

NOREF Expert Analysis

Syria: towards the endgame

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Executive summary

Syria's civil war, locked over the past year into a dynamic stalemate whereby Bashar al-Assad's minority regime cannot regain control of the country, but the Sunni-majority-dominated rebels seem not to have the military wherewithal to dislodge it, has started to accelerate as 2012 draws to an end. Attempts by Damascus to spread the conflict into neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan) and set fire to the Levant have

caused justifiable alarm, but won no strategic advantage for the regime; if anything, they have made external intervention more likely. While intervention at any level would be risky, the major risk now in not providing selected rebel units with meaningful support is that this would enhance the influence of jihadi extremists in Syria far beyond what its plural and multi-confessional society would normally tolerate.

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Nearly 21 months into the Syrian conflict the position of the Assads continues to erode, even inside their Alawite minority community. Having regularly promised a “security solution” to what began as a civic uprising before morphing into an insurgency to counter brutal and blanket repression, the regime, although much better armed than its rebel opponents, is engaged in what now looks like a rearguard action, punctuated by punitive air strikes.

The sequence of failed offensives that began in April 2011 revealed that the Assads remain dependent on two reliable ground units – the 4th Armoured Division and the Republican Guard – made up overwhelmingly of Alawites, the heterodox Shia minority that forms the backbone of the Assads’ security state, and commanded by Bashar’s volatile younger brother, Maher. The regime lost its strategic brain, their brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, in the devastating bomb attack on the National Security Council in Damascus on July 18th. Auxiliary forces such as the Shabbiha militia, deployed against civilians after the shelling of rebel districts and in the ethnosectarian cleansing of parts of the Alawite heartland in the north-west, have served to alienate members of the Sunni middle classes, who have remained mostly passive throughout the first year of the uprising.

Reliance on the Shabbiha is rebounding in other ways. The October shoot-out between rival Alawite clans in Qardaha, ancestral home of the Assads, was triggered because Mohammed al-Assad, the president’s cousin and local militia leader known as *sheikh al-jabal* or sheikh of the mountains, was found to be supplying arms to the rebels.¹ Local clan leaders can now be heard asking why the fate of the Alawite community is being tied to the fortunes of two families – the Assads and the Makhloufs (Rami Makhlof, another cousin, is the Assad-Makhlof clan’s tycoon and financier).

A string of rebel tactical successes, with the seizure of several bases and arsenals that have now provided the insurgents with some tanks, artillery and surface-to-air missiles, have given

new momentum to the Free Syrian Army, which is still a franchise, but an increasingly co-ordinated one through the provincial military councils.

The regime is trying to secure a perimeter around Damascus and avoid the fall of Aleppo, where on November 18th the rebels overran the base of the army’s 46th regiment at Atareb after a seven-week siege. But securing Damascus from its insurgent suburbs means withdrawing troops from almost everywhere else – and greater reliance on the air force – while the regime is also starting to lose bases around the capital. Nor is air power, extraordinarily destructive and indiscriminate as it has been, a solution for the regime, given the preponderance of pilots from the Sunni majority and as it begins to lose its monopoly of the skies. Air strikes will not regain control of the swathes of the country the regime is losing to the rebels.

Militarily the Assads are too powerful to defeat outright. But increasingly they are coming to resemble a militia rather than the guardians of a state – by far the best-armed militia, but with their legitimacy and coerced social compact in tatters. Their regime is eroding, a largely invisible process until pillars start to crumble and fall. This is the phase that Syria appears now to be entering.

There has, it is true, been no mass defection of entire units. What there has been is a steady stream of defections, and many loyalist units exist only on paper, since their troops have either deserted or are confined to barracks under guard. In this respect the loyalist camp resembles a castle under siege, its inhabitants fearful not just of sectarian carnage should the Sunni-led rebellion triumph, but of retribution from the regime – against them *and* their families – if they are seen to break ranks. We do not know, obviously, if Syria’s rebels have penetrated the loyalist camp. But we should perhaps recall that Libya’s rebels managed to hold more than 70 senior would-be defectors in place inside the residual Qaddafi regime – which we learnt only after the fall of Tripoli 15 months ago, which these “turned” officials instrumentally facilitated.

The Assad equation does not look much better economically or diplomatically.

¹ A well-placed source in Latakia gave a credible account of Mohammed al-Assad continuing to conduct this arms business from hospital, where he had three bullets extracted from his leg and thigh in November.

The regime is palpably running out of money. International sanctions mean it is paying extortionate amounts for fuel (in spite of help from Iraq). Importing bank notes from Russia is a fast track to hyperinflation, and the Syrian currency has started to collapse. As the economy and public finances disintegrate, it has lost the power to coerce a private sector that increasingly sees the Assad-Makhlouf clan as toxic.

Diplomatically, Syria's Russian ally looks to be wobbling: in December, after President Vladimir Putin met Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister and patron of Syria's opposition, Turkish officials said Moscow was now open to an alternative to the Assads. Putin said on his visit to Turkey this month that his country was "not enrolled as defenders of the current government in Syria".

Moreover, the vaunted "axis of resistance" made up of Iran, Syria and Hizbullah (Hamas abandoned Damascus early this year and cast its lot with the Muslim Brotherhood, spearhead of Syria's Sunni opposition) looks less than rock solid.

According to Hamas leadership sources (December), while Tehran and Hizbullah have been doing what they can to bolster the regime, both the Iranians and Hassan Nasrallah, the Hizbullah leader, have tried to get President Assad to change course by reforming and conciliating. They have failed and will soon need to look to their own interests: not for nothing is Iran consolidating its position in Iraq and Lebanon as a hedge against the eventual fall of the Assads.

Attempts by Damascus to suck neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey into the Syrian vortex have not prospered – so far. All sides in Lebanon know what the game is and for the moment appear determined to keep the lid on the country's own far-from-resolved sectarian tensions. Sunni, Druze and Christian factions, now in opposition, are quietly trying to engage with Hizbullah to pull it away from Syria and offer it a "soft landing" if – or, rather, when – the Assad regime falls. Pressure on Turkey, whether shelling across the border or exercised through allied Kurdish militia, has made Ankara more "forward leaning" militarily. After Syria shot down a Turkish jet in June, Ankara changed its

rules of engagement to allow Turkey's armed forces to confront any hostile force approaching its borders. In December 2012 NATO agreed to station Patriot surface-to-air missile batteries on the border. Both measures could be expanded to create a buffer zone on the border and as part of a no-fly zone – if the U.S. and European powers decided this would hasten the fall of the regime.

On December 12th the Friends of Syria – a loose forum of more than 80 nations arrayed against the Assads – holds its fourth ministerial meeting in Marrakesh. Already, France, Britain, Turkey and the Gulf Co-operation Council have recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the new umbrella group for the Syrian opposition brought about in good part because Washington insisted on a more cohesive force linking the rebellion inside Syria with émigré political forces.

The National Coalition is now expected to come up with a transitional government team that warrants more widespread recognition as the legitimate leadership of Syria. At the same time Britain and France have pushed through a change in the European Union's Syrian policy, which among other things could enable a review early next year of whether to supply arms to the rebels, now prohibited by a blanket embargo covering both sides.

The broader questions to be faced now are essentially three: whether the National Council can exert the authority to convince Syria's minorities that they have a secure future; whether the Friends of Syria can develop a compact steering group – bringing in Russia – to provide aid and external oversight of the Syrian transition; and whether to arm the rebels and secure buffers on Syria's borders for millions of displaced refugees, if necessary through no-fly zones.

The National Council has a more plural make-up than its predecessor, the Syrian National Council (SNC) (which is still a large component of the new body). Although now led by a Christian, one of the main failings of the SNC was its inability to provide credible reassurances to Syria's minorities – not just the Alawites, but Christians, Druze, Kurds and others – that they are seen as an integral part of a future Syria in which their rights would

be guaranteed. This was not an easy task once Bashar al-Assad unsheathed the sectarian knife in a deliberate attempt to rally minorities fearful of reprisals to his camp. But it is now more essential than ever, both to hasten the downfall of the regime and to preserve the complex mosaic of Syrian society.

The evolving structure of the new National Council, which foresees a unified military command and a judicial body, should help in this regard. Although rebel units have been guilty of atrocities such as extra-judicial executions of (mainly Alawite) opponents, there is something to work with here. The fact that there have been no large-scale reprisals in the face of intense sectarian provocation by the regime suggests that the military provincial councils and local co-ordinating committees that launched the initially civic uprising have been able to impose some discipline, conscious of the trap being set for the opposition by the regime.

Whether or not to arm the rebels is, of course, a conundrum. What if, as in Afghanistan and, more recently, Libya, game-changing weapons end up in the hands of jihadi extremists? There are only partial answers to this question.

Firstly, Western intelligence agencies have now been on the ground in Syria long enough to be able to identify the sorts of rebel units, in terms of ability and ideological complexion, that should receive arms, particularly anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons to counter loyalist armour and air power. Secondly, while the U.S. and its allies hold back, Qatar and the Saudis are pushing ahead, with the former arming and enhancing the power of the three “poles” of the Muslim Brotherhood in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus, and the latter funnelling resources to Salafist forces such as the Jabhat al-Nusra, which is winning prestige and recruits because of its prowess on the battlefield. The relevant analogy for Syria is therefore Bosnia, not Afghanistan.

When NATO and the West eventually stopped dithering and arrived in Bosnia, they found it full of itinerant jihadis, many of them “Arab Afghan” veterans of the U.S.-Saudi-Pakistan-backed jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The consequences were limited because of the resilience of Bosniak society to what it regarded disdainfully as “Wahhabis” and because the jihadis then moved on to the next front in Chechnya.

This will not happen in Syria, which pan-Islamic warriors of the Bin Ladenist persuasion regard as prime real estate in the heart of the Levant, which is all the more valuable after – through sectarianism and unbridled savagery – they squandered a golden opportunity to consolidate an emirate in the heart of Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of 2003.

Much of what the West hoped to avoid by holding back from Syria is already happening and there was never the remotest chance of a negotiated solution with the Assads, however much a procession of Western leaders episodically divined in Bashar a man they could do business with. This was always a delusion that misunderstood the sectarian make-up, power structure and nature of the Syrian security state.

The question now – after more than 40,000 deaths; the internal displacement of millions of Syrians and their scattering into precarious exile; and the cataclysmic destruction of cities, villages and infrastructure – is how to reverse radicalisation and prevent the further shattering of Syria’s fragile mosaic. Do we want to wait until the jihadis hold the whip hand and great swathes of Syria are lost in a sea of their black flags?