

NOREF Policy Brief

The regional implications of the conflict in Syria

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Executive summary

The conflict in Syria poses severe problems to regional states as to whether or not they should intervene and to what end intervention could be directed. Thus Iran, backed by Iraq and Hizbullah in Lebanon, seeks to support Damascus as part of its position in the Middle East. In response, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states seek an end to the Assad regime with threats of arming the insurgents. Turkey, despite its earlier enthusiasm for intervention, now fears the instability that could result, as does Jordan, despite the latter's longstanding suspicions of its radical neighbour, while Israel dreads regional change because of the consequent

uncertainty and unpredictability of a new regime in Syria. North Africa is too distant to engage. External powers such as Russia and China are determined to avoid a repetition of the Libyan experience, which they see as an abuse of the United Nations. At the same time, they hope to moderate the behaviour of the Assad regime and even to mediate with its domestic opponents. Other major states, despite their detestation of the Assad regime, seem to be impotent when confronted by the gap between their aspirations and their options in practice. The upshot – in the short term at least – seems to be that the Assad regime will survive.

There is no doubt that the failure of the United Nations (UN) Security Council on February 4th 2012 to pass a resolution condemning the Assad regime as a result of Russian and Chinese vetoes seems to have removed all restraints on the regime's use of repression in the worsening civil conflict in Syria. Despite the subsequent condemnations of its behaviour by the UN General Assembly and the Arab League, and irrespective of the withdrawal of the ambassadors of the Gulf Co-operation Council states together with those of major Western countries and other Arab states, the regime in Damascus has intensified its violence against the Syrian population. Even subsequent Russian and Chinese acquiescence in April in the creation of a UN observer force has done little to restrain the regime's determination to crush its increasingly armed opposition. What, then, is this failure likely to mean for those states surrounding Syria that are directly affected by its domestic repression?

Shia allies

Those most directly affected by the Syrian regime's actions are, perhaps, its allies – Iran, Hizbullah in Lebanon and, surprisingly, Iraq. At one level, these alliances are sectarian in nature since they bring together Shias in Iran and Hizbullah, as well as the Shia-dominated Maliki government in Iraq, with the admittedly heterodox but Shia Alawite regime in Damascus. In reality, however, the sinews of the alliances reflect shared political and diplomatic objectives, especially for Iran. Syria and Iran were first brought together by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) through their shared detestation of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq – Iran because it faced direct military threat and Syria because of its ideological opposition to Iraq's Baathist project.

Hizbullah, as an Iranian client and a Syrian dependent, was an automatic partner, even though it has lost much popular support in Lebanon and the wider Sunni Middle East because of its continued support for Syria over the past year. As a result, it has distanced itself a little from the regime in Damascus, but still insists that there should be no external interference in Syria's domestic crisis. Incidentally, this in turn has recently sparked pro- and anti-Syrian clashes

along the two countries' common border. The Lebanese government, however, is desperate to keep out of the conflict inside Syria itself for, should the conflict spill over into Lebanon, the threat of renewed civil war there would loom large.

Iraqi diplomatic support reflects the influence of Iran inside Iraq, particularly over the Shia majority, as well as ties between the Iraqi premier and Syria, where he spent much of his exile as ad-Dawa's representative in the 1980s and 1990s. It does not yet appear to have included material support to the Assad regime as well – indeed, Washington has warned Baghdad not to contemplate such engagement. One adverse consequence of this is that elements among the Iraqi Sunni population, some of them extremist and linked to al-Qaeda, which has openly endorsed the opposition to the Assad regime, now actively support the Syrian opposition.

The real key, of course, is the Syrian-Iranian alliance – the core of King Abdullah of Jordan's "Shia arc of extremism". The importance of this alliance between the two states is crucial to Iran's project of challenging moderate Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Gulf. Iran has provided at least \$1 billion in aid to Syria to counter the effect of Western sanctions and is said to have promised \$5 billion in total; it has provided weaponry and ammunition, and is even said to have provided specialised personnel too. Teheran, in short, seems determined to prevent the collapse of the Baathist regime in Syria.

In reality, its concerns and objectives are twofold. Firstly, it wants to preserve Syria as an ally at all costs in its wider geostrategic struggle in the Middle East. It is also desperate to prevent regime change in Syria becoming a spur to its own disaffected population through the "Green Movement" or to the sinister ambitions for "regime change" in Iran that it suspects are housed in Tel Aviv, Washington and Brussels. This implies that it is not the Assad regime as such that it seeks to support: any regime that guarantees Iranian interests would be acceptable. Iran, in short, even though it might prefer the Assad regime to survive, could well support current Chinese moves to promote dialogue between the regime and the opposition, alongside Russian ambitions for a similar outcome.

Opponents near and far

Moderate Arab states are increasingly outraged by Syria's confrontational and repressive behaviour. Despite the new activism of the Arab League, its observer mission proved to be a damp squib, making no difference to the Assad regime's aggressive policies against its increasingly disaffected population. The Gulf states, perhaps fearing sympathetic reactions among their own populations if they do not express distaste for the Assad regime, have fallen into line behind Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly, Saudi Arabia itself has turned out to be extremely hostile to the Syrian regime's behaviour. Along with Qatar and the U.S., it has suggested arming the Syrian opposition, although, thankfully, this proposal does not yet seem to have extended much beyond rhetoric.

The Gulf states and the Levant

In part, the attitude of the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, is because of a natural sympathy for the plight of the Sunni majority in Syria, but it also seems to reflect the Saudi monarch's personal fury at Syrian behaviour. This is surprising, given his close personal ties with Syria, where he spent several years after his estrangement from King Feisal in the 1960s. However, Saudi Arabia will almost certainly have to consider material support for the beleaguered Sunni majority of the Syrian population as repression continues – even support for armed opposition. The great danger for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states – and this goes for other, unreconstructed states in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring – is that events in Syria become spurs for their own disaffected populations as well. After all, few of them could escape the criticism of repressive illegitimacy that they now level against the Assad regime!

This is a danger that certainly faces Iraq and will restrain the Maliki government from too overt support for Iranian objectives. In the reverse sense it will also restrain Jordan, mainly because of Amman's fears of spillover effects, particularly of mass emigration as the violence in Syria worsens and the country moves towards a bloody and protracted civil war. Jordan has extremely uncomfortable memories of the Iraqi exodus in the 1990s as sanctions in Iraq began to bite, with the

result that unrest and criminality in the Jordanian capital increased as Iraqis challenged Jordanians and Palestinians for available resources. Yet, despite such caution, Jordan will not be able to stand completely aside if Syria's Sunni majority comes under increasing threat.

The one state that is directly affected by the events in Syria, but which still has taken no public position, is Israel. This is almost certainly because Israeli leaders would much prefer the Assad regime to continue: it is a known quantity and any new regime could severely destabilise the effective balance of power between the two uneasy neighbours. As a result, Israel has confined itself to protecting its borders, as it demonstrated in July 2011 – a policy that it is likely to maintain throughout the remainder of this year.

North Africa and Turkey

Egypt and, behind it, North Africa are not likely to play much of a role, although Libyan revolutionaries have threatened to flood into Syria to support the armed opposition there. Egypt is still obsessed with its own revolution, where the exact nature of the army's future role will take until the end of this year to be fully resolved. The Maghreb itself is too remote to be involved beyond moral and diplomatic condemnation – which has been its default position for decades over events in the Middle East.

Algeria is ambivalent – the situation in Syria is too close to its own domestic circumstances for it to wish to become explicitly critical. Tunisia and Libya will maintain their formal condemnations of Syria, but are still too engaged in the consequences of their own revolutions last year. Morocco condemned the Assad regime early on and is taking an active part in diplomatic moves against it, as its presentation of the failed Security Council resolution demonstrated. However, it would not wish to become involved in material support unless as part of an Arab League intervention force after the Assad regime collapses.

The remaining state that is directly affected by events in Syria is, of course, Turkey. A former cautious ally of the Assad regime, the Erdogan government has become increasingly outspoken in condemning the state-directed violence in Syria.

However, it is notable that, despite early hints that it might create a “safe haven” along the two countries’ common border in which the Free Syrian Army might regroup and train, it has deliberately avoided doing anything so provocative. It has provided a haven for the fragmented political opposition and has probably turned a blind eye to more militant activities as well. However, it is not prepared to overtly espouse armed resistance.

The question is why Turkey – not only a leading Sunni state, but increasingly seen as the paradigm for political change in the Arab world – should be so reluctant to become actively involved in Syria. It certainly does not lack the military power to protect itself from spillovers of the crisis inside Syria, nor does it lack the moral authority to take a more active role.

However, given Foreign Minister Davutoglu’s policy of avoiding problems with neighbours, its reticence is, perhaps, not surprising. This is not because it does not sympathise with its Sunni co-religionists in Syria, although it must pay attention to its own Alawite community and to its much more important Alevi community as well. It reflects, perhaps, the recent threats of renewed Syrian support for the Kurdish PKK should Turkey become involved, as well as a preference in Ankara for a negotiated outcome. After all, Turkey will have to live with the consequences in Syria, whatever they may be, and it is by no means clear that, in the short term, the Assad regime will collapse.

West and East

And this is a lesson that Western policymakers should take on board. The comforting assumption in European capitals and Washington that moral disapproval and economic sanctions can take care of the Syrian problem is seriously misplaced. Despite the fact that it has lost virtually all its credibility, the Assad regime still retains the support of minority communities in Syria and even, although increasingly reluctantly, of the country’s economic elite. It also has active external support from Iran, together with diplomatic support from Russia and China, both of which are determined to avoid a replay of the Libyan scenario last year.

For the purposes of domestic suppression, the Assad regime’s military capacity is formidable and it is not hindered by issues of moral constraint from using it. At the same time, it has been prepared to cement Russian and Chinese support by professing its willingness to engage in dialogue and has even offered a referendum on a new constitution allowing for a multiparty political system, albeit under Alawite control. Even though it is extremely difficult to see how a meaningful referendum could be undertaken in the midst of an incipient civil war, a majority of the opposition, despite its intense distaste for the Assad regime, which it considers has lost all legitimacy, did indicate that, in principle, it might consider such an outcome and, as a result, the regime did conduct some kind of public consultation in which 89% of the population voiced their approval of the new constitution at the end of February 2012.

Russia and China, of course, have material concerns too – Russia in particular is about to start operations at its new naval base in Tartous and has ongoing arms contracts with the Syrian regime. It also regards Syria as part of its new “near abroad” and the new Putin presidency in Moscow would not like to see a Western ascendancy emerge in the eastern Mediterranean alongside the existing pro-American outpost of Israel. China has, perhaps, less focused concerns, but it too has economic interests at stake, not so much in Syria, but in Iran – and embargoed Syrian oil, 30% of which used to go to European consumers, could always provide a useful addition to the oil flows to China from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

Western powers, in short, face a much greater constraint on their freedom of action than their public rhetoric might suggest. Firstly, the geopolitical consequences could tie them into an intervention scenario for many years to come. Secondly, even a short and limited intervention in Syria, as occurred in Libya, has highly unpredictable implications in a crucial strategic environment that is far more complex than that around Libya. Few statesmen would want to take responsibility for a military operation with such uncertain outcomes.

Their situation is made worse by the fact that some of the most active proponents of muscular intervention – Britain and France – lack the

means with which to do this. This is particularly true of Britain, where defence cuts have made it virtually impossible for foreign engagement to be seriously considered, while France is extremely unlikely to act alone. It was notable that the best the two countries' leaders could offer at their summit in Paris in February 2012 was food aid for Homs, although the means of delivery remained unclear. Thereafter, President Sarkozy was too preoccupied by his waning presidential electoral prospects to take an active role in prosecuting intervention against the Assad regime.

The U.S. under the Obama administration is extremely unlikely to act: despite intense

Congressional and popular distaste for the Assad regime, American disinclination for further foreign adventures is even greater. And then there is always the danger of a nuclearised Iran to consider, where some strategists now consider that military action might have to be taken by mid-year if the current talks fail. The simple and regrettable fact is that Western powers lack both the means and the will for further military intervention, given the appalling geopolitical implications that this might have, and the Assad regime – in the short term at least – is still too powerful to collapse under its own weight.

