Stalemate in the Syrian Civil War

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- The coalition of minorities around Assad has not disintegrated and the pillars of the regime remain in place. Assad has proved that he has the resolve to conduct effective campaigns against the rebels in a very hostile international environment, while continuing to rule and provide for the daily life of the population under his control. Two million Alawites also understand the implications of a Sunni Islamist regime in Syria, even one of the Egyptian model.

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• The United States and Europe face an impossible dilemma: on the one hand, they would like Assad to fall; on the other, they do not want an Islamist regime that is worse than the ones that succeeded Mubarak in Egypt and Ben-Ali in Tunisia.

• The same dilemma confronts Israel. On the one hand, Jerusalem would like to see an end to the Iranian-led “axis of evil.” On the other, the prospect of a militant Islamic regime, linked to al-Qaeda and possessing the Syrian military arsenal, is a nightmare Jerusalem cannot live with.

On the second anniversary of the civil war in Syria, it seems that the war is here to stay. Nothing on the horizon foretells a ceasefire, a compromise to end hostilities and stop the bloodshed, or a capitulation by one of the two sides. All those who hurriedly announced the demise of the Assad regime realize to their dismay that the existing power structures are strong enough to endure a war of attrition with the rebels even with the loss of large portions of sovereign Syrian territory.

Some analysts claim that the civil war is not two years old but, rather, began in 1980 when a group of Muslim Brothers stormed the military academy in Aleppo and, after separating the Alawite and Sunni cadets, cold-bloodedly killed the Alawites with knives and assault rifles. The regime retaliated in 1982 by brutally killing more than 20,000 Muslim Brothers in Homs and Hama, the traditional strongholds of the group. Since then the regime had played down the internal strife between Sunnis and Alawites, while occasional suicidal attacks continued to occur on its facilities, institutions, and high-ranking officials.

The Domestic Scene

The coalition of minorities around Assad has not disintegrated. Even though the security leadership of the Assad regime was hit hard by a bomb attack inside its most secure compound, with Assad losing his closest advisers, and even though some very publicized desertions have occurred since the war began, one can safely state that the pillars of the regime remain in place. Assad has proven that he has the resolve to conduct effective campaigns against the rebels in a very hostile international environment, while continuing to rule and provide for the daily life of the population under his control. The possibility of a Salafist alternative to the Assad regime, sponsored both by the Western powers and the opposition, has brought closer all the components of the Assad coalition and hardened the regime’s determination to fight without compromise. These include Christians of all schools who look at their coreligionists in Egypt and Iraq and understand very well what a Salafist regime means for their freedom; Druze; and also Sunni elites. Assad is just the tip of the iceberg beneath him: two million Alawites also understand the implications of a Sunni Islamist regime in Syria, even one of the Egyptian model.
While Assad has survived so far, he has not been able to quell the rebellion, the economy is in shambles, and so are most of the areas hit by the civil war. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians are either refugees in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, or are homeless in their own localities. Never in its history has Syria been so isolated, both in the Arab and international domains. Never has a Syrian regime been so widely condemned in international forums. Nevertheless, Assad has managed to survive, not only because of his power structures but also, and mainly, because of the support of Russia, China, and most especially Iran and Hizbullah.

The strategists around Assad chose deliberately to give up territory inessential to the regime’s survival, mainly in the periphery near the borders with Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. As a result, the Kurdish minority found itself for the first time in Syria’s modern history in a vast autonomous territory bordering Turkey, geographically connected to their brethren in Iraq and Iran, with a potential of establishing the much-dreamed-of Kurdish homeland.

However, over the past two years, Assad has not lost a single large city to the rebels. Moreover, in almost all head-on confrontations with them, the loyalist army has prevailed. Assad has made use of all the weapons in his possession to ensure that result. In March 2013 there were reports of the use of some sort of chemical weapon. Assad has made use of his air force and artillery, including Scud missiles and phosphorous ammunition, but still has not engaged the bulk of his fighting forces. The battle against the insurgents is led by his brother, Maher al-Assad, who heads the Republican Guard, seconded by a few units (all Alawites) and the dreaded Shabiha militia. So far this seems sufficient to secure the regime’s strategic goals. In late March, the best-known quarter of Homs, Bab Amro, was recaptured by loyalist forces, thus leaving the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with territories abandoned by the regime. Even Damascus International Airport has remained in the regime’s hands despite numerous attacks by the rebels. The FSA’s attempt to sever territorial continuity between Damascus and Homs was countered by a joint military effort with Hizbullah forces, which led the main battles while relying heavily on Shiite-populated villages on both sides of the Lebanese-Syrian border.

The FSA, founded and led until recently by Col. Riyad al-Assaad, is no longer the spearhead of the rebels. Most of its officers remain on Turkish territory while the main operations are conducted by jihadists assembled from almost every corner of the earth under the main structure group Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate designated by the United States as a terrorist group. Al-Assaad himself enjoyed only limited freedom of movement inside Syrian territory since he was almost under Turkish house arrest. In one of his last sorties, he was a victim of a roadside bomb and very little is now known about his fate and the extent of his injuries.

If one believes the information coming from sources close to the rebels, the FSA, with its “victories” over loyalist troops and its capture of camps, military installations, hardware, and arms depots, should not be in need of additional weapons to fight the regime. In order to survive, however, the FSA needs to be protected from Syrian air raids, which seem to be taking a heavy toll on the opposition forces. Furthermore, the FSA must bring an end to the flow of arms from Iran to Syria. This is the reason for its request that the United States impose a no-fly
zone in northern Syria and extend the area protected by the Patriot missiles deployed in southern Turkey. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has asked Iraq – so far to no avail – to stop letting Iran use its airspace to ferry arms to Syria.

Meanwhile, the hope of a popular rebellion against Assad has dissipated. The FSA, however, still represents a threat and cannot be ignored, just as the regime cannot ignore the threats from the international legion of Salafists – nurtured by al-Qaeda and armed and financed by Qatar. Volunteers from Europe number in the hundreds, as do volunteers from North Africa (Libya and Tunisia), the Middle East (Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt), and the Far East (including even China). The growing presence of jihadists, now predominant on the ground, has created friction with the FSA, with reports of armed clashes between the groups. A Lebanese jihadist who declared himself Emir of Homs was killed by the purportedly secular FSA forces. In late March, armed clashes were again reported between Jabhat al-Nusra and FSA fighters. It is this situation that has brought the Western powers to reconsider providing the FSA with sophisticated weapons. The fear that these arms could end up in jihadist and al-Qaeda hands has made France, the UK, and even the United States more cautious. The implications of such weapons in the hands of potential terrorists are dire and require careful consideration. At the same time, the Qatari and Libyans are freely arming the jihadists in Syria.

The Syrian National Coalition (SNC), established in Istanbul in 2011 by the Turkish Islamist party AKP along the lines of the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC), has been and will certainly remain a body unrepresentative of the Syrian people, despite ongoing efforts by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to shape it into a replacement for the Assad regime. This is exemplified by the FSA’s attitude toward the SNC. Even though formally a part of it, the FSA has made clear from the start that it will not accept any subordination to the SNC, which is supposed to rule the “liberated territories” until it replaces the regime. The result is that the Syrian opposition to Assad is less coherent. In a desperate move last November, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tried to create a coalition that could rule Syria after Assad fell, from the myriad opposition groups claiming to represent the Syrian people – most no more than empty shells – along with the ascendant forces represented by the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States even found a respected figure, Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib, a former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, who was moderate enough to be accepted by all parties as leader of the coalition under its new designation as the SNC. Al-Khatib had been persecuted and spent many months in jail under the Assad regime.

This attempt, however, underestimated the manipulative power of the Qatari, who wanted a politician who would be totally under their control. Together with their allies in the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qatari worked hard to nominate the Islamist technocrat Ghassan Hitto as prime minister of the SNC, reflecting their tendency to let the Salafis play a larger role on the battlefield.

Over the past two years, information on events in Syria has come from various sources, mostly biased. European sources turned out to be journalists who support or sympathize with the jihadist groups. Turkish sources as well as Persian Gulf, Iranian, and Syrian state media have all
disseminated their own versions of events, making it extremely difficult to understand what is actually happening in Syria. The intense bias of some of the reporters on the ground has fostered mistaken assessments of the Assad regime, more than once leading politicians and analysts to forecast its downfall in a matter of weeks. Yet the true nature of some of these sources has come to light. The Syrian NGO known as the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights has become a privileged source of information on Syria. The name itself gave it an aura of respectability and seriousness for Westerners. In fact, this ostensible NGO is an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and is managed by Islamists, some of whom have been indicted for acts of severe violence, particularly its founder and first president, Riyad al-Maleh. This NGO, which struck roots in London at the end of the 1980s under the benevolent sponsorship of the British secret services, enjoys full financing from Saudi and Qatari sources.

Regional and International Players

Lebanon

Lebanon was the regional state most affected by the civil war in Syria. A traditional Syrian satellite, the Syrian conflict has sparked Sunni-Shiite tensions in Lebanon. Armed clashes have occurred mostly in the northern city of Tripoli, where Sunnis and Shiites have fought under the aegis of their patrons, with Assad on one side and the Saudi- and Qatari-sponsored former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri on the other. The Shiites tried to prevent the Sunnis from using Tripoli as a transit port for weapons to the Syrian rebels, while the Sunnis have tried in every way to overcome the stiff Shiite opposition in the city. The Syrian secret services, together with their Hizbullah allies, took part in the Shiites’ preventive effort. In October 2012, the chief of Lebanese internal security, Brig.-Gen. Wassim al-Hassan, was blown up in his car while traveling from the Beirut airport to a meeting in the Christian Ashrafiyeh quarter. He was thought to be responsible for coordinating all arms shipments from Lebanon to the Syrian rebels. Two months earlier, in August, Michel Samaha, a prominent Lebanese politician known for his Syrian sympathies who was serving as information minister, was arrested on the Syrian-Lebanese border. His car was loaded with explosive devices provided by the Syrian secret services and meant to target Sunnis in northern Lebanon.

Amid the internal strife, the possibility of a spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon has never been greater. Emboldened by the deterioration of the Assad regime, Sunnis in Lebanon denounced Hizbullah and were ready to confront the mighty organization militarily in areas where it was not dominant. The Sunni sheikh Ahmad al-Assir of Sidon openly challenges Hizbullah’s hegemony. Al-Assir is taking advantage of a situation where Hizbullah is fully engaged alongside Assad’s forces on two main Syrian fronts: Homs (opposite northeastern Lebanon) and Zabadani (near the Syrian-Lebanese border on the way to Damascus). Hizbullah itself is cognizant of the threats facing it and is redeploying its forces so as to secure the organization’s perimeter in Beirut and other Shiite-concentrations in Lebanon. Hizbullah is fully aware that if Assad falls, it will be the next target of the jihadists and al-Qaeda operatives.
The situation in Lebanon is so tense that the government is paralyzed. In March, Najib Mikati resigned as prime minister less than two years after taking office, realizing his inability to rule.

**Jordan**

The Hashemite Kingdom has been on the receiving end of the shockwave originating in Syria, even though Jordan was among the few states that were spared the tsunami of social unrest that led to the ousting of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, and Yemeni leaders and to further disruptions in countries such as Syria, Bahrain, and Iraq. The Jordanians are concerned that hostile elements are striving to destabilize the country and upend its regime. Aware of the activities of regional elements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, that seek to impose an Islamist agenda and exploit popular frustration, King Abdullah initiated political reforms, reshuffled his government, and calmed potential social unrest by leaving subsidies unchanged. However, the presence of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees has put the kingdom under severe pressure and led Abdullah to request U.S. economic assistance. The king understands the regional challenges and is suspicious of the role played by Turkey and Egypt, which he does not trust. Accordingly, he is navigating very cautiously, aware that Jordan could be the next target of the jihadists if and when the Syrian conflict ends.

**Iraq**

According to a *Washington Post* report of March 28, 2013, by Ernesto Londono, after staying on the sidelines for more than a year, Iraqi Sunni tribes near the Syrian border have joined the effort to topple the Assad regime. Iraqi officials are concerned that a growing Sunni protest movement inspired by the rebellion in neighboring Syria could turn into a revolt against Iraq’s Shiite regime. The report says that Syria’s civil war is threatening to destabilize Iraq and widen a sectarian divide in a nation still recovering from the aftermath of the U.S.-led intervention in 2003. This explains Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s growing willingness to let Iran transfer arms to Syria through Iraqi airspace; he feels increasingly threatened by a possible Sunni victory in Syria. Indeed, Jabhat al-Nusra is closely linked to the Sunni insurgent group Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The jihadists have posted statements in online forums vowing to take on Maliki after driving out Assad and to march on Baghdad after seizing Damascus. The convergence of militant groups in the two countries became evident in March when Iraqi jihadists ambushed a convoy transporting Syrian soldiers who had fled into Iraq after a firefight along the border. The ambush occurred near the Iraqi village of Rabiyah, a stronghold of the Shammar tribe whose fellow tribesmen in Syria joined the rebellion about six months ago.

**Iran**

The events in Syria and Iran’s unconditional support for the Assad regime have dealt a blow to its pan-Islamic policy. The Arab world is now well aware that Tehran is driven by a Shiite agenda.
and not a pan-Islamic one. The Arab media constantly criticizes Iran and has been highlighting its subversive activities in the Gulf area and elsewhere. Iran’s attempts to bridge the gaps with Egypt have proven counterproductive. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to Egypt was met not only with skepticism but with open hostility by the Mufti of Egypt, who openly demanded that Iran stop persecuting its Sunni minority and proselytizing in Egypt. The Arab world has leveled further accusations against Iran since the uncovering of subversive cells and spying networks in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. More than anything else, the Arab world cannot accept Iran’s alliance with Assad and Hizbullah against the Syrian Sunni community. Today, Iran finds itself restricted to its fellow Shiites in the Middle East; that is, those in Syria, Iraq, and Hizbullah. Thus, the impetus of Iran’s Islamic Revolution has been sharply rebuffed for the coming years.

The Western Powers

When the crisis in Syria began, the Western powers were openly skeptical. Gradually, under the influence of the media and the growing number of civilians killed by the Assad regime, these powers came to side with the rebellion without being able to give them military assistance, as was the case in Libya, because of legalistic international constraints and concerns. Moreover, the West was confronted by Russia and China on the opposite side. The United States and Europe tried several times to obtain a green light for action from the UN Security Council, but were stymied by the Russians and Chinese. Instead of military equipment, the West has helped the rebels with intelligence, training, and financial aid; frozen Syrian assets in Europe and elsewhere; and drawn up a blacklist of wanted Syrian criminals of war; but has stopped short of military engagement in the conflict. At the beginning of March 2013, France even suggested that its European allies reconsider arms deliveries to the rebels, claiming that only military superiority could defeat the regime. However, as soon as it appeared that the alternative to Assad’s regime could very well be an Islamist, Qatari-funded, pro-al-Qaeda regime, the calls for arming the rebels ended and the emphasis shifted to compromise and a political settlement. Indeed, the United States and Europe face an impossible dilemma: on the one hand, they would like Assad to fall; on the other, they do not want an Islamist regime that is worse than the ones that succeeded Mubarak in Egypt and Ben-Ali in Tunisia.

Israel

The same dilemma confronts Israel. On the one hand, Jerusalem would like to see an end to the Iranian-led “axis of evil.” Assad’s defeat would mark the beginning of the end of Hizbullah’s supremacy in Lebanon, and Iran would be pushed back to its borders and contained there. On the other, the prospect of a militant Islamic regime, linked to al-Qaeda and possessing the Syrian military arsenal, is a nightmare Jerusalem cannot live with. Just like the West, Israel has opted for a wait-and-see policy, stating from time to time that it will not tolerate any change in the balance of power in the area and will fire back if fired upon in the Golan Heights. Specifically, Israel (along with the United States) has expressed concern about any leakage of
sophisticated weapons to Hizbullah or the rebels, especially weapons of mass destruction such as the chemical and biological agents now part of the Syrian arsenal.

Two years after the revolt in Syria began, the lines of confrontation between the loyalist forces and the rebels seem to have stabilized and an agonizing status quo is taking shape on the ground, just as occurred in the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s. If this description proves accurate, then the situation in Syria will not be resolved in the near future. It may take a good deal longer, though the timeframe is difficult to estimate. If, however, the regime falls, it could lead to a restructuring of the Middle Eastern political map.

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