romney's robust fundraising and a crush of money from Republican-leaning political action committees have forced the president's campaign to spend heavily through the summer.

Highlighting the challenge for Obama, Romney on Monday reported a July fundraising haul of more than \$101 million along with the Republican National Committee, compared to the \$75 million that Obama's campaign said it had brought in along with the Democratic National Committee.

During a fundraiser in Stamford, Conn., Obama said Romney's tax proposal would benefit the wealthy at the expense of many middle-class families. "It's like Robin Hood in reverse," he said. "It's Romney Hood." Romney campaign spokesman Ryan Williams countered that Obama was the only "candidate in this race who's going to raise taxes on the American people."

## Egypt Eyes Sinai Militants After Soldiers Killed

EL-ARISH, Egypt (AP) — Egypt vowed Monday to take on Islamist militants who have turned the Sinai peninsula into a lawless haven and are suspected of killing 16 Egyptian troops as the fighters were en route to a failed assault on neighboring Israel.

But the goal of reining in jihadists in Sinai is complicated by limits on military activity in the area under the 1979 peace treaty with Israel and by tensions between Egypt's Islamist President Mohammed Morsi and the country's powerful military.

"The armed forces have been careful in the past months and during the events of the revolution not to shed Egyptian blood," said a statement by the military. "But the group that staged this attack is considered by the armed forces as enemies of the nation who must be dealt with by force."

Morsi, who is enmeshed in a power struggle with the military leadership, pledged he would make the killers pay for their crime and would restore security to Sinai, home to several of the most popular Red Sea resorts in Egypt.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who visited Egypt last week and met with its new leaders, said the U.S. had concerns about security threats in Sinai. Egypt has seen a sharp deterioration in security throughout the country since the uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and drove the hated police force from the streets. But even before the uprising, there was rampant lawlessness in Sinai.

## Judge In Ariz. Mass Shooting Weighs Charges

PHOENIX (AP) — Reaching a plea agreement for the suspect in the deadly Tucson, Ariz., mass shooting is just one step.

On Tuesday, defense attorneys and prosecutors will need to accomplish the next: persuade U.S. District Court Judge Larry A. Burns that Jared Lee Loughner, who has been forcibly medicated at a federal prison, is no longer mentally unfit for trial.

A court-appointed psychiatrist is expected to testify that Loughner is competent to enter a plea.

If Burns agrees that Loughner is competent, as legal experts expect, a formal change of plea hearing will follow. That's when those in the court will hear from the 23-year-old college dropout at length for the first time, as the judge questions him about the agreement and changing his plea to guilty.

Burns may ask Loughner to recite his actions in his own words, but either his lawyer or the federal prosecutor could just read the facts of the January 2011 shooting spree at a Tucson supermarket as then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords held a meet-and-greet with constituents.

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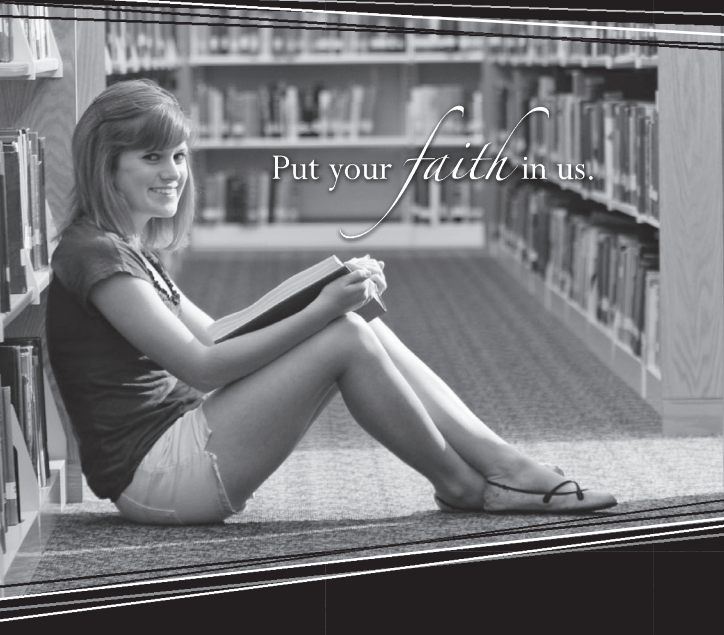


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