# A multi-disciplinary, multi-method approach to leader assessment at a distance: The case of Bashar al-Assad

## A Quick Look Assessment by the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)[1]

**Part I: Summary, comparison of results, and recommendations**

February 2014

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[1] SMA provides planning support to Combatant Commands (CCMD) with complex operational imperatives requiring multi-agency, multi-disciplinary solutions that are not within core Service/Agency competency. SMA is accepted and synchronized by Joint Staff, J3, DDSAO and executed by OSD/ASD (R&E)/RSD/RRTO.

**ABSTRACT**

This report suggests potential types of actions and messages most likely to influence and deter Bashar al-Assad from using force in the ongoing Syrian civil war. This study is based on multidisciplinary analyses of Bashar al-Assad's speeches, and how he reacts to real events and verbal messages from external sources.

The results are summarized in a two-part report. Part I (this document) provides a summary, comparison of results, and recommendations. Part II describes each analytical approach in detail.[2]

**Data**: The speeches used in the study were delivered by al-Assad from Jan 2000 to Sept 2013; the past six years was sampled most densely. Additional Twitter feeds were analyzed to gauge his influence in the region.

**Analytical Approaches**: Five separate methods analyzed the speeches: (a) automated text analytics that profile al-Assad's decision making style and ability to appreciate alternative viewpoints; (b) integrative complexity (IC) analysis that reveals al-Assad's ability to appreciate others' viewpoints and integrate them into a larger framework; (c) thematic analysis of the cultural and political themes al-Assad expresses before taking action or in reaction to events; (d) qualitative interpretations of major themes in al-Assad's rhetoric; and (e) analysis of the spread of Twitter feeds. We highlight findings that reinforce each other as particularly robust for policy.

**Major Findings**: The major findings of these studies include:
- al-Assad is **capable of recognizing other viewpoints** and evaluates them in a nuanced and context-dependent manner
- al-Assad **values logical argumentation and empirical evidence**
- al-Assad's **integrative complexity is relatively high,** but might be lower before he takes decisive action or when under intense threat
- al-Assad's reasoning is **consistent with his Arab nationalist Ba'athist political ideology**, and with a consistent opposition to Israel and Western domination; al-Assad sees Arab resistance and his leadership, or at least that of the Ba'ath party, as essential

**Key Recommendations**: We used the doctrinal 7-Step MISO process to characterize al-Assad as a target audience of one, and we absorbed the relevant components of our multi-method analyses into the Target Audience Analysis format. The main practical recommendations are:
- **Avoid direct threats** to the Syrian Ba'athist regime's hold on power;
- **Appeal to al-Assad's relatively high baseline level of Cognitive Complexity** (ability to see different sides to an issue, flexible decision-making, openness to information), pragmatism, and respect for Arab nationalism to broker a negotiated settlement; and
- **Identify and exploit al-Assad's dynamic levels of Integrative Complexity** to assess his relative susceptibility, develop arguments and recommended psychological actions and/or refine assessment criteria at a specific point in time.

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[2] Part II contains detailed analyses of each study that contributed to this effort, supporting appendices and summary chapters.

<u>**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**</u>

**Main Findings**

Basic findings from studies of al-Assad's speeches, 2000 – 2013

1. **Various Measures of Cognitive Complexity**: Multiple measures converge to show that Assad is capable of appreciating different viewpoints and the nuances between them. al-Assad's integrative complexity (his ability to differentiate different perspectives and integrate them) is relatively high compared to other leaders in the region. al-Assad furthermore demonstrates an ability to be logically consistent in how he evaluates situations, and is responsive to credible (in his view) empirical evidence.

2. **Deterrence**: Traditional deterrence theory should apply to al-Assad generally, although during periods of intense stress he may deviate more from such a model.

3. **Integrative Complexity (IC)**: In general his IC has not changed over the course of the conflict. But analysis of specific events suggests his IC tends to be lower when under intense threat, or before taking decisive and violent action, compared to afterwards.

4. **Arab Nationalism**: al-Assad wants to lead Arab interests; he is a staunch Arab nationalist.

5. **Opposition to the West and Israel**: al-Assad wishes to oppose Western and Israeli influence in the Arab world; the history of Middle Eastern peace talks makes Assad cynical about Israel-Palestine negotiations, despite his cognitive inclination for negotiation. Assad's narrative of opposing Israel decreases dramatically once Syrian unrest begins (March 2011); return to this narrative may be an indicator of his baseline rhetoric in times of relative peace within Syria.

6. **Secular Ba'athist Political Ideology**: al-Assad's reasoning and values are consistent with a more secular, Ba'athist, political ideology.

## Key Recommendations

We used the doctrinal 7-Step MISO process to characterize al-Assad as a target audience of one, and we absorbed the relevant components of our multi-method analyses into the Target Audience Analysis format. Summary of Key Recommendations along with Supporting Analyses, Part II Location, and Confidence Level are shown in table one. The main practical recommendations are:

- **Avoid direct threats** to the Syrian Ba'athist regime's hold on power;
- **Appeal to al-Assad's relatively high baseline level of Cognitive Complexity** (ability to see different sides to an issue, flexible decision-making, openness to information), pragmatism, and respect for Arab nationalism to broker a negotiated settlement; and
- **Identify and exploit al-Assad's dynamic levels of Integrative Complexity** to assess his relative susceptibility, develop arguments and recommended psychological actions and/or refine assessment criteria at a specific point in time.

**Table 1: Summary of Key Recommendations, Supporting Analyses, Part II Location, and Confidence Level.**

| Recommendation | Supporting Analyses | Part II Location | Confidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Avoid direct threats** to Syrian Ba'athist regime's hold on power | **Approach 2**: al-Assad frequently appeals to conspiracies against Syria and the Syrian Ba'athist regime; direct threats to this power reinforce this narrative to his constituents.<br>al-Assad expresses a sense of duty to lead Syria and defend its heritage against outside threats; his removal from power, if desired, is a position to which one would have to build. Immediate demands for his removal will fail, since they appear non-negotiable at this point. | 4.3.1, 4.3.3, 4.3.4, 4.3.6, 4.4.4, | High |
| | **Approach 3**: al-Assad's task orientation (or motivation for seeking/retaining office) is 0.79 where 0.71 is considered high. He is therefore likely to resist any notions of him relinquishing power, particularly as he views his responsibility (much like that of his father) as seeing Syria through the current crisis | 5.3.2 | High |
| **Appeal to al-Assad's relatively high baseline level of Cognitive Complexity** (ability to see different sides to an issue, flexible decision-making, openness to information), pragmatism, and respect for Arab nationalism to broker a negotiated settlement. | **Approach 1**: al-Assad's baseline IC (from 2000-2007) was 2.4, relatively high but within the range of Middle Eastern leaders during politically calm periods: e.g., prior to the Gulf War, when the range was from 1.1 for King Hussein of Jordan to 2.9 for Iranian President A. Rafsanjani. al-Assad's average IC from Jan 2008 – Sept 2013 was 1.9, and his yearly averages after the onset of the Arab Spring were within 1.7 and 1.9. These scores are somewhat high relative to other political leaders of the region, but within the range for Middle Eastern leaders during a crisis, such as Saddam Hussein's IC during the Gulf Crisis, which ranged from 1.2 to 2.2. | 3.1 | High |
| | **Approach 2**: al- al-Assad makes frequent appeals to Arab nationalism and Syrian Heritage, which are key values, consistent with his Ba'athist political ideology. | 4.3.1, 4.3.3, 4.3.4, 4.3.6, 4.4.4 | High |
| | **Approach 3**: This used three measures of cognitive complexity: Firstly, Conceptual Complexity (a component of ProfilerPlus Leadership Trait Analysis). al-Assad's PP_LTA_CC score was 0.66, where above 0.62 is considered high. His high conceptual complexity score coupled with his low self-confidence suggest openness to contextual information. Secondly, ProfilerPlus Cognitive Complexity (PPCC score, calculated separately by ProfilerPlus), al-Assad's mean PPCC Score of 5.8 (on a scale of 1-7) suggests a level approaching the transition from moderate to high differentiation and high differentiation. Thirdly, al-Assad's use of "thinking" words (Cognitive Mechanism score calculated by LIWC) in his speeches showed relative stability over time (mean of 18.08 and a standard deviation of 2.61). In summary, al-Assad exhibited moderate to high cognitive complexity and did so throughout the period analyzed, supporting the baseline findings of Approach 1. | 5.3.1.1 5.3.1.2 5.3.1.3 | Moderate |
| | **Approach 4**: al-Assad has historically portrayed Syria as essential in the region, and currently depicts the US as a malicious force. | 6.2.1, 6.2.5 | High |
| **Identify and exploit al-Assad's dynamic levels of Integrative Complexity** to assess his relative susceptibility, develop arguments and recommended psychological actions and/or refine assessment criteria at a specific point in time. | **Approach 1**: The pattern of IC rising or remaining stable when a problem first occurs and develops, and then declining with continued stress, has been observed in previous studies. In this particular case, the decline in al-Assad's IC could be associated with a high enough level of stress to have affected his problem solving resources, or with al-Assad committing cognitively to a decision (i.e. to use violent repression). In either case, al-Assad was able to return to a more complex cognitive structure in some of the following months. | 3.3 | High |

## INTRODUCTION

We aim to provide guidelines useful for intelligence analysis, deterrence, information operations and MISO. Five different teams[3] each employed one or more different methods for analyzing language, and each of these five approaches provides distinct insight into al-Assad and the Syrian regime's goals, values and decision calculus. Each approach has its own value and its own liabilities – and the extent to which similar conclusions are drawn from the different analytical approaches is a measure of the assurance that the conclusions are sound. This chapter provides a triangulation of results, indicating which findings are the most sound and therefore of the most use in national security viz. the Assad regime.

The five basic approaches reported upon in this white paper are:
1. **Integrative Complexity (IC) analysis** as developed by Peter Suedfeld (University of British Columbia)
2. Automated **Leadership Trait Analysis** using ProfilerPlus and the Language Inventory and Word Count (LIWC) software (JHU-APL)
3. **Thematic Analysis** based on methodologies developed by National Security Innovations, Inc. (NSI) and conducted by Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne (IPFW)
4. **Geopolitical Discourse Development Analysis** (CSIS, Center for Strategic and International Studies)
5. Analysis of **Influential Arab Twitter Feeds** (Texas A&M)

In this document we first summarize the most basic findings from each approach, and then compare the results from all five approaches.

**Note on data sources:** The speeches used in this study were delivered by al-Assad between Jan. 2000 and Sept. 2013, with the period of the past six years being sampled most. The analyzed text was from open-source translations of 124 speeches, which comprise the totality of English translations available for the (see study Table 2). Additional Twitter feeds were analyzed to gauge his influence in the region.

**Table 2: Number of Assad Speeches Included in the Analyses from 2000-2013.**

| Year | 2000-2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. of speeches | 23 | 17 | 22 | 28 | 8 | 12 | 14 | 124 |

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[3] The following individuals and institutions contributed to the research upon which this summary is based. Dr. Peter Suedfeld (University of British Columbia), Mr. Bradford H. Morrison (University of British Columbia), Mr. Ryan W. Cross (University of British Columbia), Dr. Larry Kuznar (Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne), Dr. Dana Eyre (SoSA), Maj Jason Spitaletta (Johns Hopkins University), Dr. Kathleen Egan (CTTSO), Mr. Sean Colbath (BBN), Mr. Paul Brewer (SDL), Ms. Martha Lillie (BBN), Mr. Dana Rafter (CSIS), Dr. Randy Kluver (Texas A&M), Ms. Jacquelyn Chinn (Texas A&M), Mr. Patrick Issa (Texas A&M).

**FINDINGS FROM THE FIVE INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES**


**Approach 1: Integrative Complexity (IC) – University of British Columbia**

**Background:** Integrative Complexity, as developed by Dr. Peter Suedfeld of University of British Columbia, is a measure of the degree to which a source recognizes more than one aspect of an issue or more than one legitimate viewpoint on it (differentiation), and recognizes relationships among those aspects or viewpoints (integration). This method uses a 7-point scale that ranges from 1 (no recognition of other points of view and no integration) to 7 (recognition of other points of view and relationships among them). High IC is associated with nuanced judgments, flexible and realistic planning and decision-making, openness to new information, tolerance of uncertainty, and the ability to consider opposing positions. It is sometimes also connected with slow and irresolute decision-making and a tendency to pay too much attention to unimportant or irrelevant details.

**Primary findings:**
- al-Assad has exhibited a relatively high degree of IC during the period studied.
- al-Assad's IC did not meaningfully change during the months before Bouazizi's self-immolation and the beginning of the Arab spring. This is consistent with Assad not anticipating the Arab Spring prior to Bouazizi's self-immolation.
- al-Assad's IC increased following Bouazizi's self-immolation, but before the first reports of violence in the Syria conflict.  This is consistent with applying greater cognitive resources in response to a foreseen challenge.  It may also suggest that, in the early phases of the conflict, al-Assad did not plan the escalation of violence in advance.
- His IC declined during the escalation of violence early in the conflict (e.g., with the Syrian Government's sieges of Daraa, Homs, and Hama).
- Once a pattern of violence had been established, al-Assad's IC declined during rebel offensives and prior to Syrian government offensives, indicating stress in the first instance and planning (or at least prior knowledge of plans) for violence in the second. Conversely, his IC increased during and following Syrian Government offensives and military successes (perhaps particularly in the Damascus region), implying reduced stress associated with victories.
- al-Assad's IC declined prior to the Ghouta chemical weapons attack.  This may suggest that al-Assad knew in advance about the attack, and perhaps played a role in planning it.
- al-Assad does not exhibit a trend of decreasing IC throughout the conflict.  This suggests that he is not suffering disruptive stress (IC dropping as cognitive resources are depleted) in association with the conflict as a whole.


**Approach 2: Thematic Analysis - (IPFW, Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne)**
Thematic analysis can provide general predictions of which themes will precede conflict and which will emerge as a reaction to conflict, an assessment of the major narratives al-Assad draws on to persuade his audiences, and analyses of themes that emerge around specific events.
Definitions:
**Theme** – A specific textual referent that conveys meaning; narratives will be composed of different themes that give it impact

**Narrative** – An account of connected events; a storyline.
**Theme Association** – An association of themes that reinforce one another, but are not connected in a narrative.

**Predictive Themes**
Themes in al-Assad's speeches that regularly occur in advance of material conflict and violent events
- **Domestic reform**, **Conspiracy**, **Figurative Language (symbolism, metaphor)**, **Intensifiers (hyperbole, superlatives)**, **Russia**

**Reactive Themes**
Themes that are most obviously salient to al-Assad regime and its Constituents after conflict with rebels and/or United States, as judged by al-Assad's' reactions
- **Domestic reform**, **Conspiracy**, **Figurative Language (symbolism, metaphor)**, **Intensifiers (hyperbole, superlatives)**, **Hostile Media**, **Security**

**Major Narratives and Theme Associations**
Factor analysis was conducted on a measure of theme frequency, identifying the themes naturally associated in narratives.
- **Syrian Arab Nationalism and Resistance**

  Syrian Arab Nationalism and Resistance is a cornerstone narrative in Ba'athist political ideology. It is the notion that Syrian Arabs constitute a distinct nationality, and that they have to struggle against foreign intervention in order to claim an identity, a homeland and an economy and way of life. Themes that loaded highly on this factor include:
    – Arab Identity, Courage, Duty, Honor, kinship, Sacrifice, Strength, Syrian Nationalism, Victimization, Resistance, Syrian Military, Intimacy, Figurative Language
- **Logic and the Rebellion**

  Logic and Rebellion is an association of mutually reinforcing themes that al-Assad employs to argue, on rational grounds, why the rebellion is unjustified politically and morally. He also often mentions Russia as a key-supporting ally who supports his point of view.
  - **Resistance against Israel and Western Domination**

  Resistance against Israel and Western Domination is another important narrative of Ba'athist political ideology. This narrative is an important baseline theme that all but vanishes once the rebellion begins in 2011. Should the theme return to al-Assad's rhetoric; it may indicate al-Assad's perception that the crisis is over.
  - **Heritage and Kinship**

  Heritage and Kinship are themes associated to stress the importance of one's cultural heritage and the need to protect it from foreign threats.
  - **Peace and Negotiation**

  The Peace and Negotiation narrative argues that peace between Israel, Palestine and Syria is false because Arab lands are unfairly occupied and that formal negotiations are largely futile with respect to this issue.
  - **Threat to Syrian Heritage**

  This narrative is also a core component of Ba'athist political ideology, and stresses that there exist persistent threats to specifically Syrian cultural heritage.

**Analysis of Specific Events**

The occurrence of themes three months before and three months after 11 specific events relevant to the al-Assad regime was examined. This provided an opportunity to examine how the particular context of events influenced al-Assad's use of themes.[4] Some events al-Assad planned (for example, the Siege of Daraa), and his use of themes before these events indicates which ones may be predictive of his actions. Other events he could not have planned (for example, Bouazizi's self-immolation and the Arab Spring) and his use of themes after these events indicates how he reacts to challenges.

Across these events, the following themes were **predictive of , or at least regularly occurred before conflict**:
**Figurative language**, use of **Intensifiers**, **Conspiracy**

Across these events, the following themes were **reactive** to conflict:
**Figurative language**, use of **Intensifiers**, **Conspiracy**, **Reform**, **Hostile Media**

In both cases, al-Assad's use of figurative language and intensifiers indicates a more emotive frame of mind that may impact his decision calculus and/or a use of emotive rhetoric to galvanize support from his constituents. al-Assad also consistently invokes the specter of a regional and international conspiracy against Syria before his government takes violent action, and in response to challenges to his hold on power.

**Approach 3: Leadership Trait Analysis (JHU-APL)**

A selection of English translations of Assad's speeches (n=101) from 1 January 2000 to 13 September 2013, total of 256,240 words (mean number of words per speech=2537, SD=2224) were analyzed using both ProfilerPlus[5] and Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)[6]

A more detailed description of Leadership Trait Analysis is included in Part II. A summary of those results suggest Assad exhibits:

- High Conceptual complexity and Task orientation, which are greater than his self-confidence that is in the low range; suggesting openness to contextual information.
- Low self-confidence, distrust and in-group bias
- Low need for power suggesting he has less of a need to be in charge and may be more amenable to subordinates assuming more prominent roles.
- Slightly below average belief in control over events and thus he is unlikely to be overly proactive or reactive in policy-making.
- Low in-group bias and distrust of others; therefore he does not perceive the world as either inherently threatening or himself as persecuted.
- The findings suggest al-Assad is probably open to subordinates, not overly pro- or reactive in policy, open to compromise, more tolerant of ambiguity, has a need for information, and is more pragmatic on average and receptive to the interests, needs, and desires of others.

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[4] These analyses were conducted on a monthly basis, and due to the fact that two months each contained two of the relevant events, an analysis of the occurrence of themes in nine months was done in detail.
[5] http://profilerplus.org/user/Request1.aspx
[6] Pennebaker, J. W., Booth, R. J., & Francis, M. E. (2007). Operator's Manual Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count: LIWC2007. *LIWC. net*.

**Approach 4: Geopolitical Discourse Development – Center for Strategic Analysis and International Studies (CSIS)**

CSIS analyzed the common corpus of 124 speeches by Bashir al-Assad from 2000 to present. They provided qualitative interpretations of major themes that emerged in al-Assad's discourse over the course of the 13-year period studied. Their main findings include:

- Pre-rebellion: al-Assad advocated Syria as an essential integrator of Arab nations, especially economically, basing his argument on pan-Arab nationalism. He spoke of Turkey positively, and his speeches from 2001 until 2011 revealed a generally positive tone towards Arab Gulf states.
- Once Syria plunged into civil war, al-Assad's Pan-Arabic strategic geopolitical discourse vanished from his public rhetoric. By August 2012 the president stated that Turkey had some responsibility for the "bloodshed" that his country was experiencing; In March 2011, the Syrian leader started to hint at the dangerous influence of satellite channels on the country's domestic situation, most likely in reference to Gulf stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya
- From the beginning of his rule until today, al-Assad has grown increasingly outspoken about his ties with Russia, China, and Iran. In particular, al-Assad has remained most consistent regarding how he portrays his relations with Russia.
- Starting in August 2006, al-Assad's language towards the United States turned progressively hostile. Throughout 2006 and 2007, al-Assad claimed that the United States used the United Nations to destroy Middle Eastern stability. While he repeatedly depicted Syria as the indirect victim of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, as well as of "conspiracies" against Syria in Lebanon. In November 2012, he stated that the United States was "against" him, and that it was supporting "terrorists" through its conduits in Turkey.

**Approach 5:** Al Assad in the Arabic Twittersphere **- Ms. Jacquelyn Chinn, Mr. Patrick Issa and Dr. Randy Kluver (Texas A&M)**

A team of analysts from Texas A&M University analyzed the twitter feeds of 195 influential Arabic social media activists in the Middle East, in each 24 hour period before and after Assad delivered a speech for the months of August and September, 2013.

Their primary finding is that influential Arabs tweet *about* Assad frequently, but do not pass on his messages. There is little incidence of retweets of Assad, which is typically a measure of social influence, or clout. Moreover, key regime figures and supporters do not have extensive social media presence, and in this important arena, have therefore "abandoned the battle field" for public opinion in social media. Therefore, Assad probably does not have much of an influence through social media on the regional population.

However, themes of Assad's speeches are largely replicated in the Arabic social media sphere, so it is clear that Assad's rhetorical strategies are not completely out of place in the region. Thus, although Assad doesn't seem to have a large impact upon this important monitor of public opinion, it does allow us to see how Assad's core convictions are shared around the region.

The network of influential Arabic language Twitter users is largely opposed to intervention in the region, and decidedly anti-Assad.

**COMPARISON OF RESULTS**

In this section, the main findings of each of the approaches are compared (Table 3). Those findings that reinforce one another, despite very different theoretical and methodological approaches, are taken as particularly sound, and should be seriously considered as the United States considers how best to communicate with or interpret communications from the Assad regime in the current crisis. This section is followed by suggestions for how the main findings of this white paper may be best put to use.

The various analyses united in this study reinforce one another on several major points:

- al-Assad is no less cognitively complex, by several measures (IC, LIWC, Leadership Trait Analysis), than other Middle Eastern leaders, and in many cases exhibits an ability to consider various viewpoints and flexibly respond to outside input, employs rigorously logical argumentation and seeks to lead a diverse Arab community.

- When the rebellion is most threatening to him, al-Assad's integrative complexity is lower.  As the Syrian rebellion continues he sees his neighboring Arab states as increasingly hostile, becomes increasingly suspicious of a regional and global conspiracy against him, and employs more emotional language while also using logical argumentation to defend his point of view. Evidence from the Twittersphere indicates that his distrust of the broader Arab world may be justified.

- al-Assad asserts the necessity for Arab nationalist unity against a larger world. This is the cornerstone element of Ba'athist political ideology and al-Assad is very consistent with his professed Ba'athist ideology. Related to this is a cynicism about the possibility of meaningful peace negotiations concerning Israel, Palestine and the Golan Heights.

DETAILED IMPLICATIONS IN THE 7-STEP DOCTRINAL MISO FRAMEWORK

We used the doctrinal 7-Step MISO process to characterize al-Assad as a target audience of one, and we absorbed the relevant components of our multi-method analyses into the Target Audience Analysis format. Target audience analysis (TAA) is the systematic research and analysis of relevant information within a selected population that may be exploited to achieve a desired objective. Objectives can range from altering perceptions, to affecting objective reasoning, to changing behaviors. While existing doctrine does not address the application of the TAA process to the individual, the identification of conditions, vulnerabilities, and susceptibilities lend themselves to individual level analyses such as the ones presented here. What follows is the integration of the multi-method analyses discussed early into the doctrinal TAA framework.

- **Step 1: Identify and refine target audiences (TAs).**
    - Bashar al-Assad is the target audience.
- **Step 2: Determine effectiveness.**
    - Measures of effectiveness of influence range from the absence of CBRNE weapons employment (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, High Explosive), to achieving a negotiated settlement of the conflict.
    - Additional measures of effectiveness could include the change in al-Assad's IC in response to unfolding circumstances as well as specific messages.
- **Step 3: Identify conditions.** Conditions are those existing elements that affect the TA, but over which the TA has limited control.
    - Analyses suggest the following conditions and their impact on influencing al-Assad.
        - Pre-rebellion: al-Assad advocated Syria as an essential integrator of Arab nations, especially economically, basing his argument on pan-Arab nationalism. He spoke of Turkey positively, and his speeches from 2001 until 2011 revealed a generally positive tone towards Arab Gulf states. During this time he processed information in a relatively flexible, nuanced, and realistic way.
        - Once Syria plunged into civil war, al-Assad's Pan-Arabic strategic geopolitical discourse vanished from his public rhetoric. By August 2012 the president stated that Turkey had some responsibility for the "bloodshed" that his country was experiencing; In March 2011, the Syrian leader started to hint at the dangerous influence of satellite channels on the country's domestic situation, most likely in reference to Gulf stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Throughout this period there was no overall trend in al-Assad's IC, but were temporary increases and decreases that might be associated with events.
        - From the beginning of his rule until today, al-Assad has grown increasingly outspoken about his ties with Russia, China, and Iran. In particular, al-Assad has remained most consistent regarding how he portrays his relations with Russia.
        - Starting in August 2006, al-Assad's language towards the United States turned progressively hostile. At the same time, his IC declined from a maximum in 2005, to below average (for him) in 2008. Throughout 2006 and 2007, al-Assad claimed that the United States used the United

Nations to destroy Middle Eastern stability. While he repeatedly depicted Syria as the indirect victim of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, as well as of "conspiracies" against Syria in Lebanon. In November 2012, he stated that the United States was "against" him, and that it was supporting "terrorists" through its conduits in Turkey.

- al-Assad probably does not have much of an influence through Twitter on the general Arab population.
- The network of influential Arabic language Twitter users is largely opposed to intervention in the region, and decidedly anti-Assad.
- The major narratives relevant to influencing al-Assad include:
    - **Syrian Arab Nationalism and Resistance.** Syrian Arab Nationalism and Resistance is a cornerstone narrative in Ba'athist political ideology. It is the notion that Syrian Arabs constitute a distinct nationality, and that they have to struggle against foreign intervention in order to claim an identity, a homeland and an economy and way of life. Themes that loaded highly on this factor include:
        - Arab Identity, Courage, Duty, Honor, kinship, Sacrifice, Strength, Syrian Nationalism, Victimization, Resistance, Syrian Military, Intimacy, Figurative Language
    - **Logic and the Rebellion**. Logic and Rebellion is an association of mutually reinforcing themes that al-Assad employs to argue, on rational grounds, why the rebellion is unjustified on political and moral grounds. He also often mentions Russia as a key-supporting ally who supports his point of view.
    - **Resistance against Israel and Western Domination**. Resistance against Israel and Western Domination is another important narrative of Ba'athist political ideology. This narrative is an important baseline theme that all but vanishes once the rebellion begins in 2011. Should the theme return to al-Assad's rhetoric, it may indicate al-Assad's perception that the crisis is over.
    - **Heritage and Kinship**. Heritage and Kinship are themes associated to stress the importance of one's cultural heritage and the need to protect it from foreign threats.
    - **Peace and Negotiation**. The Peace and Negotiation narrative argues that peace in the Middle East is false because Arab lands are unfairly occupied and that formal negotiations are largely futile.
    - **Threat to Syrian Heritage**. This narrative is also a core component of Ba'athist political ideology.
- **Step 4: Identify vulnerabilities.** Vulnerabilities are the needs, wants, or desires that arise from the conditions of a TA. These idiosyncratic vulnerabilities may be addressed through both the message content as well as through the dissemination mechanism.
    - Themes that are most obviously salient to Assad regime after politically challenging events include: **Domestic reform**, **Conspiracy**, **Hostile Media**, and **Security.** These themes represent issues to which al-Assad may be particularly responsive.
    - al-Assad also is more likely to use emotive language such as **Figurative Language (symbolism, metaphor)**, and **Intensifiers (hyperbole, superlatives)** providing a measure of how important these issues are to him and his regime.

- al-Assad is intent on holding on to power and is sensitive to threats to that. Like many leaders, he will equate his power with the role of the Syrian people and thus the two may be confounded in his speeches.
- al-Assad's belief in control over events is slightly below the mean and thus he is unlikely to be overly proactive or reactive in policy-making. Also, his need for power is in the low range and therefore he has less of a need to be in charge and may be more amenable to subordinates assuming more prominent roles.
- Both al-Assad's in-group bias and distrust of others are low and therefore he does not perceive the world as either inherently threatening or himself as persecuted. This may provide an opening for an objective third-party to facilitate a negotiated settlement.
- **Step 5: Determine susceptibility.** Susceptibility is the likelihood of a particular line of persuasion (LOP) having the desired impact on the TA.
  - al-Assad's leadership traits suggest he is probably open to subordinates, not overly pro- or reactive in policy, open to compromise, more tolerant of ambiguity, has a need for information, and is more pragmatic on average and receptive to the interests, needs, and desires of others.
  - Thematic analysis also indicated that al-Assad has a need for empirical data.
  - Between 2000 and 2013, al-Assad's speeches exhibit a relatively high level of IC. He may therefore be considered able to comprehend relatively nuanced arguments that incorporate the social and political complexity of the Middle East.
  - al-Assad's IC tends to be below his baseline when the threat from violent opposition to the regime is unusually high (e.g., when the conflict first became violent, and when the rebels had the initiative in or around Damascus). Thus, tactical success by a rebel group (or groups) and/or increased intensity of the conflict may limit opportunities to engage with him. Rebel setbacks and/or infighting amongst the groups may provide an opportunity for engaging with al-Assad.
- **Step 6: Determine accessibility.**
  - As a head of state, there are both official and unofficial methods of accessing al-Assad. Understanding both formal and informal mechanisms and/or pathways of conveying a message are essential, particularly when attempting an indirect method of influence.
  - Given al-Assad's BACE (Belief in Control Over Events) and need for power, identifying a trusted subordinate and/or extraterritorial ally who can help facilitate a negotiated settlement should be a priority intelligence requirement.
- **Step 7: Develop PSYOP arguments and recommend psychological actions (PSYACTs).**
  - For al-Assad, traditional rational actor deterrence theory should be generally effective, although he may take some decision shortcuts (use heuristics) when in a more emotive state before and after conflict.
  - al-Assad exhibits a relatively high degree of IC through the period studied and thus low IC arguments, often more clear and possibly viewed by him as simplistic, may not be ideal. Rather, al-Assad seems to appreciate the complexity of the conflict both within Syria and vis-à-vis the broader Middle East. Thus, a nuanced argument that does not threaten his hold on power, and especially that of the Ba'ath party, but suggests he cease the use of specific tactics and/or weapons may be effective.

- al-Assad's high Task orientation indicates that he is not likely to relinquish power, personally or for his party. This strategic option is probably the most difficult for al-Assad to negotiate, given al-Assad's dedication to his constituents, his Syrian nationalism and Ba'athist ideology, his opposition to extremist Islamists, and the difficulties in overcoming his perceived injustices from Western powers and Israel.

  - **Cognitive Complexity**: al-Assad's ability to appreciate alternative viewpoints and consider outside information indicates that he has a high potential for a negotiated settlement, especially if he is presented with what he accepts as evidence for why such an alternative would be in his and his people's interest. Approaches should emphasize his openness to information, pragmatism (as opposed to dogmatism) and willingness to adopt new policies and tactics (flexibility). Messages that are themselves high in IC may induce him to raise his own, possibly becoming more open to negotiations. There should be several alternatives that may be flexibly related to each other and to ongoing events, his and Syria's domestic and international relations, and his own policies. Given al-Assad's strong task orientation, combined with the existential threat to him and his Alawite, Christian, Druze and some moderate Sunni constituents, it is very unlikely that he would step down from power and abandon his people.

  - **Arab Nationalism**: Passing power to another leader within the Ba'athist regime, or possibly another Arab nationalist regime, may be potentially acceptable to al-Assad. Any negotiated settlement should retain power in a pro-Arab nationalist regime of some sort, if only to allow al-Assad to save face in not selling out to Western/Israeli interests, as he has perceived other Arab leaders to have done.

  - **Decreasing Integrative Complexity Hardens His Position**: If the rebellion were to continue and become more threatening to al-Assad's regime, he would be expected to become less capable of appreciating alternative solutions and would probably become more entrenched in his desire to remain in power.

  - **Opposition to the West and Israel**: Framing regime change as a victory for the West and Israel would make it a less palatable, if not impossible, option for al-Assad. Any negotiated settlement that would preserve a sense that al-Assad and his constituents were still able to resist Western and Israeli domination would be important.

  - **Secular Ba'athist Political Ideology**: The possibility of more conservative or violent Jihadist elements taking power will motivate al-Assad to hold on to power more tenaciously. A negotiated settlement with more moderate Syrian groups is more likely to succeed with al-Assad than negotiations with more radical Jihadist elements.

- Identifying a regional (non-Syrian) influential Ba'ath party member to help facilitate peace amongst regional Muslims, and not necessarily extremists with the Sunni and/or Shia sects, to exert indirect influence on al-Assad without him feeling threatened is recommended.

- al-Assad's preference for logical argumentation over empirical evidence suggests messages be crafted with sound (and consistent) logic and not

necessarily laden with quantitative facts. Appealing to his rationality is likely more effective than attempting to overwhelm him with information supporting the US/UN position.

- **Step 8: Refine assessment criteria.**
  - IC may provide an indicator of al-Assad's susceptibility to tailored messages. Analyzing Assad's responses to US/UN messaging may provide indications of effectiveness.
    - Specifically: Increases in IC relative to US/UN overtures may signal more openness to a negotiated settlement. Decreases in IC may indicate an increasing rigidity in his opinions and therefore less openness. Given his generalized ability and willingness to appreciate varying perspectives, a stable (or increasing) IC may suggest a willingness to continue along a particular route while a decrease in IC in response may suggest a specific resistance to a particular theme. Furthermore, a decrease in IC may suggest either an impending decision or an increase in perceived threat.

Table 3 Summarizes the relationships between the main findings from the various approaches described in this white paper.

**Table 3: Summary of al-Assad's Speeches, 2000 – 2013.**

| IC (UBC) | Leadership Trait Analysis (ProfilerPlus) | Thematic Analysis (IPFW) | Syrian Geopolitical Discourse Development (CSIS) | Twittersphere Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| IC comparable to other Middle Eastern leaders in peace and conflict; Capable of flexible and nuanced decision making | High Conceptual Complexity and Task Orientation; Correlation between LIWC Cognitive Mechanisms and UBC IC, r = .664 | Overall, al-Assad exhibits measured and rigorously logical and empirical argumentation in comparison to other regional leaders. | al-Assad speaks of Syria as a major political and economic integrator for the region, speaks positively about Turkey and the Gulf States; stresses Pan-Arab nationalism | |
| IC increases at beginning of Arab Spring, but declines with the early escalations of violence (first reported violence, and the sieges of Daraa, Hama, and Homs) | | Logos, Intensifiers, Conspiracy and Russia themes increase through time and with conflict; themes associated with low IC in previous studies increase before conflict: Honor/Shame, Victimization, Enemy, emotional language (Figurative language and intensifiers); puppet rulers in Arab states and Turkey as an enemy increase after crisis begins | As crisis intensifies, he talks more about conspiracies, and US support of terrorists through Turkey, and rhetoric about Syria as an economic and political integrator vanishes; mentions Russia increasingly | During August and September 2013, influential Arab Twitter users in the Middle East were largely against the al-Assad regime |
| | | al-Assad's most prevalent narrative is of Syrian Arab Nationalism and Resistance, another important narrative is Resistance against Israel and Western Domination and Threat to Syrian Heritage | Stresses Pan-Arab nationalism | |
| IC declines from 2005 to 2008, possibly a decline from high IC associated with the withdrawal from Lebanon and deepening of relations with Russia, and which then declines below baseline in association with the Israeli bombing of a Syrian nuclear facility in late 2007. IC is steady immediately before Bouazizi's self-immolation. | | Key themes before Bouazizi that indicate integration: Logos, Turkey, Trade Key themes before Bouazizi that indicate low IC: Justice, Peace (lack), Israel | | |