

The Syrian Civil War

TRANSITION WITHOUT INTERVENTION?

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The events of summer 2012 marked an important shift in the Syrian crisis. On July 15, the International Committee of the Red Cross classified the conflict as a civil war, as a way to warn against mounting battle-related casualties and, especially, the growing death toll from one-sided violence against civilians. The government's retaliation to the first coordinated military offensive by insurgents outside peripheral areas since late July has been the harshest of all seen thus far, but it only radicalized its armed and unarmed opponents. As violence expands and becomes progressively more deadly, polarized, and sectarian, the conflict acquires the character of an all-out war for survival, especially, and increasingly so, for the regime and its remaining supporters.

One of the most striking phenomena, however, has been the widening gap and growing disconnect between the conflict's internal dynamics and its international dimension. The latter itself is a mismatch between agitated political rhetoric, ambitions, and purported influence on Syria and a reluctance or inability in practice to go beyond "wait and see" policies. Despite all policy differences, this applies as much to the United States, the European Union, and the Arab League, as it does for Russia and China. Attempts to mediate a ceasefire as part of the UN-sponsored "Annan plan" failed as the plan embodied a compromise between key external stakeholders, not parties within Syria, on little more than the need to buy time. An even better reflection of this "wait and see" approach was the replacement of the UN monitoring mission, the mandate of which expired in mid-August, with the ambiguous combination of a token UN presence and the appointment as new UN and Arab League special envoy to Syria of Lakhdar Brahimi, the world's chief authority on peacebuilding in theory and in practice.

This memo argues that the issue of what the international role in the Syria crisis should be – which remains the central focus of much international political rhetoric and media – is, and in the near future will remain, completely overwhelmed by the conflict's

internal dynamics. It is these dynamics that will ultimately determine the form of international engagement, not the other way around. While military, political, and socioeconomic developments inside Syria in mid-2012 have brought the fall of the Assad regime closer, this does not guarantee “political transition” per se. Nor might it suffice to prevent a nationwide humanitarian catastrophe or the complete collapse of the Syrian state.

“Wait and See”

In contrast to the common impression, the real policy options of the international community have not been primarily shaped by disagreements in the UN between the coalition of Western and Arab League states, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other. Instead, these options have been based on and constrained by two fundamental factors.

First, most external stakeholders – including the United States, its European allies, Syria’s neighbors (Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan), Egypt and non-Gulf members of the Arab League, and, ultimately, Russia and China – would prefer some middle ground between escalating civil war and uncontrolled disintegration of the Syrian state and society. Two exceptions – Saudi Arabia and Iran – have stronger biases. Iran, for its part, risks losing a key state ally (and its only one in the Arab world). Saudi Arabia (and, to some extent, other Gulf monarchies) try to do away with the pro-Iranian regime while averting or checking the growing “threats” of reformist and radical Islamism to their own regimes, in a regional context marked by democratization and an increasing role for mass-based political Islam. As no one else seems to question the preference for a more controlled transition, the main international disagreements are about the preferred outcome of the transition process, in other words, whether or not a new regime should contain elements of “Assadism.”

Second, no Western government really desires, or can afford, direct military intervention in the Syrian civil war in the near future. While some Arab League members, especially in the Gulf, may desire intervention, they have been neither willing nor in a position to launch one on their own. The Obama administration’s practical steps have demonstrated a preference for a managed transition that would remove Assad but fall short of the complete disintegration of the Syrian state, with its destabilizing regional knock-on effects. This preference should be distinguished from the administration’s passionate rhetoric of democracy promotion and support for the insurgency and for the need to protect civilian lives in Syria. It should be noted that the latest in a sequence of Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council (on July 19) of the “Chapter 7 resolution” on Syria that would open the way up for enforcement including military intervention provided another perfect excuse for the United States to talk boldly while refraining from acting decisively.

In pursuing its course, the Obama administration is driven not only by election year pressures but also by the specific difficulties of the Syrian situation and regional context. Apart from a general reluctance to get militarily involved in another messy conflict at the end of President Obama’s first term, there are other grounds for the

administration to prefer a “controlled transition” that implies the continued functioning and rehabilitation of some existing institutions (including through cooperation with moderate/renege elements of the regime). These grounds include concerns about Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal; the need to keep in check violent Islamist extremism in the region, in particular to deny space to al-Qaeda-style elements; and broader worries about potential regional destabilization, especially as it relates to Israel’s security.

The reality is that, regardless of the Russian and Chinese vetoes and the failure of the “Annan plan,” the “wait and see” approach continues to best serve the U.S. administration’s “calculus,” using President Obama’s term. This approach still implies some hope—for the United States and most other international stakeholders save Iran and Saudi Arabia—that events on the ground inside Syria could prompt a major domestic change that could conceivably open up new venues of (post)conflict engagement without the need to resort to external military intervention in the midst of heavy fighting and protracted sectarian war.

While Russia will not change, on principle, its opposition to UN Security Council approval for a military intervention against the Syrian regime, the lack of an explicit UN mandate has not stopped the United States from undertaking interventions in the past, including in support of armed oppositions against central governments. However, in the case of Syria, a U.S. (or U.S.-NATO) unilateral intervention remains hypothetical. Even when President Obama first voiced the direct threat of a U.S. use of force against Syria on August 20, in response both to electoral pressures and an escalation of violence on the ground, he had to invoke the unlikely prospect (thus far) of some catastrophic development, such as a loss of control over Syria’s chemical weapons, to merely justify such a threat.

Ironically, the escalation of violence in Syria since midsummer, by radicalizing both parties and creating the impression of a somewhat more even military balance on the ground, did more to undermine the prospect of Assad’s stay in power than had any Western/Arab diplomacy or pressure. Above all, recent developments confirm that if something critically changes the situation, it will likely be political and military dynamics on the ground and not international diplomacy. That said, international factors, without being decisive drivers, may still serve as both facilitating and/or complicating conditions for ending the conflict.

Military Developments

Until mid-July, a breakthrough on either side seemed unlikely, making most actors in and outside the region increasingly frustrated with the status quo and critical of the international community’s “wait and see” approach. The insurgency had not become a single well-coordinated force, was difficult to arm from outside, and appeared to be confined to relatively peripheral areas of the country. The insurgency’s highly fragmented nature was reinforced by divisions within the broader opposition (such as between secularists and fundamentalists, and émigré and indigenous forces), as well as a slide toward more radical and sectarian patterns of violence. In light of the robust

government response and backlash from government-affiliated militias (*shabikha*), the insurgents stood little chance to change the asymmetrical power equation.

However, in mid-July, a major unexpected rebel offensive for the first time extended hostilities to Syria's two largest cities and main power centers, Damascus and Aleppo. The offensive was also the first nationwide campaign, as insurgents simultaneously seized crossings at borders with Iraq and Turkey and carried out smaller-scale operations in the periphery. While the government was quick to respond, the rebel attacks on Damascus and Aleppo were aimed precisely at provoking a brutal counteroffensive in the country's once safest urban areas, thereby undermining the regime's credibility among neutral and even supportive populations. While increased foreign aid (in particular, from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) contributed to the insurgents' capacity to mount such operations, the offensive was an indigenous operation carried out in the context of a civil war.

Despite the insurgents' obtaining some military and psychological gains with their midsummer attacks, however, even a large-scale and better-coordinated national offensive, or even several ones, will not be able to change the power balance in their favor any time soon. The armed movement has not consolidated to the point where it could stably hold any area for a significant period of time. Only a combination of sustained insurgency and communal violence, accompanied by a collapse of basic services and state functionality, could really change the balance of forces in the longer run. The cost of fighting is still far from untenable for either side.

In this context, the hands-off approach of the international community should not be dismissed solely as a product of international disagreement. It can also to an extent be considered a genuine effort to leave room for events inside Syria to take a more decisive course.

An "Inner Circle" Divided?

Compared to other states in the Middle East affected by protests and/or anti-government violence, Syria has had the least chance of experiencing a "palace coup" option. This is due to the particularities of Syria's rule by minority. A closely-knit caste has been in power for over four decades; its Alawite kin dominate the security forces; and the military forces have no autonomous role. Until recently, there were no grounds, despite some defections, to question the loyalty of the core regime elite.

However, the mid-July bomb attack in Damascus that killed four members of Assad's inner circle, including one of his main family confidantes and the heads of Syrian defense and intelligence, might have been an important sign of internal divisions. A common interpretation of the assassination attack is that it was the result of a bold insurgent attack facilitated by anti-government sympathizers or agents inside the security services. This interpretation holds that the killing of top security leaders directly weakened the government. It questions the regime's internal cohesion and hints at a larger number of renegade elements than previously thought.

Alternatively, it could also be suggested that the top security leaders killed in the attack might have themselves formed the core of a potential "palace coup," or been

suspected of planning one by more hardline regime elements or rival security services. While this version is less publicized, it is also entirely possible. A group of select heads of the security establishment, with or without links to present and future high-level defectors, could have planned to sideline hardliners within the security sector (such as Assad's notorious brothers and cousins) and to try and negotiate a role for themselves in the transition process or at least an acceptable exit strategy. By this interpretation, the bombing, conveniently blamed on the insurgents, has actually strengthened, not weakened, hardliners in the regime.

This interpretation also appears in line with the broader and more fundamental transformation of the regime's core, including the security services and the army, into a sectarian force that fights for survival and, parallel to the radicalization of the insurgency, reinforces the Alawites' growing "siege mentality." Ironically, it is this sectarian consolidation that, while likely to prolong the fighting in the short- to mid-term, ultimately makes the Assad-type rule in Syria untenable.

Conclusions

If the international community's "wait and see" policy has been driven by a combination of lack of leverage and constraints on intervention together with some genuine anticipation of more decisive domestic political and military developments, then it may have been more adequate than generally thought. The outcome of the crisis is indeed likely to be decided on the ground rather than by international stakeholders.

What this outcome will be is another matter. One possible scenario is still some form of political transition from the present system to a more representative one. However, this outcome is increasingly unlikely. The Syrian government may suffer more military setbacks, but none of them are likely to become mortal or final blows. Since mid-2012, there is no longer any doubt that Assad will eventually have to surrender power, but the ruling caste could yet hang on for months or more. Even a major weakening of the regime or Assad's removal would not guarantee a manageable political transition. It might instead be a step toward the complete collapse of governance, without either political transition or direct intervention.

All-out political, economic, and security disintegration is, in fact, the second, increasingly plausible scenario. This outcome implies a complex, fluid, and deadly mix of chaos and Lebanese-style sectarian division (up to de facto partitions of some territories). This scenario poses grave risks to the Syrian population in general and minorities in particular.

By autumn 2012, the prospects of the eventual disintegration of Syria's regime as a result of internal developments, even without direct military intervention, have increased. Against this backdrop, instead of focusing on the issue of intervention or trying to directly influence the domestic course of Syria's civil war, the international community could do more (for instance) to contain such real and deteriorating regional aspects of the crisis like proxy and spillover conflicts (in Lebanon, for example).

While a U.S.-led or U.S.-sponsored intervention in Syria's ongoing civil war still seems as unlikely now as before, even under the pretext of a threat of chemical weapons

proliferation, the possibility of an international humanitarian intervention at a later stage should not be excluded. This possibility will loom if the outcome of events inside Syria follows the second scenario—the total disintegration of governance, politics, economics, and security with no signs of a nationwide political transition. If this scenario comes to pass, ironically, it might actually be easier to build an international consensus in support of a humanitarian /peace enforcement /peace-building mission than for intervention in an ongoing civil war with the goal of regime change.

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