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SYRIA: THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSION AND THE CHANCE OF COMPROMISE

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Summary

Further developments in the Syrian civil war make external efforts to end the conflict particularly important. The proxy element remains highly significant and there are indications that the war may be moving into a protracted, yet very violent, stalemate. The war is further complicated by Israeli and Iraqi involvement and it is highly unlikely that any resolution can be achieved without a sustained commitment to conflict resolution by the United States and Russia. There is a slightly increased possibility of this, but the recent EU decision to end an arms embargo may be a significant complication.

Introduction

Although Oxford Research Group analysed the war in Syria last October (*The Iranian and Syrian Crises: The Dangers of Linkage*), and as recently as February (*Syria: The Evolving Problem of Competing Militias*), further developments make an additional analysis advisable. The emphasis in the most recent (February) analysis was on the manner in which Islamist rebel groups were coming increasingly to the fore in the rebellion and were by then controlling territory in the north-east of the country, including hydroelectric plants and oilfields. It also pointed to the militias that Iran was sponsoring, most likely as a means of maintaining influence should Damascus fall into rebel hands. Over all of this, a frequent aspect of earlier analysis has been the unusual double-proxy nature of the conflict, with the Saudis backing the rebels and Iran backing the regime, overlaid by western support for the rebels and Russian support for the regime.

Four elements are now becoming more significant to add to this analysis – the strength of the regime, further developments in the evolution of the rebellion, Israel's increasing involvement and the Iraqi connections.

The Regime

Soon after the start of the war in early 2011, there were confident expectations (not shared by Oxford Research Group and some other analysts) that the regime would be unlikely to last out the year, following the rapid collapse of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. In practice, the regime has stayed in power and remains robust. It has even made recent gains along the Lebanese and Jordanian borders, especially the rural areas around the strategic city of Qusayr. While the overall situation is still unstable and unpredictable, it would be wise to assume that the regime will maintain power of key parts of the country for many months, if not years. It retains strong support from the Alawi minority and from the elite components of the armed forces, as well as some grudging support from other confessional groups that fear post-regime chaos. It has considerable support from Iran, aided by easy supply routes through Iraq, and can also depend on well-trained Hezbollah paramilitaries. There are indications that it is far from using all its conventional weaponry, such as the Fateh-110 missile. Overall, the past

month has seen progress made by the regime's forces, especially against the non-Islamist elements of the rebellion.

The Rebellion

One element of the rebellion militates against its likely success – the extent of the internal divisions. There is no unity of purpose among the disparate groups that make up the rebellion and there is increasing evidence of atrocities by rebels even if the worst offenders, by far, remain the forces of the Assad regime. A particular feature of the rebellion is that some of the non-Islamist elements have acquired a very bad record of looting and disorder in the towns and districts that they occupy, substantially reducing support for them.

However, another element of the rebellion makes it unlikely that the Assad regime will prevail indefinitely. This is the increasingly significant role of the Islamist elements that have proved effective in urban insurgency and have also been shown to be capable of bringing order to areas that they control. They now control substantial territory in the oil-rich north east of Syria. This has given them access to oil revenues that provide much-needed independent sources of funding. They may not acquire long-term popularity since any sustained attempt to impose Islamist-style governance on Syrians is likely to prove very difficult, but while the rebellion may be disparate, it has the strength to continue with the Islamist elements playing a progressively more substantial role. Combined with the resilience of the regime suggests that the war might even have years to run, with terrible human consequences.

Israel

Israel's attitude to the Assad regime has in the past been motivated by three elements –

- a preference for a regime in full control of internal security,
- antagonism to its support for Hezbollah and
- the need to maintain the security of the Golan Heights.

The last of these is crucial because of the geology of the region and the security threat that Syrian reoccupation of the Golan would presents to Galilee. The Assad regime has been acceptable to Israel because of its internal control and especially because of the continuing stability on the Golan since 1973. The concern now is that the regime will be replaced by a chaotic situation with strong Islamist elements coming to the fore, and also by Hezbollah gaining more advanced weapons in the chaos.

From Israel's current perspective, the regime in Damascus may have many months or even years ahead of it, and as long as it retains control of southern Syria, Israel has less concern over Golan security. At the same time, the Hezbollah factor is important and means that there is a determination to use all necessary means to limit its power. The recent Israeli air raids near Damascus were much larger than either side has admitted or has been reported in the western media. One target was a consignment of Fateh-110 surface-to-surface ballistic missiles possibly en route to Hezbollah. These are Syrian-manufactured Iranian-designed missiles with a similar range to the obsolete Scud-B but with solid fuel motors and improved guidance, making them far more easy to deploy and more accurate in targeting. They would, for example, make it much easier for Hezbollah to target Israeli air bases in the north of the country.

Given the evolution of the war, the Israeli perspective most likely oscillates between wanting the regime to survive and, if it doesn't, then seeing a protracted civil war, which leaves a thoroughly weakened country. Unless extreme Sunni Islamist groups come to present any threat to Israel, its main military actions will be directed against two elements. One is Hezbollah's connections in the country, and especially the availability of advanced armaments, and the other is the possible deployment of modern Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles by the Assad regime. Israeli sources have indicated that Israel will act to prevent such a deployment since the missiles could limit Israeli Air Force efforts to target supplies for Hezbollah. Such foreign military intervention may have untoward consequences, not least in increasing popular support for the Assad regime in the region – dislike for an Alawi regime can readily take second place to support for any regime subject to what is perceived as Zionist attack.

Iraq

The Iraq connection is important for two reasons. One is that the Maliki government maintains a close, if slightly wary, relationship with Tehran but is more than willing to facilitate support for the Assad regime, not least because of Saudi support for the rebels. This support for Damascus is likely to continue, but the second factor is that Iraq itself is experiencing a pronounced upsurge in militant Sunni paramilitary action, with frequent bombings and shootings directed mainly against Iraqi police and army units and government departments but also against Shi'a communities, especially in the Sadr City district of Baghdad. There are strong connections between these paramilitaries and Islamist elements among the rebels in Syria. In a little-reported incident two months ago, 40 Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqis were killed by Sunni paramilitaries in an ambush that took place, not in Syria, but across the border in Anbar Province in Iraq.

The Maliki government shows no sign of making concessions to the Sunni minority in Iraq, however, this minority has a growing sense of its own capabilities and is aware of background support for it from Saudi Arabia. In a sense, it is beginning to become necessary to see Syria and Iraq as two parts of a single conflict. With tensions high in Turkey following the recent bombing and uncertainties in Lebanon, there are worrying signs that the predicted spread of the Syrian War across the region is becoming a reality, making efforts to contain the war hugely important.

International Action

In this context - of a potentially lengthy and damaging war - the double proxy element needs to be addressed more fully. There is little chance of Saudi Arabia or Iran changing their outlooks unless there are moves at the US/Russian level. One of the few positive signs is that the Obama administration is at last working with the Russians to bring the sides together and this has persuaded the able UN facilitator, Lakhdar Brahimi, to postpone his resignation. An added positive element is that John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov have developed a good working relationship. It is still the case that hawkish elements in Washington want the direct arming of the rebels but the Jihadist element precludes this. There are indications that the recent scaling down of aid to the rebels by Qatar is at the behest of Washington because of fears of Islamist ascendancy, and there are indications that the Obama administration no longer even requires Assad to stand down as a precursor to negotiations. Nevertheless, the obstacles to an externally mediated settlement are considerable and it will take a sustained commitment to make progress.

Policy Implications

With the war essentially in a violent stalemate, the possibility of joint Russian/American action becomes really important. The Franco-British axis within the EU that has argued successfully for an end to the arms embargo and appears to take the view that this action alone will put pressure on the Assad regime to negotiate, but there are few indications that this will work. Indeed, the regime may feel that the EU change of policy might actually increase support from Russia and enable it to go on the offensive even more than in recent weeks.

Much will now rest on the relationship between Kerry and Lavrov, and this might best be helped by a scaling-down of the rhetoric from London and Paris. It might also be helped if the British, French and Russians could together be persuaded to agree to a pause in any arms shipments. Given the appalling consequences of the war so far, calls for action are understandable, but the risk is that putting even more arms into Syria will make matters worse not better.

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