

The Syrian Deadlock - Bashar al-Assad and Barak Obama's Moment of Truth

Written by Eyal Zisser

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EYAL ZISSER, SEP 15 2013

The fire in Syria has been raging for over two years. A limited local peasant protest that began in the rural and the periphery – a class protest based on socio-economic distress – spread, struck deep roots, and became a broad popular uprising that eventually evolved into a bloody civil war. With the passage of time, the struggle in Syria assumed a sectarian character, and then a religious character, involving jihad by Islamic groups within Syria and volunteers streaming into the country from all over the Arab and Muslim world, opposing the heretical Alawite regime, the ally of Shiite Iran and Hizballah[1].

As of now, all the erstwhile educated assessments and predictions that the fall of the Syrian regime was only a matter of time – a few days, as was the case in Tunisia, a few weeks, as in Egypt, or at most several months, as in Libya – have been rebuffed. The Syrian regime is still on its feet, alive and kicking, and even returning blow for blow. It has managed to maintain its cohesion and unity, based on its supporting pillars: the army, the security forces, the governmental institutions, and the Baath Party. These elements continue their support of the regime, despite the severe blows they have suffered and the wave of desertions from their ranks. More importantly, the regime still relies on and benefits from the support of important sections of Syrian society – mainly a coalition of minorities comprising the Alawites, along with Druze, Christians, and even some Sunnis from the middle and upper classes in the large cities. Some of the Sunnis from the rural areas, which are currently in the center of the fighting, have also remained loyal to the regime. In addition, the Syrian regime is benefiting from the support of powerful forces in the regional and international arenas, headed by Russia and Iran. Bashar al-Assad has managed to survive the numerous eulogies said for him, to the point where many observers are once again mentioning the possibility that he may yet emerge triumphant in his bloody struggle against his opponents[2].

Bashar has gained momentum

Indeed, the tide of the Syrian civil war had seemed to turn in favor of Bashar al-Assad's regime during the past few months. Assad's forces, with considerable help from Hizballah units, had apparently halted the rebels' momentum and had seized the initiative. One noteworthy gain was Hizballah's conquest of al-Qusair, in the district of Homs, during June 2013. The importance of this city, which had been in rebel hands since the summer of 2012, was that it was the key to controlling the link between Syria's interior – the Damascus-Aleppo axis – and the Syrian coast and Alawi heartland. In addition, al-Qusair is a strategic point straddling the main route from Lebanon to Homs and northern Syria. It was along this route that weapons, aid, and even volunteers had flowed into rebel hands from the adjacent Sunni areas of Lebanon, including Tripoli. In addition, the Syrian regime solidified its grip on the city of Homs, even if it could not completely control it, and pushed rebel forces back from some of the entrances to Damascus, even though the rebels continued to control many of the surrounding villages to the city's east and west and some of neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city itself. The rebels also increased the pressure on regime forces in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and drove them from the northeastern part of the country, the al-Jazira region, and even mounted an offensive that extended as far as the southern coast of Syria, into the areas populated by an Alawi majority, the regime's stronghold. Nevertheless, the fact is that except for the city of al-Raqaa in the east, the rebels have not been able to gain full control over any of Syria's large cities, or any province in its entirety. Its achievements, while not inconsiderable, have been limited to controlling villages and their surroundings in a number

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of areas of the country[3].

Bashar al-Assad is still far from victory or even from gaining the upper hand in the battle. But the rebels are even further from victory than Assad. In the absence of external intervention and continued financial support and arms flowing from sympathetic states, it is doubtful if the scales can be tipped in the rebels' favor. They are still fragmented and unable to close ranks: after more than two and one-half years of fighting, they have failed to fashion a political and military leadership that is a necessary condition for victory.

War of Annihilation

At the meantime, the Syrian army is waging a campaign to exterminate or expel the rebels and the population that supports them. To be sure, this was perhaps not the regime's original objective, but is the outcome of an inexorable brutalization by all parties to the conflict. There is no other possible explanation for the massive use of deadly weapons of terror, such as aerial bombardment, concentrated artillery fire, surface-to-surface missiles, and even chemical weapons against the rebels and their supporters in densely populated areas. One result has been that between four and six million Syrians, between 20-30% of the total population, are either internal or external refugees, most of them Sunni Muslim supporters of the rebels living in villages and peripheral areas. If this trend continues, Bashar may well be able to eventually declare victory, after having defeated or emptied the country of his opponents and their supporters[4].

Bashr's Mistake – Obama Dilemma

But on the way to victory, Assad appears to have hit a bump in the road in the form of Barack Obama and the United States, which appears determined, on the face of things, to strike Assad for using chemical weapons on August 21st, 2013 against his opponents in the area of al-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya, on the rural outskirts of eastern Damascus, killing more than 1400 civilians including women and children. To be sure, it is clear that the U.S. does not want to be directly involved in the Syrian civil war, and especially an Afghan or Iraqi-style quagmire. Indeed, in recent months a consensus has emerged within the U.S. security establishment against any U.S. military action that would necessitate committing large numbers of ground forces to operations in Syrian territory. In addition, the Pentagon has also stated that the Syrian opposition is a collection of rebel bands incapable of replacing Assad, and that overthrowing Assad's regime would thus result in chaos and anarchy that would allow radical groups like al-Qa`ida to take over, something which would ultimately drag the U.S. in even deeper[5].

The Russians rushed to provide Obama a ladder to climb off the high tree, but the US-Russian agreement reached in Geneva may only postpone an American intervention in the Syrian crisis. Bashar may play his cards well and stay in power in Syria, however, the ball is not in Bashar's court but in Washington's, and the future of the Middle East – as well as the future of the Syrian campaign — is likely to be decided by Barack Obama and not Bashar al-Assad.

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[1] For general background on the Syrian revolution, see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2012); David W. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). For more about the socioeconomic background of the protest in Syria, see Eyal Zisser, "The Renewal of the 'Struggle for Syria': The Rise and Fall of the Baath Party," *Sharqiyya* (fall 2011): 21-29. See also *EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit), Syria – Country Report*, April 2011.

[2] For the reasons for support for the Syrian regime, see for example Eyal Zisser, "Can Assad's Syria Survive Revolution?" *Middle East Quarterly* 20 (spring 2013): 13-21.

[3] See "Does the Fall of al-Raqqa Constitute a Turning Point in the Syrian Revolution?" Arab Center for Research

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and Policy Studies (Doha, Qatar), Policy paper, March 24, 2013. For the achievements of the Syrian regime in regaining control of various areas of the country during May, see Reuters, 19-20 May, 5 June 2013.

[4] For more on the Human tragedy in Syria see the *Syria Comment* blog by Prof. Joshua Landis of Oklahoma University, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog>, and the *Syrian Revolution Digest* blog by Syrian expatriate intellectual Ammar Abdulhamid, <http://www.syrianrevolutiondigest.com>. See also Keith Proctor, "Inside Syria's Siege Economy," *CNN*, May 8, 2013. For estimates of the numbers of fatalities and refugees, see *Reuters*, May 14, 2013.

[5] See Peter Baker, "A Rare Public View of Obama's Pivots on Policy in Syria Confrontation," *the New York Times*, 11 September 2013.

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Professor Eyal Zisser is dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of *Commanding Syria, Bashar al-Assad and the First Years in Power* (London, 2006).