

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: BETWEEN ESCALATION AND INTERVENTION

The chances of a negotiated solution for the civil war in Syria are smaller than ever. A further escalation of violence is to be expected, though not all scenarios suggest an extended war of attrition. For the time being, no Western military intervention is in the offing, due to the divisions in the UN and the high risks of such a mission. However, the Syrian conflict is increasingly developing into a regional proxy war, the outcome of which will have far-reaching consequences for the balance of power in the Middle East.



War-ravaged street in Aleppo, 3 October 2012.

Reuters/Sana

It took some time for the “Arab Awakening” to take hold in Syria, despite the fact that the political, economic, and demographic conditions there were quite similar to the situation in other Arab republics such as Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya. The initial absence of a Syrian protest movement was attributed to the popularity of President Bashar al-Asad, who had presented himself as a reformer in the previous decade, although the short-lived “Damascus Spring” proved to be a mere episode. Asad distinguished himself from other Arab potentates by his youth, but also by his consistent foreign policy directed against the US and Israel, while promoting Syria’s association with the so-called “resistance front” that comprises Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Hamas.

From March 2011 onwards, however, the signs of political unrest increased in Syria as well. An opposition movement against the authoritarian rule of Asad and the Ba’ath party soon spread from economically deprived rural regions to become a nationwide phenomenon. Syrian authorities reacted to the peaceful protests and demonstrations mainly with heightened repression and an increasing use of force, accompanied by half-hearted promises of reform. Subsequently, parts of the opposition also chose to engage in violent resistance.

In the summer of 2011, various local resistance groups and neighbourhood militias came together under the umbrella of the newly-formed “Free Syrian Army” (FSA). The FSA, founded by defectors from the regular

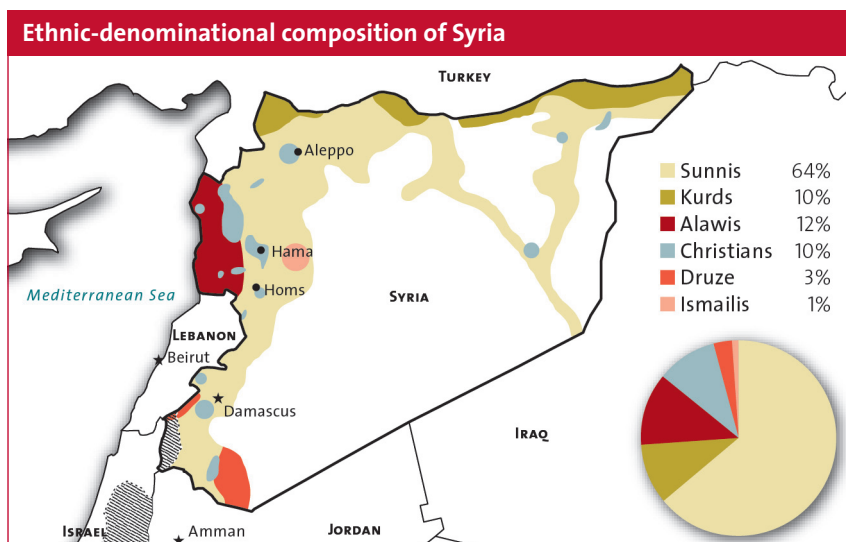
Syrian armed forces, helped coordinate the resistance and professionalised its military operations. While the conflict initially consisted of sporadic flare-ups of protests and resistance, it gradually developed into a struggle for the permanent control of Syria’s territory.

By now, the resistance movement has brought large parts of the countryside and most of the smaller cities in the northern and north-western parts of Syria under its control. Military clashes are becoming more frequent in other parts of the country as well, even in the capital of Damascus. The ongoing civil war has already had devastating effects: The UN estimates that as of October 2012, approximately 30,000 people have been killed. Nearly 400,000 Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, and another 1.2 million have been displaced within the country itself.

Among the Arab revolts and revolutions of the past two years, the conflict in Syria has become by far the bloodiest yet. A further escalation is only too likely, given the strategic considerations of the conflict parties, the diverging interests of the major international powers, and the growing exertion of influence on the part of regional actors.

Entrenched positions

The intensifying civil war is marked by the conviction of both sides that they can gain the upper hand, at least in the medium term. Asad and his followers may have failed to keep the opposition move-



ment from spreading to the whole country. Within Syria, cosmetic reforms, such as the professed introduction of a multi-party system in a constitutional referendum in February 2012, enjoy little credibility. But Asad still benefits from the loyalty of most of the regular armed forces. In this important respect, the situation in Syria differs fundamentally from the revolutionary events in other Arab republics. The armed forces of Egypt and Tunisia, for example, sided with the opposition and played a key role in bringing about political transitions.

As a result, Asad enjoys a substantial advantage in firepower. For the time being, he can use his air force and other heavy weapons to limit a further expansion of rebel-controlled territory. Only a greater involvement of other states could overcome this fundamental asymmetry, be it by direct military intervention or through increased arms supplies to the FSA. Given the reluctance of Western states, as well as Russian and Chinese support for Asad in the UN Security Council, such steps must appear unlikely to the Syrian leadership at this point.

From Asad’s perspective, there are also a number of political factors which suggest a continuation of the current strategy. Despite the spread of the fighting, a large part of the Syrian population remains undecided between the government and the rebels. To the urban population, the largely rural and conservative-Islamic nature of the opposition movement brings back memories of the civil war between 1979 and 1982, which rapidly took on the character of a sectarian conflict. As long as neither side seems poised to achieve a

decisive military victory, the urban population of Syria will likely orient itself based on its perception of what sort of political order would result from the opposition’s ascent to power. Quite unsurprisingly, the spread of Salafist-Islamist thinking and the acceptance of foreign combatants with jihadist goals within the ranks of the military opposition are exploited by the government’s propaganda to stoke fears among the population.

Furthermore, Asad is by no means the head of a “minority regime”, as is often argued. The religious group of the Alawites (which accounts for about 12 per cent of the population), to which Asad’s family belongs, is certainly over-represented in the country’s leadership and particularly in the officer corps. But this is mainly due to a system of rule which is based on patronage and clientelism. The large majority of Alawites has hardly benefited from Asad’s rule at all. Indeed, important parts of the Sunni-Arab majority, who make up about two-thirds of the population, have been integrated into the Asad system and constitute an important part of the economic elites in the country’s major cities. Asad will strive to keep at least parts of these groups on his side, although this is becoming increasingly difficult as the fighting spreads to the country’s economic centres and the sectarian antagonism becomes increasingly aggravated.

For the rebels, there is currently no real incentive for negotiations either. The deployment of the armed forces has indeed resulted in a series of military setbacks since the beginning of 2012, like the expulsion of the FSA and affiliated forces from revolutionary centres such as Hama

and Homs. But the use of heavy weapons and air bombardments against the rebels also entails an increasing number of civilian casualties, which may ultimately play into the insurgents’ hands. This is particularly true because the majority of these victims belong to the Sunni-Arab majority, since this group dominates the rebellion and the heaviest fighting is currently taking place in Sunni-dominated areas. Most of the soldiers in the regular army units are also Sunni Arabs, so that their deployment against the civilian population increases the likelihood of desertions as well. In the medium term, so the rebels calculate, the government’s current military superiority could therefore be cancelled out by its own military operations. In trying to capture the northern commercial capital of Aleppo, the rebels are targeting precisely the connection between the ruling Asad clique and the Sunni business elites.

Some rebels believe that by recasting the conflict as a sectarian antagonism between the Sunni majority and pro-regime minorities – which include not only Alawites, but also Christians, Ismailis, and Druze – they can accelerate the disintegration of the armed forces. The risk, however, is that a further aggravation of religious sectarianism and the atrocities which will most likely accompany it would jeopardise their support in the population. A further “Islamisation” of the insurgency would also weaken its support among Western states, although the Arab monarchies in the Gulf would continue to back the rebels.

Another barrier to negotiations are the deep internal divisions within the opposition itself, which render the search for common political ground very difficult. The National Coalition has recently replaced the Syrian National Council, formed in August 2011, as the internationally recognised representation of the opposition. But since it continues to be dominated by conservative Islamic forces, in particular by the Syrian section of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is struggling to get recognition from the secular and Arab-nationalist parts of the opposition and the representatives of the country’s ethnic and religious minorities. Especially the lack of minority representation renders a negotiated settlement more difficult. The lack of unity within the opposition is further aggravated by the involvement of external actors. Western states as well as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and

Libya extend support to the respective opposition groups that are closest to them ideologically, which makes it all the more difficult to achieve overarching coordination between the manifold groupings and political factions.

On the military level, too, the insurgents remain fragmented. The FSA, which until recently had been operating from Turkey, is only nominally in charge of the rebel's military strategy. At the local level, the coordination of largely autonomous volunteer units falls to ad-hoc military councils. It is hardly conceivable by now that all these groups will lay down their weapons before they have overthrown the Asad regime and achieved their goals.

Civil war scenarios

The preconditions for an externally mediated solution like the one achieved in Yemen, i.e., forming a unity government and relegating conflicts to the political sphere, are not currently met in Syria. Without external intervention, an intensification of the military confrontation can be expected. Many observers anticipate a war of attrition which lasts years without producing a clear winner, as was the case in the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the geographical and demographical circumstances in Syria also make another scenario conceivable.

The overwhelming firepower of the Syrian army and air force does indeed have a strong impact on the battlefield right now. But since the rebels control the countryside, the supply lines of government forces in the north, and especially in Aleppo, have almost completely been severed. The combat-effectiveness and reliability of the government troops fighting there is decreasing. If the government were ultimately forced to give up Aleppo, this would probably result in a loss of control over the entire north and east of Syria. A direct threat to the link between the coastal provinces and the capital, Damascus, would be the immediate result. Such a defeat would certainly have an effect on the deliberations of military leaders who are currently still loyal to the regime. In such a case, a rapid increase of desertions from the top echelons of the ruling class, currently still limited, could be expected.

A dissolution of the armed forces or their division along sectarian lines would, however, leave a loyal core of pro-regime, Alawi-dominated formations such as

the Republican Guards or the infamous *Shabbiha* militias. In this case, too, a bitter continuation of hostilities would be likely, given that the national minorities would ultimately be fighting for physical survival. Far less likely is the secession of a separate Alawite state comprising the group's traditional settlement areas along the coast, as is sometimes predicted in this context. Such a secession would neither be enforceable, nor could it be reconciled with the Syrian national identity that continues to guide the actions of most of the actors involved. Syrian civil society strives to maintain the idea of national unity and to pre-empt any future retaliation against the Alawites or other minorities. Protection of minorities should therefore be a core element in any post-conflict order. The question of whether and to what extent national reconciliation will be possible after the end of the military confrontation depends largely on the further course of the civil war and the extent of sectarian escalation.

Powerless UN, war-weary West

Foreign involvement has so far failed to bring about rapprochement between the conflict parties. To some extent, it has even aggravated the struggle. Attempts by international organisations to bring about a negotiated resolution have failed due to the inability of the conflict parties to compromise, but also due to the lack of unity within the international community. Mediation efforts and peace plans by the special representative of the UN and the Arab League, Kofi Annan, and his successor Lakhdar Brahimi have been unsuccessful. The current efforts under the aegis of the UN to introduce a political transition in Damascus are likely doomed to failure as well.

On the global stage, no convergence of positions is in the offing. The Western states as well as the Gulf Arabs are in favour of forming a transitional government (based on the Geneva Accord of the Syria action group of June 2012). They insist, however, that Asad should cede power, which is an unacceptable precondition for Moscow. Russia is a longstanding ally of the Asad government and maintains a navy base on the Syrian Mediterranean coast (which has now been evacuated). The veto powers of Russia and China prevent agreement in the UN Security Council on stricter measures. Additional UN sanctions against the

Syrian central government, let alone a mandate for an armed humanitarian intervention, can hardly be expected under these circumstances.

There is a discernible reluctance among Western states to intervene militarily. The convoluted situation on the ground, the still fragmented opposition, but also the remaining military capabilities of the Syrian armed forces, including their air defences, make it seem overly risky to resort to arms. This is compounded by a growing war-weariness in the Western world. It remains possible, of course, that a protracted conflict will lead to a creeping Western intervention, beginning with the establishment of no-fly-zones and protection zones, as was the case in the Bosnian conflict. In the US, however, without which no military intervention in Syria would be possible, domestic support for further adventures in the Middle East will remain very limited for the foreseeable future. Even if the US government will have a freer hand on Syria now that the presidential elections are past, it is unlikely to go beyond extended logistic support for the military resistance at this time. Washington's latest efforts to counteract the opposition's fragmentation and to support the formation of a more credible representation of the country's various groupings are going in exactly this direction.

Regional proxy war

The global discord over Syria is also reflected on the regional level. As on several other occasions in the modern history of the Middle East, Syria has become a central battleground in the struggle for dominance between various regional actors. The conflict in Syria thus increasingly resembles a proxy war. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the new Libya are urging for Asad to be ousted and openly support the insurgents with cash and arms. Iran, on the other hand, is holding fast to its alliance with Damascus and directly supports the Asad government. Only the new Egyptian leadership under President Mohammed Mursi is seriously engaged with a view to resolving the conflict at the regional level, but Saudi Arabia in particular opposes these efforts.

The Arab Gulf states appear to see no chance of resolving the conflict peacefully and pursue a one-sided strategy of a violent regime change in Syria. Qatar and

Only Egypt makes serious efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully.

especially Saudi Arabia also regard the conflict as a new battlefield in a pan-regional confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites, the latter with Iran at the helm. By supporting groups of Salafist Islamist fighters, the Gulf Arabs are stoking the sectarian escalation in Syria and are deliberately abetting the conflict's transformation into a kind of religious war. In doing so, however, they ignore that the alliance between Iran with its religion-based power structure and the laicist Ba'ath government in Syria is mainly due to considerations of power politics.

A direct military intervention of Arab states or the Arab League or Iran is unlikely, given their lack of military capabilities and the likely political fallout. The much-debated scenario of an Israeli intervention to secure Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons does not seem any more realistic. Such an operation would not only be difficult to carry out in military terms, but would also involve risks for Israel that may be much higher than any threat from a proliferation of chemical agents. By contrast, a military intervention by Turkey does not seem completely off the cards.

As far as the Middle Eastern regional order is concerned, Turkey is one of the main losers of the conflict in Syria. The country was long seen as the true winner of the "Arab Awakening", as it was regarded as a model for the formation of new social and political orders in the post-revolutionary Arab states. The civil war in Syria has now severely dented Turkey's elevated position. In the course of the conflict there, almost all of the gains achieved by Turkey's neighbourhood policy ("zero problems") in the past years have been lost. The previously close relations between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the leadership surrounding Asad have given way to bitter enmity. In view of the fighting, Turkey's plans for economic integration with its southern Arab neighbours – where the main focus had been on Syria – have been put on hold.

Turkey's security situation has rapidly deteriorated due to the conflict. Ankara fears the collapse of Syria's state structures and the emergence of a failed state along its southern border, with the attendant risk of a destabilisation of Lebanon and Iraq. Also, Asad has responded to Turkey's interference by adding fuel to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey – and it is in this context that the withdrawal of Syrian government forces from the Kurdish settlement areas on the

border should be understood. From Turkey's point of view, a drawn-out civil war in Syria thus constitutes a fundamental threat to its national security and regional standing.

Despite some border incidents and the downing of a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, Turkey has so far exercised restraint in the Syrian conflict. For Ankara, too, the outcomes of any military intervention are unforeseeable. Still, the deployment of strong combat forces to the south and the Turkish parliament's authorisation of military action show that Erdogan is seriously considering an intervention. Turkey's next steps will depend primarily on the course of the civil war. For Ankara, just as for any

other actor in the Syrian civil war, the outcome of the battle for Aleppo will be of major importance.

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