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Strategic Implications of the War in Syria

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Syria bleeds and its agony is expected to drag on. It started in March 2011, when the regime of Bashar al-Assad met a popular uprising with repressive force. After more than two years, there is no ceasefire and fierce confrontations have escalated into an all-out civil war, dividing the country into two dominions. Both sides have met with intransigence mediation efforts by the League of Arab States (LAS) and the United Nations (UN). Hence, the two organizations had to withdraw their respective cease-fire supervision missions abruptly. Former UN/LAS Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan also withdrew after about six months of strenuous efforts to put an end to violence. And today, there are press reports that his successor, UN/LAS Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, wants to follow suit after close to a year of similarly helpless efforts.

Russia and China used their veto powers twice to thwart moves in the UN Security Council to hold the Syrian regime accountable. The proposed measures included a call on President Assad to step down and would have imposed sanctions against his regime. This, of course, is not to mention Russian/Chinese outright opposition to any talk of authorization of use of force under any pretext. Thus, the UN has remained largely paralyzed, while the conflict has been unfolding. In an attempt to end the paralysis, the so-called Group of Friends of Syria was established in early 2012, basically to support the rebellion. The group, which counts more than seventy countries and international organizations as members, convened several meetings. However, violence on the ground continues to rise at a dreadful pace.

Lately, an understanding between the United States (US) President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart has opened the way for yet another attempt to contain the violence and reach a peaceful settlement through dialogue in an envisaged meeting, Geneva II, named after a similar meeting in Geneva one year earlier. But more recently, hopes on this understanding have dimmed, due to political complexities and further escalation of violence. In addition to the exodus of jihadists from neighboring and other countries joining the forces of the two sides, the recent heavy-handed involvement of Hezbollah, a proxy of Iran, on the side of Assad's forces has turned the war more brutal.

The war's human toll has reached alarming heights. The latest UN estimates refer to more than 90,000 killed, more than 1.5 million refugees in neighboring countries, around 4.25 million internally displaced persons and around 6.8 million – almost a third of the population – in need of urgent humanitarian aid. Still, calls from the UN and the international community to give immediate access of humanitarian aid to affected areas have fallen

on deaf ears. And the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has been urging the international community to be more forthcoming with contributions needed for its humanitarian assistance response plans. Furthermore, there has been a flurry of allegations that both regime forces and rebels used chemical weapons, and these allegations have been vindicated by laboratory tests concluded in France and the United Kingdom, indicating use of sarin gas. Thus, Obama's redline on chemical weapons has been crossed, without clear punitive reaction so far. A UN commission of inquiry also reported that it has mounting evidence that both regime forces and rebels committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. In the meantime, the Syrian regime refuses to allow the aforementioned commission of inquiry or another UN investigation team into purported use of chemical weapons into the country.

Strategic Implications

Certainly, the humanitarian, political and security aspects of the war in Syria are very fluid and require more space. But the focus of this article is on some notable strategic implications that transcend daily developments of the conflict. These implications are so important that they could act as strategic game-changers with serious repercussions on Syria, the Middle East and the world.

Firstly, the conflict in Syria halts the domino effect of the so-called Arab Spring. Unlike in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the popular uprising in Syria failed to topple the Assad regime after more than two years of bloodshed and chaos. Worse still, given the dynamics of the war today, it may persist for years to come without clear signals as to which party may prevail at the end. In this regard, the Syrian civil war may have an effect similar to that of the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s, where brutal clashes erupted between the Algerian army and Islamist groups, after the latter had won majority in parliamentary elections. Notably, these gruesome events left a deep scar in the Algerian society and stands behind estimations that Algeria has some kind of special immunity against the contagion of the Arab Spring. If we add this fear quotient to the problems that political Islam faces today in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Jordan, we end up with an outcome that does not favor further expansion of the Arab Spring or its corollary, the rise of political Islam. In parallel, counter-revolutionary forces across the Arab world stand to gain more public support, which may count against chances of further democratization in the region.

Secondly, although the conflict in Syria started as a popular uprising demanding democratic change, it is fundamentally a sectarian one, pitting the Sunni majority against the ruling Shiite-Alawite minority. Accordingly, Sunni countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia quickly rushed in with support to the Sunni military rebellion, while Shiite-Twelver Iran and its affiliate Hezbollah have sided with regime forces. Moreover, Sunni jihadists from across the Islamic world and Shiite fighters mostly hailing from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen have flocked to Syria. Sectarian polarization of this sort risks redrawing the political map of Syria and the region anew. On the Syrian level, there are already signs of potential division into two states, Alawite and Sunni. On the regional level, sectarian polarization in Syria further kindles Sunni-Shiite rifts in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In particular, a Sunni state in Syria may act as a bastion for Sunni forces in Iraq struggling against Shiite dominance that only came about after the second Iraq war. Closely linked to the issue of sectarianism are the misgivings and national aspirations of minorities such as the Kurds who vie for an independent state engulfing parts of Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Driven by chaos in Syria and Iraq, Syrian and other Kurds may find it opportune to press ahead with their historical demand.

In particular, the tumultuous engagement of Hezbollah in Syria could be assimilated to a political earthquake. Foremost, this is likely to prolong the war. It is obvious that Hezbollah's forces have significantly bolstered the military come-back of Assad's forces. On the other side, opposition forces have ultimately managed to better organize their ranks under the command of the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA). Consequently, the FSA is now slated to receive more arms from the US and European countries. Hence, military victory seems remote for either side. In addition, the involvement of Hezbollah's militia entrenches the sectarian nature of the war and opens the door for a regional sectarian war that could set countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen ablaze. In this regard, recent confrontations in Lebanon and escalation of violence in Iraq could only be harbingers of more chaos in the two countries and the region. Though somehow anticipated, Hezbollah's move also shocked Arab public opinion. Highly touted as the most successful military-cum-political organization in the Arab world, Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, have long been role models of resistance to Israel. Now that Hezbollah has chosen to side with the Syrian regime, it incurs a huge damage and hits hard the integrity of the wider front of resistance to Israeli occupation.

Thirdly, Syria is one of the main flashpoints of the conflict in the Middle East. The Syrian Golan Heights are under Israeli occupation since 1967. And Israel still occupies Lebanese Shebaa farms, a small strip on the borders between Lebanon and Syria. Though Israel is not party to the war in Syria, it launched three airstrikes against targets near the capital Damascus on 30 January, 3 March and 5 March 2013. Unconfirmed press reports indicated that the targets were weapons caches bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon. There were also several attacks against UN blue berets in the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights and the UN Interim Force in Southern Lebanon. As a result, Austria announced the withdrawal of its battalion in the UNDOF.

In view of the fact that the current war in Syria is a strategic boon for Israel, it is not in the interest of Israel to become party to it. However, more Israeli airstrikes may lead to retaliation from Syrian regime forces or Hezbollah's militia. In addition, a weakened Syrian regime may eventually decide to attack Israel or to give the green light for one of its allies to do so to raise public support. In a worst-case scenario, such incidents may put the Middle East on the verge of another war.

Fourthly, the Syrian civil war upends the balance of powers in the Middle East. Given the current pace of destruction and the potential for state collapse in Syria, a pivotal component of the Arab-Israeli balance of powers is subsiding, and Israel is certain to come out as the biggest winner. Added to destruction in Iraq, transitional problems in Egypt and other Arab Spring countries and the vulnerability of other Arab countries to winds of change, the wider Arab front plummets to a historic low level. Hence, in strategic terms, Israel will be under less pressure to commit to any new peace endeavors. The war in Syria also demonstrates the shifting balance of powers in the Arab world, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia increasingly dominating the center stage, at the expense of traditional powers such as Egypt and Syria. Although both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have their own problems at home, the grip on power in the two countries seems reasonably intact. Thus, most probably, these two countries will continue to wield significant strategic weight in the foreseeable future.

Iran stands to lose from the Syrian war, with its main proxy in the region, Hezbollah, engaged in the battlefield in a fatal damage control exercise. Hamas, another close ally of Iran, decided to keep neutral and its leader, Khaled Meshaal, pulled out of his Syrian headquarters, delivering a blow to the Syrian regime and Iran. In strategic terms, these developments weigh on the balance of powers between Israel and Iran and make an Israeli attack against the Iranian nuclear program more acceptable from the viewpoint of Arab public opinion. Turkey, in turn, bears a heavy humanitarian and economic toll because of the war. Although it reached a recent understanding with the incarcerated leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan, on ceasefire and resort to dialogue to settle its Kurdish cause, the sectarian war in Syria and in particular Kurdish armed groups in Northern Syria such as the Democratic Union Party continue to pose threats to Turkish national security. In the meantime, Turkey flexes its muscles to the extent possible and shows keen interest in maintaining its role as a rising regional power.

On the international level, the paralysis of the UN Security Council over Syria partially reflects the dynamics of the global balance of powers, particularly between a resurgent Russia and a fatigued US. The gap between the two sides also revives memories of defunct Cold War politics. Notably, Russia has a special strategic relationship with the Syrian regime; Russia's only remaining military facility overseas is in the Syrian Mediterranean city of Tartus and Russia continues to ship arms to Damascus in the absence of a UN embargo. Russia's position on the war in Syria also falls in line with its positions on related issues such as the US missile defense program and the Iranian nuclear program. Notably, China's position on Syria generally aligns with Russia's. Together, the two powers make a solid front against any moves targeting the Syrian regime, whether emanating from the West or the region. This tug of war somehow vindicates the plethora of theories on shifting world order. While the global posture of the US has shown some relative decline since the second Iraq war, and European countries are struggling with their economic and internal crises, the rise of emerging or reemerging powers, such as China, Russia, India and Brazil, proselytizes a multipolar new world order where Russia, for instance, can counterbalance the US.

Fifthly, Syria has become a hotbed of jihadists and extremists from across the globe. In particular, Jabhat al-Nusrah, one of the most effective armed rebel groups, announced allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri in April 2013. In response, the US State Department branded the leader of the group, Mohammad al-Golani, a terrorist in May 2013. Beyond extremists, there are Salafist armed groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Suqoor al-Sham, which are said to be fighting only to depose the Assad regime. On the other side, in addition to Hezbollah's militia, press reports refer to Iranian revolutionary guards and radical Shiites fighting alongside regime forces. Taking into consideration the recent UN report stating that both regime forces and rebels probably used chemical weapons, we end up with the gloomy outcome of having a breeding ground for jihadists and radical elements with access to weapons of mass destruction.

In the meantime, President Obama has announced that it is time to end the war on terror, with the rationale that the threat of al-Qaeda has been reduced to a manageable level under normal circumstances. It may be true that al-Qaeda, the mother organization, has been crushed down to a small hub with several affiliates scattered throughout the world. However, the recent Boston bombings prove that terrorism can still hit inside the US homeland. In addition, virulent franchises of al-Qaeda in Africa and the Middle East are fomenting chaos. Moreover, the risk of terrorism posed by the Syrian war resembles those posed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan some years ago, except that the US and the West are not engaged in the battlefield this time over, and as such are not targets. In contrast, Syria and other countries in the region could be targets. For instance, Syria has suffered many suicide attacks and car bombings since the inception of the crisis, the latest of which occurred just a few days ago in central Damascus. In addition, in May 2013, the Turkish city of Reyhanli, near the borders with Syria, was hit by two car bombings that killed 46 and injured around 100 persons.

Hence, from a global viewpoint, the threat of terrorism is present, is more widespread and may become more destructive.

Way Forward

After more than two years of bloodshed and chaos, the world has failed to address the conflict in Syria, and there is little reason to think that it will manage to do so soon. In the meantime, the Syrian civil war is becoming more brutal. And humanitarian aid falls short of providing basic help or preventing a potential human catastrophe. Furthermore, the war has some salient strategic implications that could develop into strategic game-changers with serious repercussions on Syria, its region and the world. In particular, the war halts the Arab Spring and could challenge the wave of democratization in the region; threatens of potential sectarian fragmentation in Syria and its neighbors; could lead to another war in the Middle East; shakes the balance of powers in the region and the world; and provides a hotbed of breeding extremists who may launch another wave of global terrorism. Hence, certainly, the world can not afford to wait on Syria.

Clearly, the developments of the conflict so far prove wrong further militarization in hope of decisive victory. In essence, further militarization only reduces the chances of reaching a political breakthrough. In addition, the insistence of the opposition and some other stakeholders that Bashar al-Assad must step down before negotiations could be launched has proven to be a nonstarter. In contrast, a more feasible approach would be political engagement with the Assad regime, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and other rebel groups, as well as with regional stakeholders, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran and Turkey. In this regard, priority should be given to reaching a cease-fire agreement with a credible supervision arrangement, immediate access of humanitarian aid and a holistic arms embargo on Syria. In the aftermath, a political process should be launched, with a view to addressing the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for security, justice and liberty.

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