

The Civil War in Syria

Syria's Civil War: Geopolitical Implications and Scenarios

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In May 2013, the violence in Syria continues to escalate. There is no sign of an end to the conflict and human suffering some two years after a largely peaceful protest movement on the country's periphery was met with brutal repression. Hollow promises of reform made by the regime had no substance or credibility, and the situation quickly degenerated into an armed uprising. While the rebels have made significant advances and the regime has withdrawn its forces from almost half of the country's territory, the insurgents and the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat or Democratic Union Party, the Syrian version of the PKK, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan or Kurdistan Workers' Party), who respectively hold parts of these lands, have neither been able to gain complete and sustained control of any of the larger cities nor protect the civilian population in the so-called liberated areas from the regime's air, artillery and missile assaults.

As a consequence of the fighting, some 70,000 people have been killed, tens of thousands arrested, about a quarter of Syria's population has fled the violence – either to safer areas inside the country (with some 3.8 million Internally Displaced Persons – IDPs) or outside, mainly to neighbouring countries (with some 1.4 million refugees registered or awaiting registration by the UN, and the actual number probably much higher). Furthermore, the humanitarian situation has worsened significantly, and the fighting has entailed a radicalisation of the insur-

gents, an influx of foreign fighters and the confessionalisation of the struggle.

Syria's revolt has developed into a civil war fueled by external actors' strategic – and at times existential – interests and meddling. International, regional and subnational conflicts are being fought in Syria. Above all, it is the conflict over Iran's regional role that has stoked the civil war. From the perspective of Arab Gulf states, first and foremost Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Syria crisis has offered an opportunity to reverse Tehran's considerable growth in influence since the 2003 Iraq War and to strengthen their own positions. Some US and Israeli strategists have also seen the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to decisively weaken Iran, hoping that defeat in the Levant would force Tehran to give ground on other issues such as its nuclear programme. They also expect that the Lebanese Hezbollah will be weakened by regime change in Syria, which serves as its main transit route for arms supplies. On the other side, Iran has regarded the power struggle in Syria – much like the international sanctions against the Islamic Republic – as an element of a US and Israel-driven policy of isolation that ultimately seeks regime change in Tehran. The Iranian leadership sees itself at the forefront of a strategic and ideological conflict about nothing less than liberating the region from US and Israeli hegemony. Iran has therefore supported the Syrian regime with military advisers, weapons, financial transfers and energy supplies, while the rebels have received political, financial and logistical support as well as training from Western actors like the United States, Turkey, the United Kingdom and France, and financial and military aid from the Arab Gulf states.

In addition there have been divergent analyses and interests among the permanent members of the UN

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Security Council. Russia and China have effectively supported the Assad regime by shielding it from Council criticism and through trade and, in the case of Russia, arms deliveries. Attitudes towards pro-democracy movements and towards their own Muslim minorities, the row over applying the responsibility to protect principle in Libya, as well as the maintenance of areas of influence have all played a role, preventing unified and effective international efforts from working towards a political solution, as well as decisive international action to stop the bloodshed or protect Syria's population. In addition, while the alleged use of chemical weapons in spring 2013 has reinvigorated the debate among Western backers of the opposition over arming the rebels and/or imposing a no-fly zone, the US administration and its allies have remained reluctant to do either.

Spill-Over Effects

The repercussions of the degeneration of Syria's uprising into civil war have been felt strongly across the region, not least due to Syria's central location and geostrategic importance.¹ The constantly rising number of Syrians fleeing the violence has put an enormous strain on neighbouring countries, particularly Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, with regard to providing adequate shelter, health services and supplies. It has also provoked tensions with local populations. In Turkey, for example, the presence of overwhelmingly Sunni refugees and rebels in the area bordering Syria has led to the local Arab Alawite population feeling threatened by the rebels and disadvantaged compared to the refugees. In all host states, distribution conflicts are likely to increase in proportion with the refugee influx.

In addition, fighting has spilled over into Lebanon and Iraq fueling sectarian strife in these already destabilised states, both of which have a history of civil war. Both countries have also been involved in the Syrian conflict, with government and opposition each supporting opposing parties in the conflict, rhetorically, financially and at least partially with

combatants, e.g. the Lebanese Hezbollah. There is a real danger that both countries will be severely destabilised by Syria's civil war – in spring 2013 Iraq is witnessing the worst violence since the US withdrawal – or even drawn into it. Turkey, as a host to the Syrian National Council (SNC) and operations base for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), became a party to Syria's conflict early on, and has also been affected by hostilities on its border. In reaction, in October 2012 the Turkish Parliament authorised operations in neighbouring countries, and in January 2013, NATO stationed Patriot defence batteries along the border with Syria.

Geopolitical Implications

Ankara has also been afraid that another autonomous Kurdish region (next to the one in Northern Iraq) might be emerging just over the border – boosting separatist aspirations among its own Kurdish population and providing a safe haven for the PKK. Indeed, as the Syrian regime has largely withdrawn its visible presence from Syria's Kurdish region, structures of self-rule as well as Kurdish militias have been established there. Armed fighting between Syrian rebels and the PYD as well as political differences between Arab and Kurdish representatives of the Syrian opposition have made a far-reaching autonomy or even separation of 'West Kurdistan' increasingly probable, and have thus opened the question of regional borders as established in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Against this backdrop and in view of other regional and domestic considerations, Turkey's government has engaged in talks with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and in April 2013 agreed on a ceasefire, a retreat of PKK fighters as well as comprehensive reforms aimed at improving the status of Kurds in Turkey and thus allowing for upgraded relations with Kurds in Iraq and Syria.²

In a more general sense, the regional position of the three non-Arab states, Iran, Turkey and Israel, has been strongly affected by the Arab Spring and in

¹ For a more detailed analysis see ASSEBURG, Muriel and WIMMEN, Heiko. "Civil War in Syria. External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict." *SWP Comments* 43, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2012; ASSEBURG, Muriel. "The Arab Spring. Challenges Emanating from Europe's Neighbourhood and the European Response." *The International Spectator* (Summer 2013, to be published).

² For detail see MATTHEES, Kevin and SEUFERT, Günter. "Erdogan and Öcalan Begin Talks. A Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Kurdish Policy and a New Strategy of the PKK." *SWP Comments* 43 Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2013.

particular the crisis in Syria, and relations between all three of them have further deteriorated – with Israel and Iran on the verge of war. Iran, which saw its own revolutionary path vindicated by the protests in North Africa, Bahrain and Yemen, interpreted as an ‘Islamic Awakening,’ has denounced the uprising in Syria as Western and/or Jihadi driven. The Syrian civil war has also undermined the alliance between Iran and the Palestinian Hamas, with the latter resisting Iranian pressure to rally behind Bashar al-Assad and instead moving its headquarters from Damascus to Qatar’s capital, Doha. This has been a severe setback for Tehran’s regional leadership aspirations, in which ‘Palestine’ and the ‘liberation of Jerusalem’ have been central rallying cries.

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Turkey, which was initially seen by many as *the* winner of the Arab Spring, considered a model for the compatibility of Islam and democracy, economic development and civil control over the military, has probably suffered most from the economic fallout and geopolitical implications of the Syrian crisis. Observers have been keen to point out the failure of Ankara’s ‘zero problems’ approach. The crisis has deeply strained Ankara’s relations with Iran. In addition, Turkey’s tense relations with Israel have undermined its ability to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict and thus to contribute to a stable and prosperous Middle East. And while in spring 2013, due to US Secretary of State John Kerry’s mediation efforts, progress regarding Turkish-Israeli reconciliation and a re-normalisation of relations is underway, and Israeli arms sales to Turkey have resumed, a return to the close strategic alliance as it was before the end of 2008 does not seem close at hand. Not only has Israel’s regional isolation further increased due to the Arab Spring; Israel has also

been confronted with a strongly destabilised neighbourhood. With a wavering Bashar al-Assad, Israel is losing a hostile but reliable neighbour who had ensured a quiet border. Israel has been strongly concerned about spillover effects of the violence raging in Syria, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, tactical weapons getting into local terrorists’ hands (or being transferred to Hezbollah) and Syria turning into a safe haven for al-Qaeda. While Israel initially acted with restraint and refrained from retaliating against border violations attributed to skirmishes inside Syrian territory, in January and May 2013 its airforce bombed vehicles transporting tactical weapons allegedly bound for Lebanon’s Hezbollah, thereby increasing the risk of regional conflagration. Also, rather than providing a push for conflict settlement on the Arab-Israeli track, the Arab Spring has hardened party positions to this conflict.

With regard to overcoming the geopolitical split of the Palestinian territories though – the main demand of the Palestinian 15 March Movement – the Syrian crisis has actually produced a more favourable environment to progress than before. With Hamas relocating its headquarters to Qatar and distancing itself from Iran and Syria, part of its external backing at least (the Arab states and Turkey) will be working towards Palestinian reconciliation rather than blocking it. However, that does not mean that reconciliation is close by, as the external sponsors of the Palestinian Authority (PA), in particular, the United States, persist in blocking progress and the governments in Gaza City and Ramallah have consolidated their control over their respective territories and shown little appetite for power-sharing.

Sectarian Polarisation

Syria’s civil war has also brought about a massive increase in the sectarian polarisation that had already marked the region in the wake of Iraq’s civil war. The result has been not only an increasingly entrenched perception of the revolt as a Sunni uprising (supported by the Sunni Gulf monarchies and Turkey) against an Alawite regime, its local supporters (Alawites and Christians) and its Shiite allies (Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government), but also a geopolitical realignment along sec-

tarian lines that has increasingly come to overarch the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

As a consequence, the political camps characteristic of the region since the 2003 Iraq war have been shattered – camps mainly defined by their stance towards the West (and Israel), with pro-Western, so-called ‘moderate’ leaders (including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the PA) on the one side; ‘radical’ regimes and groups allied with Iran, the so-called ‘axis of resistance,’ on the other (comprising Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah); and Turkey and Qatar acting as moderators or balancers. In the wake of the Syria crisis, Turkey and Qatar have located themselves in the Sunni, anti-Iran, anti-Syrian regime camp, thereby not only losing their balancing position but further contributing to sectarian polarisation. In the end, a region that lacks any kind of regional security architecture has become even more polarised, on both the societal and government levels.

The sectarian polarisation does not bode well for the future of Syria nor for the region’s mosaic societies, in particular in the Levant and in Iraq

However, the geopolitical realignment has not taken place solely along the Sunni-Shia divide; domestic considerations and historical ties have also played a role in this repositioning. Thus, among the Sunni-dominated countries, on the one hand Tunisia, Libya and Egypt have fallen into a ‘revolutionary camp,’ when it comes to support for protest movements and rebels in the region. On the other, the conservative Gulf States, while supporting revolutions against unloved rulers in Libya and Syria, have coalesced to repress the uprising in Bahrain, pushed for a stabilising elite pact in Yemen, and shored up fellow kings in Jordan and Morocco with offers of generous support – not least encouraging them (regardless of geography) to apply for GCC membership. In Tunisia and Egypt, these states sought first to maintain the regimes in place and, when that was no longer feasible, started to support conservative, often Salafi

forces. However, even Arab Gulf states have not all taken the same approach: while Qatar has been the most prominent supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood’s regional ascendancy, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been wary of the Brothers’ increased influence.

It is not yet clear if the regional coalitions that are becoming discernable today will be of a lasting nature nor how the regional balance of power will consolidate in the medium to long term. It does seem clear, however, that the sectarian polarisation does not bode well for the future of Syria nor for the region’s mosaic societies, in particular in the Levant and in Iraq. To a large degree, regional developments in terms of conflict, state borders, alliances and balances of power will depend on how the situation in Syria evolves in the months and years to come.

Scenarios for Syria’s Short to Mid-Term Development

Today, four scenarios for Syria’s short to mid-term development seem to be plausible, albeit with very different probabilities: a negotiated transition; continued fighting and a cementation of the country’s fragmentation; the fall of the regime and sectarian civil war; and the fall of the regime and political transition.³

Scenario 1, “negotiated transition”: After more than two years of fighting, an end to the violence and a transition negotiated between the regime and the opposition would probably lead to the most stable and least violent outcome. However, it is also the most improbable scenario. It would need agreement on three levels: the domestic, the regional, and the international. Due to the zero-sum logic that the parties to the conflict (i.e. regime and opposition forces) are applying, conflicting interests on the regional level (mainly but not exclusively between Saudi Arabia and Iran) as well as the international disagreement (mainly between “the West” and Russia) over the analysis and handling of the conflict, agreement on any of the three levels seems unlikely. Both regime and rebels see themselves in a fight for survival

³ See ASSEBURG, Muriel: “Ziviler Protest, Aufstand, Bürgerkrieg und Zukunftsaussichten”. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 63/8:11-17, 2013.

that leaves no room for compromise. External supporters of both sides also treat the conflict as a zero-sum game with far-reaching and, for some actors existential, consequences for their own strategic positions, and are therefore determined to prevent any outcome they would regard as disadvantageous.

Scenario 2, “continued fighting and a cementation of the country’s fragmentation”: For the period to come, the continuation of fighting and a cementation of the country’s fragmentation, if fragile, seems to be the most probable scenario, as both parties to the conflict are set on prevailing militarily and external supporters continue to arm and supply them. Even if support for the rebels with heavy weapons, training and logistics were increased massively, the regime still has a large arsenal of weaponry to be employed as well as a loyal core and support among parts of the population to lean on. Thus, rather than leading to a quick military solution, such support bears the danger of massively increasing the bloodshed. Rather than the regime collapsing, the consequence may be its retreat to the center of Damascus, to what is often called the “Alawite heartland.” The regime would then control the centre of Damascus, a corridor to the coast via Homs and including the cities of Lattakia and Tartus, and the coastal mountains mainly inhabited by Alawites. That would mean a de facto fragmentation of the country into three areas, with the PYD controlling the Kurdish areas in the north and northeast, and the rebels controlling the rest of the territory. It would hardly be a sustainable situation though. Continued fighting between and within the three parts would be likely, especially in towns and areas with mixed populations and among competing warlords in the making. The spectre of ethnic cleansing would become a concrete threat.

Scenario 3, “the fall of the regime and sectarian civil war”: Even if the rebels were successful in bringing down the regime militarily, aided by a massive increase in foreign support (or, unlikely, direct military intervention), the violence is unlikely to halt with the collapse of the regime. Rather, there is a significant risk of continued or even escalated vio-

lence afterwards – in the form of acts of vengeance against persons seen as symbols for the regime’s apparatus and those groups in the population considered responsible for the regime’s brutality, first and foremost Alawites; but also in the form of fighting between different rebel groups over local control and between remnants of the regime’s security apparatus and militias and rebels. Such violence bears the danger of escalating into a civil war mainly along sectarian lines, again entailing ethnic cleansing.

Scenario 4, “the fall of the regime and political transition”: There is a broad consensus among social and political forces in Syria and the Syrian Diaspora, that the revolution should lead to a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive post-Assad order in a united Syria.⁴ However, the effects of the civil war, the radicalisation of certain rebel groups and the influx of, often Jihadi-oriented, foreign fighters, have diminished – and are continuing to diminish – the prospects of these visions prevailing over those held by the different power centres. To make matters worse, the political opposition has struggled to unite and build a credible representative body that is endorsed by the population, local activists and diverse rebel groups, and has an impact on the ground. These difficulties have stemmed not only from ideological divisions and infighting over access to resources among the different groups and personalities, but also from different sponsors of the opposition trying to give their favorites the upper hand. In this context, it seems obvious that those that give most support to the insurgents – Saudi-Arabia and Qatar – and thus add to their standing among the local population (not least because they are in a position to effectively engage in humanitarian relief) are already exerting and will in the future exert more of an influence on the political and social order to come than those largely absent from developments in Syria, such as the Europeans.

The European Response

The EU and its Member States have lacked any significant influence on the path that the conflict has

⁴ See, for example, the July 2012 declaration of Syrian opposition representatives in Cairo, online: www.facebook.com/notes/us-embassy-damascus/the-final-statement-for-the-syria-opposition-conference/10150925537506938 as well as the document prepared by the “The Day After” project, THE DAY AFTER GROUP. *The Day After Project. Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria*. Berlin 2012, www.usip.org/the-day-after-project.

taken. It is true that European diplomats have engaged in efforts first to convince the Syrian leadership to change course and engage in serious reform, and then, from the summer of 2011 onwards, to isolate and weaken the regime through the freezing of cooperation, diplomatic pressure and a series of sanctions. They have also engaged in the Friends of Syria group, established in February 2012 on a US and French initiative, to circumvent the blocked Security Council, to give diplomatic, technical and financial support to the opposition and so-called “non-lethal” aid to the rebels, and to prepare for reconstruction. In addition, some European States have engaged in training the rebels; others have started providing support to local structures in liberated areas. Europeans have also been the largest donor of official humanitarian assistance. Overall, however, European support has been too slow, too bureaucratic and too little to have more than a marginal impact on the ground and to reach those people most in need.

European policies have also been incoherent as EU Member States have not agreed on the question of military intervention and on arming the rebels – thus sending confused and confusing signals

In addition, European policies – as those of other third parties – have been inconsistent in that there has been a contradiction between a norm-based rhetoric encouraging the Syrian opposition in its ever more militant approach on the one hand (by stating that Assad had to go and by insinuating the establishment of buffer/protection/no-fly zones and the delivery of arms to the rebels, assuming the opposition organised itself according to the West’s vision), and the lack of concrete and effective European support for achieving that objective (against the backdrop of concerns over a regional conflagration and the spectre of a Jihadi safe haven emanating in Syria) on the other. European policies have also been incoherent as EU Member States have not agreed on the question of

military intervention and on arming the rebels – thus sending confused and confusing signals. On the punitive side, while the European ban on Syrian oil imports and sanctions on the oil-related industry had a strong impact on Syria’s state budget and foreign reserves thereby potentially influencing the regime’s stance – before the sanctions, some 85% of Syrian exports of fuels and related materials had been exported to the EU –, the arms embargo provided no such possibility as Europe does not figure among Syria’s major arms’ suppliers.

Conclusions

Europe and its allies and friends are confronted with a tragic dilemma in Syria: while there is no legal basis for arming the rebels and for military intervention – and that is very unlikely to change in the near future –; while it is questionable if, in the absence of a Security Council endorsement, direct or indirect military intervention would be justifiable under the responsibility to protect principle; and while arming the rebels bears the danger of massively increasing the bloodshed, the current approach of the international community de facto sanctions systematic war crimes and the breaking of humanitarian norms. It is also leading to the destruction of Syrian state institutions, as well as the fabric of Syrian society, and poses a serious threat to the stability of the whole region.

In these circumstances, it should be an absolute priority to work against further escalation of violence. This endeavour, however, will not be successful without taking into account the interests of relevant third parties, above all Iran and Russia. At the same time, Europeans should work much more effectively (i.e. less bureaucratically) to alleviate the humanitarian consequences of the conflict in Syria and its neighbouring states and to prepare the conditions for a transition to a stable and inclusive post-Assad order. Instead of pressing the Syrian National Coalition to be representative or producing statements of inclusion and diversity, Europeans should rather give concrete support for the local structures of self-government emerging in the areas not under regime control.