SYRIA'S STALEMATE: THE LIMITS OF REGIME RESILIENCE

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We are witnessing in Syria a stalemate between regime and opposition. The battle has been constructed as a zero-sum game from the very beginning, increasing the stakes tremendously for all parties involved, most notably for the regime. The Syrian writer Hassan Abbas classifies the actors in the confrontation as follows:

a. The army (particularly the Third and Fourth Divisions), the uniformed security forces and paramilitary groups (*shabiha*)
b. Opposing groups that attempt to undermine the cohesion and impede the violent practices of the groups mentioned under subheading "a," including dissident army officers and soldiers
c. Nonviolent forces who confront the suppressing security apparatuses in demonstrations and protests
d. Elements within the nonviolent groups who engage in violence and try to drag the others along.

Social "incubators" nourish all the elements and provide material and moral support.

This breakdown categorizes the elements involved but does not spare any of them from critical examination — hence Abbas's indication that there are social "incubators" who support both protesters and the regime. The protesters have external sources of support that do not always share their basic interests or may oppose the regime for their own reasons. The breakdown acknowledges the peaceful and democratic nature of much of the opposition, especially its early iterations, but also points to the increasingly militarized elements that have confronted the regime, particularly from the summer of 2011 onward. This situation has enabled the regime to portray the opposition as a foreign-funded armed insurrection aimed at destabilizing Syria in the interest of foreign powers.

SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS

The complex terrain in Syria favors the state in the short to medium term, but not for the long term. For more than four decades, the regime has forged effective relations and alliances within a multisectarian social structure. Comparatively speaking, there is a higher coherence at the top (the level of the regime), which prevents significant defections, and a heterogeneity within society, which undermines collective action on a broad scale.

The simple logic of "all or nothing" pervades the regime's upper echelons, its principal coercive institutions and their immediate networks, nearly all of which believe the regime will survive or perish as a single indivisible unit. Heterogeneity stems from the society's varied religious, regional and ethnic identities. Even without manipulation by the regime, the minorities (who make up about 40 percent of the population) have developed a preference for non-majoritarian government. In times of what the regime called "social peace," it seemed unshakable, and for a quite a long time it was. But there are limits to the regime's resilience amid sustained mass upheaval, as evinced by the erosion of its authority, if not power, today, as well as by its increasing disconnectedness from society.

The Sectarian Terrain

The heterogeneity of society has lent itself to decades of manipulation, not only by the regime alone. Syria is a mix of Sunnis, Alawis, Shiis, Druze, Ismailis, and Greek Orthodox, Maronite and other Christians.[1] The only ethnonational identity other than Arab is Kurdish,[2] representing 6-8 percent of the population, at best. Thus, there is no simple Sunni-Alawi divide. Even those struggles infused with religious or sectarian tension are intertwined with class and region, giving credence to the argument that identities are often composite and not reducible to a single dimension.[3] Joint action at high levels is, therefore, difficult. These divisions have produced a lesser-evil argument among minorities who prefer the status quo. A sizable and strategically passive segment of Syrian society has lent unintended succor to the regime.

With the passage of time, however, the calculations of those on the sidelines are changing. At the beginning of 2012, even die-hard supporters of the regime itself, not just of the "stable" status quo, are witnessing ever more expansion of the areas of instability and ever more decline in the regime's ability to guarantee stability. There now are parts of the country — in Idlib, Dara and the northeast — that are outside the influence or authority of the regime.[4] The regime has been massing its forces in troubled metropolitan areas (like Homs) and in the two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which continue to enjoy a modicum of normalcy.

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

In 1982, urban Sunni merchants saved the Syrian regime when they stood by Hafiz al-Asad as he clamped down on the Muslim Brotherhood.[5] The merchants' stance prevented the Islamist movement from acquiring a mass base. The Asad regime never forgot that moment. Since then the regime has forged deeper and deeper ties with the Sunni business community (though careful to prevent it from achieving the capacity to engage in collective action). It has also fostered the creation and development of networks that linked "safe" officials with business actors. These networks replaced the regime's social alliance with labor and shifted some of the burdens of the public sector to private actors. The latter were given untold privileges in investment, which spurred a large-scale foray by the state bourgeoisie into the "private" sector. A new business class emerged in the 1990s from the ashes of a state-centered economy.[6]

The support of this powerful social stratum has shielded Damascus and Aleppo from the widespread expression of discontent.[7] The flip side is that these same businessmen and their partners in official roles

have shifted the allocation of resources and investments away from the countryside since the late 1980s. They have also pushed for dramatic reductions in state subsidies over the years, without a corresponding spike in employment opportunities. This policy has been particularly marked since 2005, when Bashar al-Asad announced the establishment of the "social-market economy."[8] The uneven distribution of development funds combined with subsidy cuts meant that the countryside and small cities were hit exponentially harder by economic downturns than the big cities.[9] The straw that broke the camel's back was the scant rainfall since 2003, which culminated in four consecutive droughts from 2006 onward, causing severe food insecurity, poverty and waves of rural migration to urban areas.[10] Large cities were more able to absorb such migration than provincial cities like Idlib or Homs, which are now hotbeds of protest. Most inhabitants of rural areas had very little to lose and were ready to express their discontent. All they needed was a spark. The Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi provided them with one when he immolated himself in 2010.

Coercive Institutions

Until March 2011, and perhaps beyond, the regime was uninhibited by worry about the obedience of the ruled.[11] It was able to manufacture domestic peace through social alliances and fear of reprisal. Few Arab states enjoyed the calm and safety that inhabitants of Syrian cities enjoyed. Today, however, the regime is unable to implement policy beyond its constrained zone of influence. After 10 months of mayhem, there is an increasingly marked lack of central authority, command-and-control tools, or even popular compliance outside Damascus and

Aleppo. The regime is gradually losing its capacity to exercise effective control over the institutions, associations and alliances that it was able to manage through a combination of coercion and accommodation. Slowly but surely, the party affiliation of many such cadres and rank-and-file loyalists has become drained of its value. The direct and indirect incentives that once motivated them are no longer so compelling. This process is a function of two factors: decreasing funds and logistical support to sustain broad and deep patronage networks and the marked decrease of morale among even the regime's "enforcers." Those who complied under threat of force or lure of incentive are no longer doing so, especially in areas to the north (Homs, Hama, Idlib and surrounding areas), south (Dara and surrounding areas) and northeast (Hasakah, Qamishly, Deir il-Zor and surrounding areas) of the capital.[12]

THE ARMY

It is evident from the continuous low-level officers' defections that the army is fraying at the edges.[13] The effect is seen not in fighting ability, but in authority, credibility and initiative. The army has been reduced to holding down forts with tactical maneuvering, not strategic planning. For decades, the army has been out of practice, and it was certainly unprepared for the mostly unarmed upheaval we have witnessed to date. Worse still, it is not equipped or trained to fight "dissident" militarized groups in an unconventional battle zone full of civilians.

Perhaps the most serious handicap is that the army cannot be relied on by the regime to shoot its own people, absent unusual circumstances involving a third party.[14] It is one thing for an army to intervene to quell an uprising, but keeping the

peace afterwards involves direct contact with unarmed or lightly armed protesters in their homes. In most cases, the army remains a tool that is too risky to use, even as it loses its edge. The regime has been extremely careful about which battalions it deploys where and in what kind of mission.

It is also an exaggeration to assume that the Syrian army is less loyal to the regime simply because it comprises mostly Sunnis. The Syrian army was hardly ever prepared to be a professional fighting force, certainly not since the 1973 war, the last time it performed in a relatively effective manner. For the most part, the locus of power in Syria devolved from the Baath party to the narrower and more tightly controlled security service branches. The tendency is to interpret this as a sectarian maneuver by an ostensibly minority elite. Such shifts, however, characterize most police states with rather homogeneous populations, including in Latin America and elsewhere in the Arab world, Tunisia being a case in point. Much more weight should be attributed to nonsectarian factors; simplistic arguments about sectarianism do not explain, they only describe.

Security Services, Elite Units

More than a dozen security services in Syria continue to be both the most "loyal" and the most cohesive part of the regime's coercive apparatus. Their loyalty is matched only by the elite Republican Guard units directly under the control of Mahir al-Asad, the president's brother.[15] The combination of the above formations, with the latter having an edge of sorts, represents by far the most powerful and well-trained lines of defense and offense the regime possesses. The relationship is organic. The boundaries between the two are sufficiently blurred so as to make the whole resemble a family structure:[16] internecine conflicts may erupt, but in times of crisis, the cohesion of authority and command structure obtain. Though sectarianism is certainly a part of the glue, it is not the sole cause. There are non-Alawi members among these groups, often in powerful positions. More significant, what binds these units together is a combination of political, ideological and experiential factors — and the stark belief that the ship sinks or floats as one unit.

The security services are not a fighting force in the classic sense. For the most part, they can defend and strategize, but they would not perform well in conventional armed combat and have as little experience with battlefield operations as the army. Those officers who have experience are certainly not the youngest and most vigorous. Finally, despite this fact, it would be a grave mistake to assume that members of these branches would behave in a manner similar to their counterparts in Tunisia or Egypt in the event of a tightened noose. They will fight with the regime until the very end and will be a force to reckon with at various levels. Their fate is securely intertwined with that of the regime.

THE OPPOSITION

Part of the regime's resilience during the past 10 months involves the state of the opposition, primarily the external one, embodied by the Syrian National Council (SNC). The internal opposition, an amalgam of what is called the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC), local groups and increasingly an armed component under the rubric of the Free Syrian Army, has been far more successful in putting pressure on the regime without incurring the kinds of liabilities the regime was able to

use against it. The regime claims, however, that "armed gangs" are causing much of the havoc and speaks of these and the opposition in the same breath. In the short run, the opposition has played into the hands of the regime. But the challenge for the state in the medium to long run will be to contend with its ever-shrinking authority and territorial control while battling an increasingly militarized local opposition.

A Troubled SNC

The Syrian National Council, formed somewhat hastily in the fall of 2011, is based on an amalgam of old and new opposition figures and groups that united outside Syria and found a base of sorts in neighboring Turkey.[17] Primary among the reasons for the council's weakness is its dependency on regional and Western states that have had an agenda against the regime that did not always accord with the aspirations of the Syrian people (vis-à-vis Palestine/Israel, Iraq and post-2005 Lebanon).[18] But the SNC also suffers from other ills. Its leadership is unseasoned politically and must contend with a plethora of internal squabbles, external alliances and a sensitive relationship with the internal opposition.[19] On all such fronts, it has not shown the kind of leadership, unity and inclusiveness that many Syrians hoped it would, though it has retained some popularity. Early on, conflict resolution within the council caused defections that were attributed to favoritism and lack of transparency.[20] More recently, shifting positions on the question of supporting international intervention became a subject of controversy between the SNC and the external figurehead of the NCCDC, human-rights lawyer Haytham Manna. In fact, in contrast to the original "three nos" (to sectarianism, violence and international interven-

tion) elaborated by the head of the SNC, the behavior, statements and alliances of the council seemed to shift considerably, especially on the latter two.[21] The council continues to enjoy a great deal of support but has lost the moral high ground it hoped to occupy and has become a party to the conflict rather than a symbol of unity.[22]

The Internal Opposition

Whatever its shortcomings, for many Syrians the internal opposition remains the most authentic representative of the uprising. For the most part, the opposition is local, indigenous and independent. It has a street and cyberspace presence throughout the country and its work is coordinated through the local Coordinating Committees that have increasingly developed something of a central communication, if not command, structure.[23] Their social makeup is, for the most part, cross-sectarian, cross-ideological, regionally diverse and cross-generational, though the youth component dominates. Their mode of operation is largely characterized by consensus and democratic procedure, as indicated by the lack of conflict. It is these committees that first popularized the three nos. It is noteworthy that, though groups within the internal opposition paid lip service to the SNC, they are aware of the council's limitations and potential liability. Dissidents are open about the mutual strategic interest "at this time," but "things may change if we feel they are departing from the initial course we drew together."[24]

But the internal opposition is not without its troubles. As time passes and violence, death and desperation escalate, the magnitude of the armed component of the opposition is growing. It is likely to spin out of control soon, in a scenario favored by the regime. Armed elements developed

sometime after April or May 2011, primarily from the ranks of defecting soldiers but also from within the local opposition itself. Initially, the armed opposition mostly responded to local calls for protection, but a sizable and fast-growing part moved to an offensive posture after the summer, targeting the army and sites of government authority.[25] Within this last segment, it is reported by journalists and Syrian activists on the ground that there are elements who, for one reason or another, are engaged in forms of sabotage. Such actions are intended either to promote chaos for their own purposes or to replicate the tactics of the regime by creating mayhem through targeted or even sectarian killing, often, but not always, in retaliation.[26]

Privately, most Syrian dissidents recognize that such tactics do not serve the "revolution." Publicly, they are far more preoccupied with fighting or escaping repression than with investigating this phenomenon, a risky affair. It is not yet clear the extent to which such groups have external connections or whether some of them are ultimately nationalists exploiting such connections to gain funds and ammunition. Certainly, the regime's claim that the violence is primarily caused by armed gangs (a combination of thugs and Salafis) is a myth, though widely believed in some circles.[27] But considering the developing stakes in Syria, and the number of states and political actors with a stake in this uprising, it is naïve to view all violence against the state as a function of local and independent opposition. An armed insurrection does not usually fund itself.

COMPETING NARRATIVES

The battle on the streets is made all the more controversial by media competition over the narrative.[28] None of the image

and narrative manipulation should cloud the structure of the conflict, a four-decade dictatorship pitted against its own people. However, to assume that media outlets (Arab and non-Arab) are not playing an active role is naïve. And there are some common threads that run through both semi-independent reports and regime/media propaganda. I was fortunate to have met and interviewed several local and international activists, dissidents and journalists who had spent a good deal of time on Syrian streets.[29]

Three observations emerge. First, the zone of influence of the regime is shrinking by the week. The regime has limited resources, so they must be deployed in areas of strategic value. The unintended consequence is that regime-free enclaves are growing and are increasingly independent, gradually chipping away at the state's authority and the regime's social power.

Second, the armed opposition is growing and forming spontaneous and localized structures of authority often independent of what is called the Free Syrian Army, especially in the center of the country. Neighborhood-level coordination is the nucleus, revealing the extent to which claims about foreign infiltration must be scrutinized in the majority of cases. However, it is important not to consider foreign infiltration and local organizing mutually exclusive. Both parties could be exploiting each other for their own purposes, giving the unverified impression of agency, conspiracy or even coordination.

Third, despite its growing numbers, the armed opposition as of December 2011 remained poorly funded and equipped. Although in many ways self-managed, it does receive funds from external sources, combining states, organizations and private business people.[30] It is not a secret that the

organizations are primarily related to the Muslim Brotherhood, which now receives ample financial support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[31] Lesser sources of funding include local, regional and international businessmen and groups who provide funds and supplies. Their claims of unified motivation are questionable. According to some recipients, "Sometimes money is received from sources who do not know exactly which part of the opposition, or where in the country, is the final destination."[32]

The best analysis does not attribute this low level of funding to the unavailability of potential donors. Rather, it is the strategic calculation that a full-scale battle will fundamentally and prematurely change the character of the confrontation in ways that would foreclose certain courses of action or outcomes. Those who seek external intervention might prefer to appeal to the United Nations at a time when the overwhelming violence is on one side. In the event of "diplomatic" and "international" failure, this strategy might change in a way that would produce more steady funding and militarization. Calls for taking the Arab League's plan to the United Nations in late January were steps in this direction, but ended with a veto by both Russia and China at the Security Council.

MILITARY STRATEGY AND TACTICS

According to activists and independent journalists, the "regime feels strong and confident" because it assumes it has "managed and controlled the demonstrations, which is partially true."[33] On the ground, the regime has managed to cut off the physical spaces where demonstrations occur so that crowds congregate but must stay in one place, cut off from their counterparts in the next neighborhood. The threat of reprisal is severe; demonstrators are usually shot after demonstrations nowadays. The regime has partially succeeded, adopting violence to limit the scope and movement of protesters and determine the actual location and time of demonstrations. But the regime's limited resources only allow it to conduct such strategic suppression sporadically, with a focus on hot spots: "If they choose to prevent a demonstration, they can do that now," but not in all places at the same time.[34]

The above tactics are met by counter measures of demonstrators, who will always be one step ahead of the regime in mobilizing protests. The regime, too, has developed counter measures, penetrating the opposition through incentives and threats, often using blackmail. The release of those arrested is usually a bargaining chip to force compliance from those leaders who have not yet been arrested. According to some dissidents, there are often actual agreements about where demonstrations can be held without reprisal, provided certain rules are followed on movement or maneuver. Such bargaining has occurred in Dara, Douma, Homs and elsewhere, according to activists. The protesters realize the limits of the regime's violence: It can increase exponentially against demonstrators, but only at a regional and international cost that the regime is not prepared to pay, including among allies like Russia and Iran.

This dynamic has unintended consequences. The longer it goes on, the more compromised the regime will become. Time is on the side of the protesters in nearly all cases, whether or not a part of them is doing an external state's bidding. As time passes and funerals are held, the regime gains neither adherents nor credibility. The more people die, the more people will be willing to die fighting the regime, and with better tactics and coor-

dination. As discussed above, there is no shortage of countries and institutions that would like to see this regime go, as opposed to its counterparts in the region who actually were helped to say afloat, including through force (Bahrain), by the same countries that now lead the diplomatic confrontation against the Syrian regime. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States and some European countries favor regime change. They are treading lightly because they know that the alternative is costly, and they recognize that, though they can control the SNC, the internal opposition may have other plans. Their best bet is to maintain the aura of the SNC's representative leadership, which is proving untenable.

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

The complex Syrian terrain has a critical regional, and perhaps international, dimension related to Syria's role on three levels: (1) as a regional player belonging to a small but effective axis, along with Iran;[35] (2) as an enabler of resistance to various forms of external encroachment and military occupation; and (3) as an ally of powerful and remote state actors (Russia, China) interested in regional leverage.

Thus, the forces that might come to the aid of the regime are many, though not all of them favor its actions. They are supportive largely of its political position. Syria can count on its regional and international allies, and has indeed done so, to exercise a deterrence posture[36] or actively veto or threaten to veto resolutions against it at the United Nations, as Russia and China have done. On the other hand, Hezbollah's deterrence lies in the fact that it will certainly be, or become, party to any scenario of military intervention in Syria, whether or not Iran is dragged into the conflict. Various hawkish elements in the United

States might see this as an opportunity for redrawing the region's map, rather than as a deterrent. However, such designs involve unintended consequences and are likely to be decidedly counterproductive.

Syria continues to create anxiety for Arab Gulf monarchies, on the one hand, and fierce debates among leftists in the Arab world, notably the Levant, on the other. This debate centers on whether Syria's "resistance" credentials and the outside forces amassed against that function (resistance to imperialism and Israeli occupation) should absolve the regime for its domestic brutality.[37] Most of this debate is political and polemical, but it is of crucial importance to explaining the reasons the Syrian case is complex. More tangibly, it also explains why the Syrian regime still enjoys some measure of support locally and regionally, from Lebanon and Iran. By contrast, this regional "resistance" role, which strategically involves both Iran and Hezbollah, has in large measure mobilized the Arab Gulf states, supported by their Western partners, to engage the Syrian uprising. Leaders of the Arab League Mission in Syria — Saudi Arabia and Qatar — considered it a step towards going to the United Nations.[38]

Considering Syria's regional and international roles, caution is warranted at both the analytical and policy levels. It would be folly to assume that the Syrian case is a simple struggle against dictatorship. More important, it is crucial to consider the vast differences between international intervention in Libya and Syria, in terms of both logistics and consequences. Sober minds the world over have made this distinction vis-à-vis the new status quo in Syria.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

A breaking point is not too far off. The year 2012 will likely produce a decisive

outcome, unless new inputs of support (financial, logistical and otherwise) are provided by Syria's allies. Aside from questions of finance, the logistical wear and tear alone on military vehicles and other equipment is cause for delimiting time frames. There will also be new realities with which to contend, including the escalation of the bombing campaign in Damascus, no matter the perpetrators.[39]

One scenario involves a regional deal, though this is still not likely at this point. The Syrian regime remains too confident about its ability to contain the situation or at least remain in power. However, a few months down the road, as various kinds of pressures are applied from within and from outside, a deal might be possible.

Foreign military intervention also remains unlikely in the short run, as it is not in the interest of anyone, whether local, regional or international.[40] Barring an unforeseen development that would necessitate intervention, this option remains off the table, by the admission even of NATO and the United States. It remains to be seen whether Turkey would urge military intervention to secure its interests, though it is becoming less likely because of its own internal politics vis-à-vis the Kurds. Israel remains curiously cautious about regime change in Syria.[41] Few outside the SNC and part of the domestic opposition are calling for external intervention. This is not for lack of desire. Largely, it is because of the low payoff and a bit of cynicism in the anti-Syrian camp (regime, geostrategic importance and people). First, Syria is neither Iraq nor Libya. It does not have enough natural resources to mortgage its future. Second, unrest in Syria may potentially spill over onto the new champions

of democracy in and around the Arabian Peninsula, not to mention Lebanon. Third, the Syrian regime has protected its borders with Israel for decades, a situation that is not easily replicable.

Finally, a third scenario carries some credence. Under the pressure of mounting financial, food security and other difficulties, we are likely to see the regime elite fracture.[42] This might not be decisive in itself. However, compounded by other logistical and regional factors (as the opposition becomes more powerful militarily), it might open a door to consequential negotiations so long as the regime's hand is not forced. Ultimately, this scenario is also not likely unless real danger is imminent. The unspoken scenario is some unexpected local or regional event (perhaps a military confrontation or severe escalation of bombing within the capital) that would create a new reality.

The tragedy of Syria is that most possible courses of action intended to remedy the situation would, in fact, aggravate it. Often it seems that standing by is the best solution, yet it appears inhumane, if not risky. Ultimately, the waiting game is not in the regime's favor, but no one knows how far the situation will have to deteriorate before a tipping point is reached. A civil war would be devastating, yet foreign military intervention would produce a much deadlier and messier war, without the possibility of a legitimate conclusion. The main question is, when will the time come to consider the best interest of Syrians as a society, and who has the legitimacy to articulate, if not enforce, it? Certainly it cannot be non-Syrians; and that is perhaps the most important fact to keep in mind.

[1] Percentage of Sunnis: 74-75; Shiis (non Alawi or Ismaili): 1-2; Christians: 8-10; Alawis: 8-11; Ismaili: less than 1; Druze: 3; Kurds: 6-8; Armenians less than 1.

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