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SYRIA: THE EVOLVING PROBLEM OF COMPETING MILITIAS

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The war in Syria is currently in a particularly complex phase with conflicting reports of rebel progress. Jihadist militias are growing in strength and capability, making it probable that they will have considerable influence and even power in a post-Assad Syria. At the same time, there are indications that elements supporting the Assad regime, including the Iranian government, recognise this and are planning for the aftermath with their own militias.

Context

In our August 2012 briefing (*The Jihadist Element in Syria and its Implications*), we analysed the Jihadist aspect of the Syrian civil war. We discussed the manner in which trained paramilitary cohorts in Afghanistan in the 1980s had formed part of the al-Qaida movement, and we then pointed to the parallel development in the period 2003-09 in Iraq, where young dedicated paramilitaries gained combat experience against the well-armed professional troops of the US Army and Marine Corps. Many went on to fight in Syria, and by early 2012, there were estimated to be a thousand paramilitary jihadists in the country. They were proving particularly effective, partly because of their dedication, but also because of the previous combat experience that many of them had already.

The October briefing (*The Iranian and Syrian Crises: The Dangers of Linkage*) continued the analysis and cited four aspects indicating a lengthy conflict:

- Fewer defections from Assad's security forces.
- Substantial support from Iran.
- A disunited opposition.
- A double proxy, with the Saudis supporting the rebels and Iran supporting Assad, overlaid by US support for the rebels and Russian support for Assad, and neither willing to cede success to the other.

These briefings argued for vigorous international action to bring the proxy elements together and suggested that the war otherwise had a long time to run, recalling that many analysts had thought the regime about to collapse in late 2011.

Recent Developments

The consequences of the fighting, especially through the winter months, have been terrible, with UN latest estimates of 70,000 people killed in less than two years. There are indications that while the regime is holding its positions in the second city of Aleppo, and might even have consolidated control of some large towns in central Syria, it has recently come under greater pressure in Damascus itself. In the first week of February, there were significant advances by rebel forces, especially in the suburb of Jobar. While these have been met with airstrikes and artillery bombardments, the infantry counter-attacks by regime troops have shown signs of strain among those troops. This has resulted in claims by rebels that they are at last making progress against the regime's core support, but any such claim must be treated with caution, given the many claims of the regime's imminent demise over the past eighteen months. At the

same time, there are indications that the rebels have been receiving more arms from abroad, particularly those sourced from Croatia with Saudi financial support. This may be one factor that has aided rebel advances during the winter months.

Even so, there remain major divisions among the rebel factions, but what is more important to recognise is that when advances are made, the rebels frequently fail to consolidate them. Often this is due to the fact that when a government facility, whether police station, depot or army base is taken over by rebels, it then becomes a ready target for regime airstrikes. With the rebels lacking anti-aircraft weapons they then tend to withdraw, making it possible for regime forces to regain control.

The Jihadist Element

This fundamental asymmetry is one of the main reasons for the regime's enduring strength and the consequent length of the conflict, but what is becoming clear is that within the ranks of the rebels, the Jihadist elements are becoming steadily more powerful. Why this is important is that some of these elements experienced a similar conflict environment in the mid-2000s in central Iraq, when facing US air power. They are therefore more likely to be able to use a range of tactics in order to avoid the full impact of airborne counter-attacks.

Furthermore, the Jihadist elements within the rebellion have been making considerable progress in strategic regions of Syria, particularly in the Euphrates Valley. On 10 February, paramilitaries of the Al-Nusra Front took control of the Thawra Dam, Syria's largest, in Raqqa Province, as well as the town of Thawra, immediately to the south of Lake Assad, which is impounded by the dam. Other rebel groups had taken control of the Baath and Tishrin dams, the latter a hydro-electric facility.

In a move that may be just as significant, Islamist units were reported to have followed up the taking of the Thawra Dam by over-running the nearby al-Jarrah air base. While regime forces may well counter-attack against the air base, they will be unlikely to re-occupy it given the numbers of Islamist rebels in the vicinity, and they will be reluctant to attack rebel forces at the dam itself for fear of damaging the structure. The emerging reports that Al-Nusra fighters have taken the town of Al-Shaddada in the main oil producing province of Hasaka, only add to this overall picture of increasing strategic gains.

Apart from the significance of the dams, the attacks are consolidating rebel control of the Euphrates Valley and thereby greatly improving the connections between the Islamist rebel elements in Syria and their many associates across the border in Iraq. Al-Qaida in Iraq may be involved in violent resistance to the Maliki government in Baghdad but many see the conflict in Syria as a part of wider anti-Shi'a resistance in both countries. Indeed, insofar as the al-Qaida movement can still be said to exist, there is a sense that the Syria/Iraq Jihadist endeavour is coming to represent a major new focus for the Islamist vision, with considerable long-term potential.

There are three more general aspects of the Jihadist rebel elements to consider:

1. Different Islamist militias may have competing agendas, often district or regional, but they are frequently cooperating with each other.
2. Because of their prowess and experience, other secular forces are willing to join with them.

3. There are even instances of secular militias being willingly led by Islamist paramilitaries because of their leadership and experience.

By mid-2012, it was estimated that there might be around 1,000 to 1,500 Islamist paramilitaries among the rebel forces. That figure is now thought to be closer to 3,000, with many thousands more offering a degree of support. This has implications for a post-Assad Syria that are considerable.

After Assad

The United States government and its Western European NATO partners may be keen to support the rebels and to want to see the Assad regime fall, but they now have serious concerns over the post-Assad governance of Syria which, if it ever becomes stable, will most likely be Sunni dominated with a powerful Islamist element. From a very different position, Iran and Hezbollah have even greater concerns and are therefore working diligently to prepare for that eventuality, even if it is a year or more away.

Their working assumption is that a post-Assad regime will have excessive Sunni power and be strongly anti-Shi'a/Alawi, making it essential to find a means of maintaining influence for Iran and viability for Hezbollah. Currently, the main vehicle for this is extensive training and support for pro-regime militias drawn mainly from the Alawi community. These tend to be grouped under the Jaysh al-Sha'bi alliance, which should not be confused with the other pro-regime "Shabiha" militias with their appalling reputation for atrocities.

The "Jaysh" are closely supported and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and modelled on its own Basij militia. They are closely connected with Hezbollah and act in support of the regime, not least in the north-western coastal districts of Syria that are predominantly Alawi. There are claims that as many as 50,000 paramilitaries allied to Jaysh are operating but this may be an exaggeration. What does appear likely is that their existence represents a major investment by Iran, made on the basis that the regime might just be starting to enter a terminal phase. It may currently be something of a "Plan B", but it is getting considerable attention.

In the short term, the Jaysh militias may prevent that regime collapsing, but in the longer term they are likely to have three intended functions:

1. Prevent Syria being unified under a Sunni-dominated regime.
2. Ensure Iranian influence over a separate Alawi region, including access to a port and airport.
3. Provide a conduit for continuing support for Hezbollah.

In terms of humanitarian impacts this means that Syria faces the prospect of being divided into spheres of influence on a near permanent basis involving long-term insecurity and violence, and with Saudi-backed Sunni Islamist paramilitaries and Iran-backed Shi'a/Alawi paramilitaries vying for the control of territory.

Implications

The three major developments since the last Oxford Research Group analysis are:

1. The increasing effectiveness of Islamist paramilitaries among the rebels.

2. The development of Iran-backed Shi'a/Alawi paramilitaries.
3. Huge humanitarian costs including increased cross-border refugee flows.

All of these point to a dangerously fractured future at a time when western states are showing a decreased interest in Syria. Thus is a serious mistake. Instead, efforts should be intensified in seeking a negotiated settlement.

While it would undoubtedly be very difficult, now may be the time for states that are essentially neutral in the conflict to consider the possibility of sponsoring initial Track II discussions. There are indications that the regime might now be willing to engage in negotiations with some elements of the rebels, and there are also indications that Russia is becoming more willing to engage. These are the circumstances in which a Track II process involving unofficial representatives might have some chance of progress.

The prospect of a violent and deeply unstable Syria is to be avoided, primarily on the grounds of limiting the humanitarian consequences, but there might now be recognition among the proxy powers, principally the Saudi-Iranian and US-Russian elements, that there is a growing common interest in seeking a negotiated solution.

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