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The War in Syria: Responding to Stalemate

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Summary

The Syrian War is now in its fourth year and the indications are that the regime will survive and consolidate its position in 2014. This is radically different from early last year when many analysts thought it was under serious pressure, and it should be recalled that in mid-2011, a few months into the war, the prevailing view was that the regime would not last to the end of that year. The costs have been huge, with around 140,000 killed, twice that number injured and more than a third of the population displaced, millions of them refugees in other countries. This briefing seeks to put this appalling conflict in a longer term regional context as an aid to looking at possible policy options in attempting to bring the war to an end.

The Regional Context in 2011

At the start of 2011 the region was struck by remarkable political upheavals as people in a number of countries reacted against autocratic rule and demanded political change. It commenced with the rapid and unexpected fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia on 14 January and was followed on 11 February by the quite startling collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Across the region there were public uprisings of varying intensities in Oman, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria and political uncertainty in several countries including Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco.

In broad terms, those political authorities that did not immediately collapse reacted in different ways that may be summarised as concession or repression or a mixture of both. In Oman, demonstrations were repressed with force but concessions were also offered and the innate wealth of the authorities was available to “buy off” resentment. In Bahrain the royal house opted for repression, aided by army and police support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia treated Shi’a opponents harshly but distributed many billions of dollars of resources across most of the population.

In Morocco, King Mohammed sped up the pace of reform with some effect, and across the border in Algeria some economic concessions, including increased food subsidies, were made. In Libya, Gaddafi used repression but western, and a few Gulf Arab, states intervened on the part of the rebels; a six-month war ended with regime collapse and Gaddafi’s lynching. This has been followed by huge insecurity, including rise of Islamist and local tribal militias.

The Syrian regime faced extensive nonviolent demonstrations, most commonly after Friday prayers, and faced an escalation in dissent at a time when two regimes in the region had already fallen and in the same week that Saudi and Emirati forces intervened in Bahrain and the UN approved foreign intervention in Libya. The fate of Mubarak was particularly striking for the Assad regime given Syria’s long-term historical relationship with Egypt, and it is probable that this meant the regime believed its only course of action was vigorous repression. It became progressively more vigorous and determined in its pursuit of control.

Underlying Causes

Although most of the individual anti-government actions across the Arab World were responses to persistent and long-term autocracy, these were in the context of a number of other factors:

- Outside of a small cluster of oil-rich states, the wealth-poverty divide has become huge, often with the majority of populations marginalised.
- Even in countries of modest wealth, much of the economic power has been concentrated in the hands of small groups of elites, often less than a tenth of the population. The world economic downturn from 2007 onwards exacerbated these socio-economic divisions.
- The demographic transition is still in progress across much of the Middle East, meaning that a large proportion of the population is under the age of 30.
- Although educational standards are highly variable and there is still a marked gender gap, in most countries most people now go through high school and there is an increasing proportion of graduates among people under 30. There is frequently a serious lack of job opportunities, not least for well-educated young people. At the time of the changes in Tunisia it was reported to have 140,000 unemployed or seriously underemployed graduates out of a population of 11 million.
- The surge in world grain prices in the late 2000s, not least following China's harvest difficulties, added to the economic problems for many, not least in Egypt. Syria had a specific problem of drought stretching over many years, leading to an influx of the rural poor into urban areas.

As a whole, these factors mean that there are trends across the region that point to the risk of longer-term social upheavals. These will persist and must be factored into any policy formulation that might relate primarily to Syria. Instability is highly likely to be a feature of the region in the coming years.

Syria's Perspective

In the light of the regional upheavals, the Assad regime used high levels of violent repression from the start, which led to a transition from nonviolent to violent protest. From the start the regime presented itself as the guardian of stability against opponents that were essentially terrorists. This may have been a travesty of reality at that time, but in the context of the extraordinary upheavals and uncertainties across the region – as well as a keen understanding of the shared sectarian and geopolitical rivalries that tore Lebanon apart within recent memory – the need for a strong regime was more widely accepted within Syria than most diplomats and external analysts appreciated.

The regime's stance was aided by internal and external factors. Internally it had the strong support of the Alawi minority but most other Shi'a, Christians and Druze were also willing to accept the regime as guardian of the security of the state. In combination this represented close to a quarter of the population but there was also support from many in the Sunni business community who feared that regional upheavals would spread to Syria. By and large these elements persist, although the great majority of Syrians just want an end to the war.

Externally, the regime has had support from three quarters. One is the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon that has long been heavily dependent on Syria for weapons and other support. Hezbollah militias have become a crucial part of the paramilitary support base of the regime. Second has been the continuing support of Iran, including weapons, training and supplies, and an important sub-set of this has been the increase in paramilitaries from Iraqi Shi'a communities, backed by Iran. Finally there has been the long-term relationship with Russia, with the Putin government seeing Syria as the key centre for remaining Russian influence in the Middle East. In the past year Russia has been particularly useful in its support for repairing and upgrading military equipment, especially aircraft and related weapons systems.

The Islamist Dimension

In the past year, radical Islamist paramilitary groups such as ISIS, the Islamic Front and al-Nusra have come to the fore among the rebellion, offering the strongest opposition to the regime. There has thus been an element of self-fulfilling prophecy for the regime. In 2014, internal conflicts among the Islamists have weakened them. They may still offer the strongest resistance but their relative decline is one reason why the regime is likely to survive long-term. Western states, whatever their public stance, would now prefer to see the regime survive than lose control to al-Qaida-linked Islamists. This is clearly the case for Putin, where fear of an Islamist spill-over to the Caucasus is now considered less likely following the safe conclusion of the Winter Olympics and the internal Islamist conflicts within Syria.

Policy Implications

In a very pessimistic environment, there are two more positive elements. One is that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are showing signs of improvement, including reports of unofficial Saudi/Iranian discussions on Syria. The second is that a number of local ceasefires have been developed, not least in some parts of Damascus. There may be scope for these to develop further, especially in parts of the country where Islamist groups are not prominent.

The international community must seek to increase pressure on the UN to enhance multilateral processes, and specifically seek to engage Tehran and Riyadh. In addition, given that this war has many months and possibly years to run, states must commit to improve aid to refugees and to any initiatives that increase the possibility of gaining and embedding local ceasefires – not least by immediate aid for those districts where ceasefires take hold. Approaches to the region must now take a much longer-term view, based on the likely survival of the regime and the fact that the underlying elements behind changes in the region will persist.

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