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Middle East and North Africa Summary

Syria and Its Neighbours: Regional Dimensions of the Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of discussions at a closed-door expert workshop convened by Chatham House in partnership with the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) on 12 February 2014. The workshop brought together a number of analysts and policy-makers from Syria, its neighbours and the United Kingdom and Europe to discuss the regional dynamics of the conflict, focusing on the specific impact on each neighbouring country, the political, military and humanitarian situation in Syria, and the broader international and regional diplomatic context.

Some of the main findings of the meeting include the following:

- Syria's conflict has the potential to be particularly damaging across the region because it is exacerbating existing political and sectarian cleavages in neighbouring countries. Finding ways to mitigate damage to Syria's neighbours must be a priority for regional and international policy-makers.
- On current trajectory, the balance of military power in Syria is likely to continue tipping towards Bashar al-Assad's regime. Furthermore, with continued material support from Russia and Iran, the regime is in a relatively good financial position.
- The Geneva diplomatic process in its current form is unlikely to achieve an end to the conflict. However, presidential elections in May and the deadline for dismantling Syria's chemical weapons stocks in June may be opportunities for the international community to take a different diplomatic tack or send a strong signal to the regime.
- There has been little change in the position of any external actors engaged in Syria, and strong disagreements between the regime's external allies and supporters of the opposition continue to act as an obstacle to resolving the conflict. There is space for a regional coordination body that could mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Lebanon is hosting the greatest number of Syria's 2.5 million refugees. While it is not on a direct trajectory to civil war, its political system is under strain and certain 'wildcard' events could trigger a more serious conflict.
- Syrian refugees and the diaspora should be seen as a resource for Syria, and addressing refugees' needs for education and livelihoods is a priority given the trajectory of the conflict. But there are political and economic obstacles to addressing refugees' and host countries' long-term needs.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

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SESSION 1: A REGIONAL WAR?

During the first session of the workshop, participants discussed the impact of the Syrian conflict on neighbouring countries. It was noted that while there has been wide discussion of the socio-economic impacts of Syrian refugees, in particular in Lebanon and Jordan, many of the regional dynamics of the conflict remain poorly understood.

The session began with an overview of the regional geopolitical context. The Syrian conflict has come during an era of changing regional order, argued one participant, with the end of the 'pax americana' and the United States' decision not to intervene after the August 2012 chemical weapons attack has confirmed this retreat. A cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also emerged, but it was said that it would be a mistake to see the context as bipolar – rather it is multipolar, with other actors such as Turkey and Qatar having regional ambitions. Furthermore, several participants noted the increasing importance of sectarian identity regionally, which has become one of the primary forms of political mobilization.

In considering the 'overspill' of the Syrian conflict on neighbouring countries, several participants emphasized that Syria is not exporting violence, but rather the conflict is exacerbating existing political and sectarian cleavages in the region.

Lebanon

Participants discussed whether Lebanon is on the path to civil war. While it was agreed that most factions and groups in Lebanon do not want to see their conflicts played out inside the country itself, there are nevertheless huge strains being put on Lebanon politically, economically and socially. The absence of a government for the last 10 months [a new government was agreed on 15 February 2014 after this meeting was convened] and the parliament's length of tenure mean that the Lebanese state's legitimacy is being eroded during a sensitive time. The security services are bearing the brunt of the consequences of political failures, and there is a risk of strain over time.

One participant argued that there are a number of wildcards that could see Lebanon's political factions lose control of the security situation. For example, a car bomb that kills 200 Shi'a worshippers at Friday prayers could see Hezbollah unable to prevent its supporters from retaliating. It was noted that the Lebanese Shi'a increasingly fear an existential threat. Another potential flashpoint is Aarsal, the Sunni area of Lebanon by the Syrian border which is located in the mainly Shi'a and Hezbollah-supporting north of the Beqaa Valley. Aarsal is hosting a large number of Syrian refugees and rebel fighters also frequently cross the border into the town, which has led to attacks on it by the Syrian army. Until now Hezbollah have left the Lebanese security forces to handle this sensitive area, but this could change if a greater threat is perceived.

Jordan

Participants agreed that Jordan does not face similar threats to its political stability, despite the social and economic strain it is experiencing due to the refugees it is hosting. It was noted that Jordan had successfully used a 'soft security' approach to manage its street protests and the reform movement has been contained. The example of Syria has also contributed to softening the protest movement, causing fear of instability. Nevertheless there is political polarization around the issue of Syria, with the East Bank Jordanians who form the regime's base and dominate the government bureaucracy unwilling to be too heavily involved in Syria despite pressure from its Gulf allies.

Israel

A participant outlined Israel's position and its concerns regarding the conflict. The participant's view was that Israel is not taking sides in the conflict, but sees opportunities – including the possibility of weakening Iran and Hizbullah, and of enhancing quiet cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Its primary concerns are preventing strategic weapons falling into the hands of Hizbullah or Islamist extremists, and the threat of Islamist extremist groups proliferating along its border (in Gaza, Sinai and the Golan).

Turkey

Another participant described the four main areas in which Turkey is seeing the impact of the Syrian conflict. First, existing Sunni-Alawite tensions are being exacerbated by the presence of Syrian refugees and the May 2013 bombings in the border town of Reyhanli, which killed a number of Alawites. Second, Turkey has had some direct military involvement in Syria, retaliating to cross-border shelling and recently bombing an Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) unit. Turkey is also cracking down increasingly on Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Turkey, prompting fears of retaliation. Third, strains on infrastructure and the economy are being experienced due to the number of Syrian refugees. Finally, there is domestic political polarization resulting from the government's strong support for the opposition.

Iraq

On Iraq, participants highlighted that Iraq was moving from being seen as an 'exporter' of terrorism to a country suffering overspill from Syria. It was stated that Iraq is not able to protect its borders from terrorists coming in from Syria.

Several participants emphasized the importance of action being taken to limit the potentially catastrophic consequences that the Syrian conflict could have across the region. However it was also argued that the conflict is already a regional war, in particular due to Hizbullah's involvement.

SESSION 2: PARADIGMS AND APPROACHES

During the second session, participants discussed the trajectory of the conflict and international diplomatic efforts to end it.

Trajectory of the conflict

It was stated that there has been a recent trend towards consolidation of military groups, especially Islamic ones. This means the armed rebellion has become more narrowly concentrated on the rural constituency. On the military front, while some participants argued that the regime would consolidate its forces to keep certain areas, other participants saw that hardliners in the regime would not be willing to give up on any territory, pointing to the fact that Raqqa is under ISIS control but the regime continues to pay salaries.

Meanwhile, the Syrian lira has stabilized, both due to ongoing Russian and Iranian support and also to a greater supply of hard currency from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to the rebels. Lines of credit from Iran totalling \$7 billion were agreed in 2013, of which \$3 billion was specifically allocated for oil supplies. Additionally, natural gas production has in fact increased since 2009 (which reflects its use for electricity production, benefiting both regime and rebel-held areas). One participant stated that he had heard multiple reports from Syrians in Turkey that ISIS and the Nusra Front are selling oil to the regime. There has also been a softening of EU sanctions, with balance from accounts of the Commercial Bank of Syria located in the EU now permitted to be used for the purchase of certain humanitarian goods. Furthermore, because of the number of Syrians who have left and international humanitarian action in the country, the regime has fewer basic commodities to finance. Participants agreed that the regime's financial position is thus relatively good.

External actors

It was also agreed that there had been very little change in the positions of external actors involved in the conflict. It was stated that the Saudis have increased their military backing to the rebels since July 2013, however there continues to be an imbalance with Russia and Iran more heavily committed to backing the regime than the Friends of Syria are to supporting the rebels. Furthermore sanctions against Iran have not appeared to affect significantly the level of material support it can provide. It was argued that the Friends of Syria, except Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have mostly not delivered on their promises to the opposition, and that the Friends are not willing to invest any further political capital. Syria remains low on their list of priorities.

There was disagreement on the priorities for Iran and Russia in Syria. Some participants argued that both countries prioritise maintaining state institutions in Syria, and until now calculate that this is not possible without Assad. It was noted that in Russia's view the maintenance of a stable state system is essential to the world order. However, another participant argued that Iran was less concerned with institutions and more concerned with its relationship with the Alawites and with Hizbullah, while Russia prioritized domestic terrorism and the position of Christians in Syria.

One participant also emphasized that Iran has become more influential than Russia in Syria, while certain elements of the Iranian security services think that Assad cannot survive in the long term. Additionally, Hizbullah, which has the most foreign fighters in Syria (an estimate of 30,000 Iranian and Hizbullah fighters was cited), has also realised that it cannot restore the status quo ante.

Geneva

Participants discussed the prospects of the Geneva negotiations, and agreed this particular diplomatic mechanism was unlikely to achieve a solution to the conflict. One participant raised concerns that discussing local ceasefires would become a substitute for negotiating political transition, while another countered that such discussions were important as confidence-building

measures. One participant considered that the main risk to the negotiations was whether the opposition would agree to remain, and pointed out the disconnect between the National Coalition and the fighters on the ground and the risk that armed groups may become quickly frustrated with slow progress at the negotiations. Several participants criticized Iran's absence from the negotiating table viewing them as crucial to achieving any progress. However it was also said that Iran was engaged through back channels, and this was the most appropriate way of engaging them for now, while another participant argued that including Iran in the negotiations was tantamount to rewarding them for the harmful role they have played in Syria.

The view was expressed that should the Geneva process entirely fail it would be time consuming to establish another process, though it was also pointed out that diplomatic processes tend not to be declared 'dead' and parallel processes may be established alongside. No optimistic outcomes were projected for the negotiations, with one participant pointing out that the weakness of the Friends of Syria means that any agreement reached would be much more influenced by Russia and Iran and not result in an actual end to the conflict – for example an agreement to hold a 'national dialogue' in Syria.

Scenarios and future developments

It was highlighted that many conflict experts predict estimate that the Syrian war will last 8–15 years, though the intensity of fighting will not be sustained at current levels. The literature on civil wars also suggests that there are three main structural barriers to resolving the conflict: a fragmented opposition; too many veto players and spoilers; and disagreeing external actors. However, there could be a sudden shift which affects these structural barriers, either in a positive or negative direction.

The scheduled presidential elections in May were seen as an important potential turning point. One participant argued that this will be a moment of opportunity to strike a deal with Assad, for example for him to stay as president with reduced powers for two years until further elections can be held under international auspices. However others disagreed, pointing out that if the Geneva process was to be taken seriously there should be no elections, and that a 'mafia' regime such as Assad's would not agree to reduced powers.

June 2014, the deadline for destroying Syria's chemical weapons stock, will also be a potential turning point, and it was said that should Syria fail to meet the deadline it would be an opportunity for the international community to send a strong signal to the regime through a military strike. However participants agreed that there is no political appetite in the West for military intervention, and that Western governments prefer to focus on humanitarian relief. Nevertheless it was pointed out that humanitarian relief does not provide a solution for the conflict, and does not have a neutral impact. Another factor in the near future which will have an impact on the conflict is the outcome of the Iranian nuclear negotiations.

It was pointed out that there would likely be a de facto division of Syria in the medium term, which would need to be taken into account in any transitional governance arrangement. It was said that while it was unlikely that there would be any formal changes to national boundaries, these boundaries would become more porous and new informal boundaries would be established within states. Participants agreed that the regime is likely to continue winning the ground war. With the regime remaining the actor most in control, and Western governments increasingly concerned by the proliferation of Islamist extremist groups and the possibility of terrorist attacks emanating from Syria, the view was expressed that Western governments would move back towards dealing with Assad as the legitimate representative of Syria. It was said that at least six Western governments including the United States had recently had high level meetings with Syrian intelligence.

SESSION 3: REFUGEES, EXILES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The third session focused on the situation of Syria's 2.5 million refugees and the potential of its large diaspora. Participants also discussed prospects for reconstruction and the role that local civil society is playing in Syria.

Refugees

Participants agreed that the biggest challenges for refugees will be the need to work, and access to education. It was also highlighted that Syria's refugees have long-term geopolitical implications, especially in light of the crisis of UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA) and the reduced opportunities for seeking asylum in the West. One participant asked whether these questions should be addressed in the Geneva negotiations.

Syrian refugees are having the greatest impact on Lebanon, where they now constitute around a quarter of the country's population. Several particularly troubling aspects were pointed out, such as the possibility that poor Syrians who are struggling to make a living could be easily recruited into Lebanon's militias as 'guns for hire'. It was highlighted that on a recent trip to Lebanon, a participant had seen the tensions caused by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' targeting of aid which means many who continue to be in need have been cut off from support. However, it was also noted that there is an effective network of NGOs and local municipalities which is working to coordinate aid to refugees and host communities.

In Turkey and Jordan, education also remains a particular issue, with one participant stating that only 10 per cent of the two-thirds of Syrian refugee children who are living in urban areas (outside camps) in Turkey are being educated. It was also pointed out that in Jordan, though education was available to all refugees, not all families would agree to enrol their children. Another particular problem which was highlighted in Turkey was the number of children born to refugees are unregistered (estimated at 6,000) and risk being stateless in future. One participant noted that on a recent trip to Turkey, there was less support for Islamists than he expected among the refugees.

Diaspora and reconstruction

Participants discussed the situation of the wider diaspora, which is estimated to constitute around 18 million Syrians. It was said that they are not as politically divided as is generally perceived, and that diaspora Syrians tend to be less sectarian than those inside the country. Although there is a constituency which supports the Muslim Brotherhood, most diaspora Syrians would prefer to be engaged in humanitarian activities. Meanwhile, it was noted that there continues to be much criticism by Syrians on the ground of the exiled opposition which makes up the National Coalition; however it was also highlighted that it is not surprising that the opposition is divided given the circumstances in which it arose.

Participants agreed that refugees and the diaspora should be seen as potential resources, and that it was important to work on mapping them and their initiatives, unifying them and combating the influence of Islamist extremists. It was noted that during the Lebanese civil war, a UNDP database of Lebanese professionals in the diaspora was established, which was effective for mobilizing their skills in support of various initiatives. A recent textile fair in Beirut for Syrian companies which was reported to have done \$70 million in business was also pointed to, and it will be important to support such businesses to move back into Syria after the war. Diaspora Syrians had already been investing in Syria since the 1980s, and a fund could be set up to channel investment after the conflict ends.

Participants discussed a number of other issues around reconstruction. It was pointed out that the costs will be huge, currently estimated at around \$100 billion, with one third of the housing stock destroyed and 20–25 per cent of classrooms. There will likely be many difficulties for refugees returning, with people not wanting to or able to return to mixed communities. It was noted that it took two million Bosnians 12 years to return to Bosnia. On reconstruction there are also

uncertainties around who will affect the nature of reconstruction and the impact of sponsors on the shaping of institutions; on ideological questions (will all groups share the same idea of the free market?); and on whether reconstruction money will be channelled through the Assad regime, if he continues to stay in power.

Civil society and humanitarian aid

Several participants highlighted the important role that local civil society groups are playing on the ground in distributing humanitarian aid and negotiating local ceasefires. There is still very little national civil society because of the current context and the regime's actions to keep the country divided, but one participant expressed the view that such groups could evolve and eventually supplant political parties.

Several participants emphasized the need to channel more support to these groups, with one participant pointing out that hesitation on the part of Western donors to supporting local councils has meant Islamist groups have benefited much more from external support from religious backers. However it was also noted that Western funding can harm groups' local legitimacy. Donors also continue to face problems in supporting local groups, as many feel it is difficult to minimize associated risks and track accountability, and there are obstacles to cross-border aid due to the security situation. However other donors are willing to take more risks, and one initiative mentioned involved distribution of small grants to groups who can demonstrate consultation with their beneficiaries.

It was emphasized that there were also two different types of aid to local civil society groups: humanitarian aid, and political aid designed to support local governance structures and support future transition. There are problems with both types of aid. For example, it was said that donors could not avoid supporting armed groups as all groups are armed or connected to armed groups. Thus it was argued that donors should decide who to support based on the groups' ideology. It was also emphasized that the greatest need was in opposition areas. Several concerns were raised about the politicization of humanitarian aid, with the same group of donors meeting one day regarding their political strategies and the next regarding humanitarian coordination.

SESSION 4: A COORDINATED RESPONSE

The final session addressed problems in international diplomatic and humanitarian coordination, and where the international community's priorities should lie.

Participants discussed the need for a clear structure and mechanism for coordination between regional actors, and the role that a regional body could play in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The deposed Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi established the 'quartet' initiative, but since the end of his presidency there has been no alternative mechanism.

One participant proposed that there should be enough shared interests between the various external actors in Syria to find some common ground. It was argued that the West's interests are to prevent state collapse, jihadist takeover and Syria's transformation into a terrorist incubator, and to achieve regime change. The participant viewed Russia and Iran's key interests as broadly the same, except that they would only accept regime change through elections, while the Gulf countries' only priority is to achieve regime change.

However, other participants saw the situation as more complex, noting that different states have influence in different parts of Syria, while there is also rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It was also said that the lack of a coordinated opposition undermines international coordination.

Priorities

It was agreed that priorities for the international community in the humanitarian response should include more humanitarian aid inside Syria, assisting communities hosting Syrian refugees and focusing in particular on vocational training and livelihoods for refugee youth. Participants also discussed the move from a humanitarian response to the refugee crisis to a development response, with several participants emphasizing the need to invest in infrastructure in host countries. However it was also raised that there are a number of obstacles to improving the long-term response to the refugee crisis. For example, it was said that there are political obstacles to allowing refugees to work or even receive vocational training, due to pressure from domestic publics in the host countries. Meanwhile, humanitarian funding will plateau and decrease as competing humanitarian crises arise. Investing in infrastructure is also difficult where governments are perceived as too corrupt to manage funds effectively, such as in Lebanon.

ABOUT SYRIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

From 2014, the Syria and Its Neighbours project will be looking at the regional effects of the deepening crisis in Syria, convening regional and international workshops and publishing a series of policy papers. This project aims to gather, network and disseminate research-driven analysis on how the civil war is affecting Syria's neighbours through direct engagement with governments, civil society groups and other stakeholders in the neighbouring states. The MENA Programme's experts also regularly provide comment and analysis on Syria assessing the Syrian conflict's economic, political and humanitarian impact across the region.

www.chathamhouse.org/syria

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