

Syria's Agony: Situation and Outlook, Winter 2013

Written by William Harris

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WILLIAM HARRIS, FEB 21 2013

In early 2013 the conflict in Syria between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the armed opposition that evolved out of the 2011 protest movement appeared, at least temporarily, to be in bloody stasis. Despite its fractured character and the lack of significant external backing, the armed opposition asserted command of much of the countryside and had entrenched positions in Aleppo and Homs as well as through the suburban belt around Damascus. Despite Bashar al-Assad's advantages of firepower and diplomatic, financial and military aid from Russia and Iran, solid regime control appeared reduced to a core of contiguous territory from Damascus through Homs to the Mediterranean coast, with outliers elsewhere. The regime compensated with aerial and artillery assaults, largely against defenseless civilians in opposition-controlled areas. After two years of a crisis that has irrevocably changed the Levant, it is worth taking stock of regime and opposition, reviewing primary responsibility for the devastation, and assessing prospects, with or without intervention.

The Protagonists After Two Years

On most indicators, the Syrian uprising should not merely be a stalled revolution but a failed revolution. The armed opposition disdains the political opposition that sits outside Syria, and both are highly fractious. Militant Islamists inside and the Muslim Brotherhood outside each aspire to hijack the revolution. The Kurds of the north stand aloof. Proclaiming its fear of Islamists, the West has deserted the anti-Islamist mass of what was in 2011 the most West-friendly protest movement of the so-called 'Arab Spring.' Apart from being heavily out-gunned, opposition forces within Syria have not generated either stable coordination or coherent administrative capability and their areas have slipped toward anarchy, risking erosion of popular support. In the outside world the regime has gained traction for its tendentious narrative of its opponents as nothing except "terrorists" and "armed gangs" set up by al-Qaeda, Israel, and the West. This is apparent, for example, in the international mediator Lakhdar al-Ibrahimi labeling regime and opposition as committing "equally atrocious crimes,"[1] a grotesque comment in view of the actual balance of responsibility for casualties and damage.

How then has the opposition stayed afloat? Despite overall disorganization, both secular-inclined and Islamist armed groups have developed reasonably effective joint planning and field cooperation for attacks on regime positions, for example in Idlib province.[2] They have had sufficient success in attracting military deserters and acquiring weaponry within Syria to preserve viability. The brutality and absolutism of the regime, which has put Sunni Arab provincial Syria up against the wall, has so far outweighed war weariness to sustain opposition mobilization. The combined armed opposition probably comprises more than one hundred thousand fighters,[3] equivalent to the rump manpower of regime forces. Fast learning in urban insurgent warfare and patient pressure has resulted in an almost even balance of military casualties with the regime side in early 2013.

For its part, the regime has retained the ability to fight back from inner Damascus, positions in and near Homs and Hama, and Alawite-dominated coastal Syria. Fear of Sunni Islamists, carefully cultivated by the regime, has to date kept the majority among the Alawite, Christian, and Druze minorities as well as a residual of the Sunni bourgeoisie, up to 30% of Syria, corralled in the regime camp. Similarly, much of the officer corps and largely Alawite elite military units have maintained cohesion into 2013, partly because of solidarity with the Alawite Assads and partly because of ferocious supervision. Russian backing and Iran's determination to prop up its Syrian ally, including a \$1 billion Iranian credit facility extended in January 2013 to override Western sanctions,[4] inflate Bashar al-Assad's

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confidence that he can prevail.

The security forces, however, have lost a full division in deaths alone (12,350 in the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights conservative count of 50,130 for deaths from violence from March 2011 to January 2013).[5] This is staggering attrition; the regime needs to conserve manpower and has for now conceded most of northern and eastern Syria, keeping wedges in and around Aleppo. Alawite villages in coastal Syria have suffered thousands of dead and wounded among their young men for the sake of a president who married into the Sunni high bourgeoisie and paid little heed to most of his community after taking power in 2000; can they keep it up?

Responsibility

Laborious United Nations investigations established a death toll of 60,000 resulting from the regime's campaign to smash the opposition from March 2011 to November 2012.[6] The figure was a surprise to the UN researchers; it exceeded Syrian opposition claims and indicated their restraint. Adding a reported 100-150 per day after November 2012 to the UN base figure, the toll from violence reached 70,000 by February 2013. It is therefore approaching the losses in the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s that so exercised the international community. Because of the scale and because of a temptation in the outside world to cover for inaction by equalizing the sides, it is important to emphasize the almost exclusive responsibility of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

First, the crony capitalist economic policies of Bashar's first decade after 2000 enriched a minority in Damascus and Aleppo and marginalized the great bulk of rural, provincial, and suburban Syria. These policies were combined with the most repressive secret police machine in the Arab world and with the hubris of a leader insulated from the Syrian street, who displayed an arrogance and impetuosity quite different from his cautious father.[7]

Second, the ruling Assad family clique determined on the most brutal response to the peaceful protest movement of the first five months of the post March 2011 street uprising. It clearly believed that any concession would unravel the whole system and its systematic violence seemed calculated to goad the opposition into an armed revolt and a shift toward religious assertion and Sunni Islamic sectarianism. This would service the regime narrative of an Islamist and sectarian challenge and facilitate global indifference to deployment of heavy weapons against civilians. International human rights organizations were unanimous on the barbarity of the regime from the outset of the protests.[8] Armed opposition became inevitable.

Third, in its escalation from use of tanks and heavy artillery to indiscriminate aerial and Scud missile bombardment the regime continues in early 2013 to be the motor of destruction. In the atmosphere of brutalization created and sustained principally by the regime, opposition armed elements have committed nasty war crimes, but in scale these pale beside original and continuing regime criminality. Western governments and the media have expressed alarm about possible future massacres of members of minorities, especially Alawites and Christians, who remain inclined to the regime. Such fears seem to devalue the procession of actual massacres since March 2011, which have been overwhelmingly of Sunni Muslims by regime forces and militias.

Outlook in Early 2013

A stalemate between the sides in early 2013 and pressure on opposition politicians in exile to be open to dialogue with regime representatives indicate maneuvering between the US and Russia for a Syrian political "transition." Within Syria, however, the armed opposition is fundamentally reluctant about giving Bashar al-Assad the breathing space needed for retooling, the probable Iranian and Russian interest. For his part, Bashar still looks only to liquidate his opponents and continue in power.[9] Ahmad Mu'az al-Khatib, leader of the opposition coalition in exile cobbled together at the urging of the West and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, has adjusted to the gaming of the US, Russia, and Iran, meeting US Vice-President Joe Biden and the Russian and Iranian foreign ministers at a 2-3 February 2013 Munich gathering. He has made an initiative to talk to the regime about its "peaceable demise," which of course is a non-starter but of utility for the opposition in the international arena.

Russia, smarting over the results of letting the West intervene in Libya and determined to salvage something of the

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longstanding Russian investment in the Syria of the Assads while aware of its weak international position, contemplates a "compromise." Bashar might be sidelined from a transitional government mixing opposition and regime elements but would remain president. The catch is that Bashar would retain intimidatory power through unreconstructed military and secret police machines. On the dismal precedent of the 2012 "Annan Plan," international monitoring and peacekeeping would be useless. The armed opposition, whether Islamist or pluralist minded, would prefer to soldier on.

A military solution remains the predominant trajectory, regardless of diplomatic detours. Regime resurgence is plausible, depending on Iranian and Russian infusions and perpetuated Western restriction of aid to the rebels. It would bring reassertion of the "resistance" alignment of Bashar, Iran, and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Lebanon would be submerged and Syria's Sunni Arabs would be subject to extended terrorization; a new round would be certain.

The more likely outcome is collapse of the regime in the Syrian interior in the present round. With no external intervention or surprise decapitation of the regime leadership, this means ebb and flow through more months of attrition. Within Syria the death toll from violence alone will soar far beyond 100,000. A scornful, embittered opposition will not want to hear anything from the Westerners who have sat, watched, and thereby become tacitly complicit in the devastation of Syria. Hezbollah will continue to attempt to transfer surface to air missiles and perhaps chemical weapons into Lebanon, inviting Israeli interdiction. Internally, as the regime's options dwindle, it may deploy chemical weapons in Homs and Damascus.

If the diplomatic maneuvering of early 2013 comes to nothing, the West cannot avoid reappraising the pros and cons of intervention. It is nonsense that there are only the alternatives of standing aside or "boots on the ground." In addition to arming selected rebels or enforcing a no-fly zone from Turkey with Patriot missiles, there could be a response to war crimes such as aircraft bombing hospitals and civilians queuing for bread and gasoline – regular events after mid-2012 – with a cruise missile strike on offending air bases. This would be a half hour affair, it would likely terminate such air attacks, and it would be a tremendous shock to regime personnel. It might even precipitate regime implosion, truncating Syria's misery and giving the West some right to influence subsequent arrangements.

What sort of Syria might emerge if opposition forces win after a protracted conflict? It is doubtful that the regime can long sustain an Alawite sectarian canton on the coast if it loses Damascus; therefore the country will not fragment for long. Surviving Alawite military capacity may give the Alawite one-eighth of Syria's population a bargaining platform. As for hardline Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood, both lack a solid popular base among Syria's Sunni Arab majority. The country's naturally diverse, cosmopolitan culture means that after regime collapse the street crowds will probably reappear amid the rubble demanding the pluralism and non-sectarianism they endorsed in 2011. It should be remembered that in 2011 these crowds were Sunni and heavily from poorer layers of society; their piety does not necessarily mean they crave politics driven by religion. Apart from them, Syria has an entrenched minimum of 40% — the large non-Sunni minorities that are a quarter of the population, many Kurds, and secularized Sunni Arabs – who can be guaranteed to refuse Islamists. There are good reasons to suppose that the Islamists and their agenda will swiftly deflate among a people that will have paid so much for a new dawn. The outlook, however, will darken with perpetuation of the agony.

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[1] See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9835866/Syrian-conflict-reaches-new-levels-of-horror.html>

[2] For excellent comment on the situation in June 2012, consult <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-maturing-insurgency>

[3] Nazir Rida, "Alaf al-Muqatilin al-Suriyin Yatawazza'un 'ala Jabahat..." ("Thousands of Syrian fighters are

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distributed on fronts...”), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 13 January 2013, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=712838&issueno=12465#.UQ8gXI5ENuU>

[4] Ragheda Dirgham, “Iran: Bilyun Dollar li Suriya wa Da’m Barnamaj al-Assad lil Hal” (“Iran: one billion dollars for Syria and support for Assad’s program for a solution”), *al-Hayat*, 17 January 2013.

[5] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on Facebook, 31 January 2013 – <https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr>

[6] See, for example, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43866#.UQ8qlo5ENuU>

[7] Carsten Wieland, a German journalist who spent years in Damascus in the early 2000s, cites a friend of Bashar as observing: “Bashar is a man who does not need advisors, who takes the most dangerous decisions within five minutes” – Carsten Wieland, *Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism and ‘Pax Americana’* (London: Hurst, 2006) p.45.

[8] Human Rights Watch “We’ve Never Seen Such Horror” Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces, June 2011: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0611webwcover.pdf>

Report of the Fact-Finding Mission on Syria pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-16/1 – Advance Unedited Version, August 2011: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/countries/SY/Syria_Report_2011-08-17.pdf

Amnesty International “Deadly Detention – Deaths in Custody amid Popular Protest in Syria,” August 2011: <http://amnesty.org/sites/impact.amnesty.org/files/PUBLIC/Syria%20report%20embargoed%20until%202011%20BST%2030%20August%202011.pdf>

[9] See, for example, Bashar al-Assad’s theatrical speech in the Damascus opera house, 6 January 2013 – “Al-Assad: Nahnu fi Halat Harb wa la Tahawun ma’ al-Irhab ... wa la Hiwar ma’ al-Mu’arada Dumya” (“Al-Assad: we are in a state of war and no laxity with terrorism ... and no dialogue with the puppet opposition”), *al-Hayat*, 7 January 2013.

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