

NOREF Seminar paper

The Syrian crisis: victory, survival or compromise?

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Almost three months since the Kofi Annan-brokered ceasefire agreement went into effect in Syria, it has virtually collapsed. The unarmed United Nations team has suspended its monitoring trips because of fighting in most of the cities they were required to visit.

From the start most players inside and outside the country paid little more than lip service to the ceasefire agreement. Violations were constant and severe, and in early June the Free Syrian Army, the main rebel force, said they no longer felt bound to observe a ceasefire. The Syrian government has not made a similar declaration but it always said it would reserve the right to respond to attacks. Its forces have shelled opposition strongholds on a regular basis.

Although the ceasefire initially reduced the rate of killing by a small degree, the toll of dead and injured still amounts to several hundreds per week.

What are the potential scenarios for the next twelve months, and can anything be done to improve compliance, reach a genuine ceasefire and start a process of political dialogue?

Victory

Although the level of violence decreased across Syria when the ceasefire went into effect on April 12, the government did not withdraw its heavy weapons and snipers from all cities. It keeps them in reserve or is actively using them, both in response to armed attacks and ambushes on its security forces and the police, and as a deterrent to prevent peaceful protests from gathering strength. In theory, the ceasefire makes it possible for large groups of demonstrators to occupy squares and streets in Syria's cities, including Damascus and Aleppo, and thereby go on the political and psychological offensive. The government remains as determined to prevent this as it

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has been since the first demonstrations began in March 2011. Hundreds of people are being detained every week. Massacres in villages around Houla and Homs suggest that sectarian violence between Alawites and Sunnis is gaining ground and that loosely-controlled pro-government Alawite militias are playing an increasing role in targeting Sunni villages, thereby making it even harder to get a ceasefire to stick. There have also been cases of Sunni groups kidnapping and killing Alawites. The trend could lead to a full-scale outbreak of sectarian murder as bereaved communities seek revenge.

The government's use of military action is a direct response to the opposition's ceasefire violations and the increasing number of attacks on government police and security forces as the opposition's supply of weaponry, most of it obtained from abroad, continues to grow. There are frequent reports that the opposition has killed regime police and troops whom they capture. The fighting is increasingly taking on the character of a civil war in which the rebels seize and control territory to deny it to the government and, in turn, the government uses massive force to regain the lost ground.

In spite of the huge escalation of violence in recent months, the government still believes it can gradually overcome all resistance and return the country to the enforced stability of the decades before the Arab spring.

The opposition to the Assad regime can be divided into at least six groups:

1. The Free Syrian Army (FSA)
2. The Syrian National Council (SNC)
3. The Syrian Democratic Forum, combining external and internal people
4. The internal opposition in key cities such as Homs, Hama, and Idlib that have suffered heavy bombardment in recent months: some of these groups are armed and call themselves Local Co-ordination Committees.
5. The internal opposition in Damascus and Aleppo, including the National Co-ordination Committee, Building the Syrian State, the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, several political parties and civil groups

6. The US, other Western states, Turkey, the Gulf Co-operation Council and most members of the Arab League, except for Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon

With the exception of some members of the third and fifth groups, they have all pronounced themselves in favour of an immediate end to the Assad regime. Some foreign states, notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are funnelling weapons to the Free Syrian Army in the hope that it can defeat the regime's forces or exact a high enough cost in casualties so that key units of the government army defect. The US, Britain, and France quietly approve this aid and are giving the FSA non-lethal equipment as well as logistical and political support. They also support the SNC and are using aid and diplomacy to urge the SNC and the FSA to co-ordinate their activities and political programmes.

The FSA and the SNC were always highly sceptical of the Annan ceasefire and Annan's six-point plan, since it does not explicitly require Assad's resignation as part of the transition to a democratic and plural political system. The plan advocates negotiations rather than one side's victory as the best way to resolve the crisis. It is also seen as allowing Assad to play for time.

Western states, Turkey, the Arab League share the scepticism about the Annan plan, and in spite of their public declarations of support for Annan there are strong grounds for suspecting that they would be content for the Annan mission to fail and come to an end. In their view, this would put greater pressure on Russia to admit that Assad must be removed from power. The FSA and SNC still advocate Nato intervention as the best way to give them victory. Short of that, they are appealing to foreign states to give them anti-tank weapons as well as grenade launchers to raise their combat power. The FSA and SNC are not unhappy to see the ceasefire collapse since they believe this will eliminate the need for negotiations and convince NATO there is no alternative to direct military intervention.

Although the US and other Nato states are at the moment unwilling to use force in the way they did over Libya, they have not ruled out the eventual use of "humanitarian corridors" or "safe havens"

as a justification for destroying the Syrian air force and air defences and bombing the regime's artillery and other heavy weapons. They say explicitly that the threat of force should be left on the table.

There are also suggestions that US reluctance to take direct military action is dictated largely by President Obama's unwillingness to have a new crisis before November's presidential election, but that, if re-elected, he will feel no such restraint.

The internal Syrian opposition is divided. Many residents of cities which have already suffered severely from fighting and bombardment are desperate for outside military aid. They see it as the quickest route to safety and the removal of the regime. Opposition groups in Damascus and Aleppo, which have suffered less from the upheaval so far, feel less desperate. They are worried about an increase in violence and a slide towards sectarian war. Members of religious and ethnic minorities still tend to favour the government remaining in power because they fear the opposition is increasingly led by Sunni extremists and Salafis.

The arrival of al Qaeda-inspired militants in Syria and the increasing use of car bombs on the pattern of neighbouring Iraq has added a new dimension to their concerns. Many Kurds are worried about the Sunni opposition's links to Turkey. There is also a large "silent majority", made up of people who have many complaints against the government and some who support it but who believe a military victory by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis and the Alawite regime's complete collapse would be a worse outcome than a negotiated process of reform in which both the regime and the opposition would have to agree on concessions. They are also concerned that arming the FSA and/or foreign military intervention will produce bloodshed and chaos on a scale not yet seen. Their voices are not much reported in foreign media, where the opposition tends to be presented inaccurately as being fully supportive of Nato intervention.

Kofi Annan's staff have been trying to bring the external and internal oppositions together under one umbrella. It is not yet clear how the current differences over whether to support outside

military aid and intervention will be resolved. There are also major debates within the opposition over the rights of women and ethnic minorities, and on the role of sharia law if the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power, and whether Syria would be a secular civic state with equal rights for individuals.

Survival

If victory proves impossible, the government and most of the opposition see survival as the next best option. In effect, each side is ready to accept a protracted civil war that could last indefinitely.

The government sees this scenario as preferable to surrendering power. If it is necessary to violate Kofi Annan's ceasefire in order to be sure of not being defeated and in order to reduce the risk of large-scale protests or a Tahrir Square-type encampment in central Damascus, it will do so.

The government is aware that foreign media and foreign governments will put most blame for the collapse of the Annan mission on the regime rather than its opponents, but the Syrian government believes it can survive the opprobrium. There have been enough ceasefire violations by the opposition to muddy the waters and Russia and China will not drop their objections to foreign military intervention. Whether the UN monitors resume their activity or not, the Syrian government is confident it can contain any new street protests as well as attacks by the armed opposition with a degree of force that will not be so large and conspicuous as to trigger a change of mind in Moscow or Beijing. In short, the government believes it can survive a civil war.

The armed opposition takes a similar view. It believes it can survive all attacks by government security forces with enough strength so as to remain a permanent irritant to the regime. The FSA has a well-established safe haven in Turkey, and has little difficulty in smuggling arms and other forms of aid across the borders from Lebanon to Homs and Hama, from Jordan to Deraa, and from Turkey to Idlib. It sees no danger of any of these avenues being shut down.

As for the SNC, it feels sure that foreign political support will not dry up as long as the Assad

regime remains in power. The government has offered negotiations but the SNC sees no benefit in accepting the offer as it currently stands. It does not believe the government will offer significant concessions or agree to a genuine power-sharing arrangement or free elections, let alone a transfer of power on the Yemeni model. It called for a boycott of the referendum on a new constitution in February 2012 as well of the parliamentary election in May.

Compromise

A durable long-term solution will require compromise on all sides. In the absence of interest on the part of most Syrian players in softening their current demands, the role of persuading them to change their minds can best be played by outsiders.

Convincing the government

Among foreign states Russia holds the strongest cards in terms of potential leverage over the Syrian government. It has maintained close contact with Assad and other leading figures in his regime throughout the crisis. It has declined to humiliate Assad by challenging or denying the government's legitimacy. While criticising his government's disproportionate use of force it has firmly opposed foreign military intervention and insisted on a Syrian-led political process of change. It calls for a transition to democracy but has not said this necessarily includes Assad's resignation unless the Syrian parties themselves agree on that. It continues to supply the regime with weaponry.

In the face of Western scepticism Russia invested considerable diplomatic capital in backing the Annan mission and the despatch of a credible number of international monitors to implement it. It was one of the first countries that offered to send monitors in. While maintaining close links to the government Russia has built up contacts with all groups in the political opposition, from the SNC to the internal parties like the National Co-ordination Committee and the Popular Front for Change and Liberation.

Russia now needs to use its leverage to:

- convince Assad that victory is impossible and that political compromise offers a better alternative than a protracted civil war which it will never win
- warn the Syrian government that Russia will stop re-supplying the Syrian security forces if the opposition accepts a renewed ceasefire but the government continues to use heavy weaponry in cities and allows snipers to shoot peaceful protesters
- press for an arms embargo in which Syria's neighbours and other foreign states halt arms deliveries to the opposition while Russia and the government's other arms suppliers halt their own deliveries to the government
- join in convening an international conference at which Syria's neighbours and all other concerned foreign states, including Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, agree to respect Syria's sovereignty, cease to intervene with arms and logistical equipment for the opposition, and turn the "Friends of Syria" into an impartial body that can help to defuse the crisis rather than acting as a support mechanism for the opposition
- urge the government to appoint an empowered interlocutor who can start a dialogue with opposition forces, in Damascus for the internal opposition, and in an acceptable foreign venue, e.g. Beirut, for the SNC and the FSA. In the first stages, the dialogue can be conducted by a senior official in Annan's team. At a later stage, once amnesties and safe passage are assured, a national forum should convene inside Syria with the widest possible participation of civil society groups, human rights advocates, women's representatives, and spokespeople from religious and ethnic minorities.
- encourage Assad to envisage the creation of a government of national unity that will have an equal number of pro-Assad and opposition members and be led by an independent technocrat
- urge Assad to announce that the presidential elections, due in 2014, will be freely contested under new rules for registering candidates and political parties that conform to international

best practice. This could defer the issue of Assad's personal future until other elements of a democratic system are negotiated, including whether a new constitution should make Syria a parliamentary state rather than one with an executive president

- persuade Assad that any negotiated solution must include the immediate restructuring of the armed forces so that they represent all ethnic and minority groups and come under democratic civilian control

Convincing the opposition

Western governments, Turkey, the GCC and other members of the Arab League will have to play the major role in persuading the opposition that victory (in the sense of Assad's early resignation) is unattainable and that they must accept a political solution that falls short of their original demands

The US, UK, France and other Nato states need to:

- rule out military intervention by Nato in Syria unequivocally and publicly and announce that they oppose any military intervention by the Arab League or other regional forces. Although there is no stomach in the West for intervention and little likelihood of its happening, most opposition groups still cling to it as an eventual option. It should be ruled out explicitly
- urge Qatar and Saudi Arabia to desist from their stated intention to send arms to the FSA
- warn the FSA that Nato states will cease supplying non-lethal equipment unless the FSA ceases all attacks on Syrian government forces, police, and officials
- inform the SNC that they back a process of reform in the Syrian crisis rather than any specific opposition group or groups, and that they will reduce Western political support to the SNC if the SNC does not agree to meet the Syrian government's interlocutor and show good faith in joining a political dialogue that leads to compromise

- enlarge and transform the Friends of Syria (as mentioned above) so that it becomes an impartial body rather than a support mechanism for one side in the crisis

- move to a lifting of economic sanctions, in particular the ban on Syrian oil exports and the restrictions on dealing with the Syrian Central Bank, which are having a serious negative impact on the well-being and livelihoods of ordinary Syrians. Sanctions on the Assad family's travel options and financial assets should be maintained until a political agreement is reached to end the crisis.

Turkey needs to warn the FSA that it will consider closing the safe haven the FSA enjoys in Turkey close to the Syrian border unless the FSA ceases its attacks on Syrian government forces and personnel, and supports the national political dialogue in Syria

Qatar and Saudi Arabia need to cease arming the FSA and declare they will urge the SNC to join the national political dialogue in good faith. The rest of the Arab League should support this change in policy.

Conclusion

Reaching a compromise to end the Syrian crisis is urgently necessary if the drift towards an expanding civil war is to be halted. The Annan mission is the last chance for peace. It needs to be re-invigorated and supported in deed as well as word.

Compromise will require foreign governments, as well as the Syrian actors, to have the courage to change course and in some cases reverse their current policies. They will have to recognise that existing policies have made the crisis worse, not better.

They will also need to break from two mind-sets. The first one over-personalises the analysis by focusing on the fate of a single strongman and creating the illusion that, if he goes, the path to reform will be relatively easy. The other mind-set, a kind of momentum theory, assumes that the

outcome of the last crisis automatically provides the best model for resolving the next one.

In fact, it does not follow that because the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings of 2011 ended with the exile or death of a dictator, the crisis in Syria has to follow a similar script. The precedent of Yemen, where the president was granted amnesty as part of a deal for him to resign and he still remains in his country playing a political role, may be as relevant as those of North Africa. The

precedents of Jordan and Morocco in 2011 and 2012 where dynastic families have managed to answer street protests by means of institutional reforms without resignation are also relevant.

But the real lesson is that there are no relevant precedents. The Syrian crisis is unique. Its context is specific. Whatever solutions are devised, they will have to be in tune with Syria's circumstances or they will not stick.