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# Looking Past Assad

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AFTER almost two years of civil war, there are no longer two options for Syria, political or military. Both sides now rely on force.

The opposition activists who try to maintain the originally peaceful character of their uprising are still there, but the armed rebels are calling the shots. Those in the regime who wanted to engage the opposition in some form of dialogue were marginalized early on, when Bashar al-Assad chose to respond to the protests with force.

Eventually there will have to be a political process. But the conditions under which such a process will come about now largely depend on military developments on the ground — plus, to some extent, on the signals and actions of international players.

But if both sides are now using military means for political ends, the ends differ. For the opposition, the military struggle is a means to support the initially civilian uprising. It considers the civilian population, even in regime-controlled territory, as its base, and it aims to depose the regime by gaining military and political ground.

Many government officials are aware that the regime cannot win militarily — Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa said so much in a recent interview. But territorial losses and political setbacks have not made the regime core around Bashar al-Assad and his brother Maher more inclined to negotiate. Power sharing is simply not a concept in the Baathist world view.

Nor does Assad seem any more willing than a year ago to negotiate a safe exit from Syria. His political strategy is to stay, but it is no longer about the whole of Syria. Assad believes he can concentrate on retaining a few strategic areas — Damascus; the coastal mountains, which are mainly inhabited by members of his Alawite minority; the port of Tartus; and the land connections between these areas — while inflicting scorched-earth punishments on rebel-held territory.

Militarily, Assad is now relying almost totally on loyalists from his Alawite sect who dominate the senior officer corps. The mainly Alawite elite battalions and the air force are still largely intact, and supported on the ground by hastily recruited militias — the so-called shabiha — which have been responsible for most of the atrocities against civilians.

With the rising brutality, the war has increasingly turned into a sectarian conflict. Propaganda depicting the Alawites as the enemy has been on the increase among the majority Sunnis, and some extremist groups have targeted Alawites.

As a result, many Alawites are now prepared to fight on Assad's side not out of conviction, but out of fear that if he falls they and their families will be slaughtered. Without assurances for their future, the elite battalions, air force, intelligence services and shabiha will fight on simply to secure the survival of their community, possibly in an Alawite enclave in the coastal mountains.

Certainly the regime is to blame for the destruction of Syria's social fabric, but this does not help to repair the damage. The more the opposition advances, the more it also becomes responsible for rescuing and rebuilding the state.

The opposition has taken an important step by forming the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. It now has a credible leadership with better contacts to the Local Coordination Committees and other civilian groups inside Syria, and it has made progress toward unifying the diverse forces of the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups under one military command.

Parallel with the military struggle, though, the opposition has to present itself as a credible alternative to the regime. Among other things, the Coalition needs to start providing services in liberated areas, particularly by distributing relief aid to residents and refugees.

At the same time, the Free Syrian Army needs to distance itself from extremist forces. Opposition leaders obviously appreciate the fighting power of these groups. Politically, however, the opposition cannot win with forces whose actions and propaganda exacerbate the fears of those Syrians who oppose the regime but fear that its fall will lead to more bloodshed and repression.

Thanks to their personal histories, leaders of the Coalition such as Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib, Riad Seif and Suhair al-Atassi are well placed to offer a vision of coexistence to those, particularly Alawites, who have so far stuck with the regime. The appointment of an Alawite as ambassador to Paris was a good signal, but it is not enough to reassure the community that it will have a place in a post-Assad Syria.

International actors do have an impact in Syria, even in the opposition. The main means of strengthening those who want to build a democratic and inclusive post-Assad Syria is to unify the flow of money and material support. The better the Coalition and the Free Syrian Army are able to pay their soldiers and dispense the necessary equipment, other militias and groups will submit to their leadership.

This would increase civilian control over the military component of the rebellion, weaken extremist groups and improve chances for a political transition.

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