

The Syria on the Horizon

Written by William Harris

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WILLIAM HARRIS, JUN 14 2013

In June 2013, it is almost certainly safe to say that one hundred thousand people have suffered violent deaths in Syria since March 2011, with more than 80% in the past twelve months alone. A meticulous United Nations commissioned report established a minimum of 60,000 up to November 2012.[1] In short, one in every 200 persons in Syria has been killed. In scale and intensity the Syrian affair has already equaled its counterparts in Iraq in the mid 2000s and Bosnia in the early 1990s. According to the generally conservative estimates of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), less than half the cumulative deaths were civilian by mid-2013 and more than half military,[2] reflecting the sharp rise in combatant casualties since mid 2012.

On the civilian side, particularly among women and children, losses have overwhelmingly been those inflicted by regime forces on the Sunni Arab majority. In addition, more than 1.5 million people, almost 10% of Syria's population and mostly Sunni Arab but including many Christians, the latter fearful of and squeezed by intolerant Sunni Islamists, have fled as refugees to neighboring countries.[3] Another three million have been displaced within Syria, primarily by regime depredations. Tens of thousands of Syrians have disappeared into the regime's apparatus of prisons and torture chambers.

The consequence of such afflictions, more significant than Geneva conferences or regime resurgence, is that the great majority of the two-thirds of Syrians who are Sunni Arabs are irretrievably alienated from Bashar al-Assad and his associates and can never accept their continuation in authority. The armed opposition's prolonged mobilization of around 100,000 Syrian fighters indicates this alienation. Force majeure, war weariness, or fortified cantons propped up by Iran and Russia might temporarily apply, but not for long.

There is another consequence arising from the apparent evolution of military casualties. In May 2013, the SOHR identified a rough parity between regime and rebel losses up to that date, despite regime advantages of firepower and external support. From early on, Bashar could not rely on Sunni Arab troops, and deployed Alawites disproportionately in serious battles. Even if we assume that only half of about 28,000 estimated deaths among troops and militia on the regime side have been Alawites, this is a fearsome loss of young adult men for a community of 2.5 million. It raises questions about the staying power of a military machine principally dependent on a reservoir that is one eighth of Syria's population. Strain shows, for example, in the preeminence of Hezbollah personnel from Lebanon in the regime's assault on al-Qusayr; if imported militiamen are crucial for regime command of territory how stable can that command be?

The Shape of Things to Come

Such consequences of the suffering and losses for Syria's Sunni Arabs and Alawites suggest Syria's trajectory into the future. As long as they have minimally viable supplies, the largely Sunni Arab opponents of the regime will maintain a war of attrition, regardless of setbacks short of collapse in northern Syria. If regime-side military fatalities continue as even a subdued version of current SOHR estimates, the Iranian/Hezbollah combine and Russia will eventually fail to keep Bashar al-Assad afloat; they need to have the opposition smashed beyond hope of recovery in early offensives.

Regarding the short term, the idea of a "transitional government" melding the regime and opposition via an

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international conference is fatuous. For the Russians, it is cover for new weapons supplies to the regime, principally basic hardware and munitions,[4] helping to nourish Bashar al-Assad's conviction that he is heading for military victory. Russian insistence that there is only a diplomatic outcome is fraudulent. As for a "transitional government," Iran will obstruct any transition away from its commanding role in Syria, and the Syrian regime's determination to liquidate anyone it cannot coopt makes co-habitation of regime and opposition while Bashar al-Assad retains the security levers an absurdity. For Bashar, the Obama administration's edicts to him to "step aside" are merely Shakespeare's "idle wind, Which I respect not."

Beyond the short term, a series of questions arise. Can the regime recover decisively and sustain this? How might eventual collapse of the regime occur? After more than two years of largely regime driven brutalization, is the future hopeless?

Regime resurgence became a talking point in April 2013. Iran and its Hezbollah auxiliary committed themselves as never before to Bashar al-Assad while the opposition still lacked leadership, discipline, and heavy hardware. Regime forces made advances in the Homs region, the Damascus suburban belt, and the Hawran. This raised a bigger issue: could mainly Alawite forces with Hezbollah stiffening retake and hold northern Syria, at the same time as consolidating "order and stability" in central Syria, all of Damascus, and south to Dera'a? Would the regime face another swing of the pendulum with the opposition seeping back? Or would the opposition fall apart because of lack of ammunition and its internal contradictions, enabling the regime to sweep to the Turkish border – a nightmare for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Whatever the extent of the regime's resurgence, its stoking of sectarianism through massacres of Sunni Arab civilians and its dependence on Hezbollah and other Twelver Shia fighters from outside in a country where less than one percent of the population is Twelver Shia, likely spells its ultimate doom. This is compatible with severe blows to the uprising in the immediate future; the situation is not comparable, for example, with the Algerian army's defeat of Islamic radicals in the 1990s because the Algerian regime was not thrown back on a local sectarian minority and foreign fighters.

It can be safely forecast that Bashar and his circle will continue to refuse any Syria that is not their Syria. The Syrian president's speeches and interviews are epics in self-righteousness. Opponents are "terrorists," pawns of the United States, Israel, and al-Qaeda, and Bashar is the indomitable surgeon of the "resistance" – himself, Iran, and Hezbollah – cutting, excising, and spilling blood to save the patient.[5] There is no daylight for diplomacy here; a plausible scenario involves a war of multiple phases lasting years, maybe including a substantial regime re-imposition before a renewed slide and the grimness of the future finally brings falling-apart within the security machine and falling-away of state employees and other regime constituents.

Although most of the armed opposition in mid-2013 adheres to Sunni Islamist alignments of various flavors, it is not predestined that regime change several years from now will install a Sunni Islamist state. Nor should it be assumed that the country would fragment into sectarian, warlord, or jihadist fiefdoms – beyond a short period these would not be viable and would have no serious legitimacy. In the psychological decompression after a collapse of the Assads and their vicious security state, there would be a new Syrian public atmosphere, very possibly hostile to Islamist bigots. However dismal the current scene, it would not be fair to paint Syria's post-Assad future as inevitably a version of the Islamist ascendancy that has blighted post-Mubarak Egypt.

Aleppo and "Geneva 2"

The real test for the current phase of the Syrian conflict is coming in and around Aleppo. After advances south of Homs courtesy of Hezbollah pushing out from its Lebanese base areas, the regime is taking advantage of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's new domestic diversions with a lunge against the opposition heartland. Hezbollah has gone with it, contributing contingents in Homs and the Aleppo countryside in its risky excursion into the Sunni depth of Syria.

Opposition fortunes may well depend on munitions infusions from Turkey, in turn depending on the degree of distaste

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in Turkey's ruling party for the potential spectacle of Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran triumphant within an hour's drive of Gaziantep. Otherwise the opposition may falter in parts of northern Syria, even falling back across the border into the refugee camps – not an ideal situation for Turkey. It would not be the end of the uprising; indeed it may mutate into a virulent guerilla campaign. It would however mean settling in for a very long haul.

Despite their incoherence, opposition forces may manage a renewed stalemate against a regime with chronic manpower difficulties. Opposition persistence has always been more remarkable than that of the regime. It remains to be seen what regime bombast about its “storm of the north” portends in practice. Whatever the case, the Obama administration will need to come to terms with having been played for suckers by the Russians over the projected “Geneva 2” conference. Russia, in its distaste for regime change, drives toward an abomination – that Bashar al-Assad and his security machine, overwhelmingly responsible for the mess in Syria and for the whole degradation and brutalization of the country, receive effective international endorsement for a perpetuated stranglehold on Syria's future.

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[1] Megan Price, Jeff Klinger, and Patrick Ball, *Preliminary Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic*, the Benetech Human Rights Program, 2 January 2013 – commissioned by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Available at:

www.humansecuritygateway.com/showRecord.php?Recordid=38714

[2] Reuters, 12 May 2013, “Syrian war toll rises to 82,000: opposition group”: www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/12/us-syria-crisis-toll-idUSBRE94BOAD20130512

[3] Matthew Weaver, *The Guardian*, 16 May 2013, “Syria's crisis: number of refugees tops 1.5 million, says UN: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/16/syria-crisis-refugees-million-un

[4] Karen De Young and Joby Warrick, *Washington Post*, 30 May 2013, report “twenty-thousand Kalashnikov assault rifles and 20 million rounds of ammunition” as items in “the Syrian army's March weapons request to its Russian supplier.”

[5] See “Al-Assad yaftatih Dawrat Majlis al-Sha'b al-Jadid bi Khitab al-Tahadi” [Assad Opens the Sitting of the New People's Assembly with a Confrontational Speech] in *al-Safir* (Beirut), 4 June 2012, for Bashar al-Assad's operating theater metaphor.

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