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Syrian Uprising: Looking In, Looking Out

Summary

- The Syrian regime was initially able to count on its neighbors in two key areas: ensuring that their territories do not become a safe haven for Syrian dissidents and continuing to receive their support on the regional and international level.
- This support has since eroded as a result of the regime's inability to contain the ever-escalating level of violence being perpetrated against the protesters.
- The gravest concern for the regime is the emergence of a Benghazi scenario in a city like Aleppo as a result of Turkish military intervention.
- The Syrian regime now finds itself in an ever-increasing cycle of isolation and increased internal repression.

“By far, however, the gravest concern for the regime has always been the emergence of a “Benghazi scenario” where the uprising supported by a group of breakaway army units or deserters are able to establish a foothold somewhere.”

Continuing Protests and Narrowing Options

With protests in Syria entering their seventh consecutive month, options for the Assad regime appear to be narrowing by the day, as the opposition grows bolder. The strategy of the Assad regime has been focused on systematic military and security operations with sporadic efforts at engaging in so called national dialogue. Throughout, the opposition has been maintaining pressure on the regime internally through sustained, almost daily street protests and other forms of civil disobedience while externally trying to mobilize the international community to isolate and apply punitive sanctions against it. Both sides, however, are also acutely aware of the increasingly important role that Syria's neighbors are able to play as events within Syria unfold.

The Syrian Regime's Regional Perspective

For the Syrian regime, the most important neighbors in this ongoing conflict with its people in order of priority are Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Israel's impact in matters relating to the uprising is considered to be negligible. There are two key expectations that the regime has of its neighbors: ensuring that their territories do not become a safe haven for Syrian dissidents and continuing to receive their political support on the regional and international level. During the early weeks and months of this conflict, the regime seemed to be able to hold its neighbors to these key roles, primarily out of concern that these states have over the Syrian regime's capacity for retribution against them. They also fear that its collapse would prompt a takeover by radical Islamists, civil war, and fragmentation—likely outcomes with serious consequences for Syria's neighbours.

When events in Dera'a first broke out in March less than 3 miles from the Jordanian border, many of the inhabitants attempted to seek refuge there. The Jordanian authorities however, quickly sealed the border and pursued those who had made it across. Similarly, when dissidents started to take refuge in Lebanon and use its numerous Internet cafes to organize their cyber-revolution, they began to be harassed by supporters of the regime and the Lebanese authorities. When some Syrian conscript soldiers deserted during the operation around Tal Kalakh, the Lebanese army reportedly handed them back, much to the satisfaction of the Syrian regime. The Lebanese government also obligingly assisted the Syrian regime internationally by blocking the last efforts by the international community to move to a vote condemning the regime's actions at the U.N. Security Council, of which Lebanon is a member.

Turkey was also willing to hold back on criticizing the Assad regime even as Syrian security forces repressed protests in Jisr Al-Shoughour and Idlib. This is in no small part due to the fact that Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was still convinced then that he could persuade Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to institute reforms and avert further violence that might ultimately destabilize the country. Even Iraq, which had long been critical of the Syrian regime's involvement in allowing insurgent fighters to cross its borders, remained deafeningly silent, most likely at the behest of Tehran, which is actively supporting the regime. More recently, however, there appears to be a shift in the attitude of most of the neighboring countries. While Jordan and Lebanon have yet to make an official statement, there is increasing disaffection among their populations with their governments' lack of support for the Syrian uprising. Turkey and Iraq, on the other hand, have become increasingly critical of the Syrian regime with the most dramatic public shift coming from Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, who in August went on record calling Assad a liar who must step down and that there would be no further engagement with Syria. In short, it appears that while the regime succeeded initially in restricting support for the uprising from its neighbors, this effort has eroded due to the regime's reluctance to contain the level of violence against protesters on the Syrian street.

By far, however, the gravest concern for the regime has always been the emergence of a Benghazi scenario, where a breakaway army is able to establish a foothold. The most vulnerable areas are the border regions with Turkey and Iraq. The Iraqi borders in that region are notoriously porous (as seen during the Iraqi insurgency) and the concern for the regime is that the Iraqi tribes will begin to send support to their Syrian brethren while providing them with safe havens from the regime. As a result, the Syrian response in these areas has been particularly swift and brutal with widespread destruction of property. The crackdown is not just to suppress and intimidate the local population, but to send an unequivocal message to the greatest prize of them all, the northern city of Aleppo.

It is no coincidence that Aleppo has remained relatively calm during the uprising. The Assad regime is acutely aware that the city of Aleppo—in addition to being Syria's most populous city, has the greatest potential for becoming Syria's Benghazi. Were Aleppo to rise up and reach critical mass in its anti-regime protests, the Syrian regime would then be obliged to carry out a punitive reprisal campaign against the city in a manner similar to that seen in Homs, Deraa, Deir Al-Zor, and elsewhere. Otherwise, the uprising would surely spread to Damascus and all would be lost. However, the last time such an attack occurred against a city close to the Turkish borders was Jisr Al-Shoghur, and it sent 10,000 refugees across into Turkey. The population of Jisr Al-Shoghur is about 30,000, while Aleppo's population is about five million. Therefore, any attack on Aleppo has the potential for generating a humanitarian catastrophe with an overwhelming number of refugees pouring across the borders into Turkey. In turn, the Turkish authorities would be obliged to either allow these refugees through their borders or move in and create a safe haven around

Aleppo, thus paving the way for the potential Benghazi scenario. It is primarily fear of the latter option that has driven the regime to dedicate so much time and resources to Aleppo. These include a massive security presence, and intimidation, both direct and indirect, as well as making examples of other cities like Deir Al-Zor, Abu Kamal and Al-Rastan. Thus far, these tactics have managed to prevent any major protests or upheavals from occurring in Aleppo.

Finally, the following points should be noted in assessing the regime's view of its regional circumstances. Up to now the north-eastern Kurdish region that shares borders with both Turkey and Iraq has not been particularly problematic for the regime because Kurds there have avoided becoming fully engaged in the uprising. This, however may well be changing, with large demonstrations now being reported in the city of Qamishli, and more importantly after the assassination on October 7 of Masha'al Tammo, a leading Kurdish activist and a member of the Syrian National Council. Again, Israel has little or no direct role to play, but it is possible that the regime may at some point raise tensions again across the borders as it did a few months ago as a means of distraction should the need arise. The Syrian regime also continues to exploit and play on the fears of all the neighboring countries that the alternative to it will be an Islamist takeover with a Salafi agenda, and aggressively promotes the idea that civil war and sectarian strife will engulf the country and threaten to spill over its borders.

The Syrian Opposition's Regional Perspectives

The Syrian opposition's primary goal is to bring down the Assad regime and replace it with a democratically elected parliament and government. In pursuit of this goal, the opposition has relied in part on a strategy that has attempted to draw one particular neighbor into the fray—Turkey. There are three distinct roles that Turkey may find itself increasingly involved in on behalf of the opposition. The first is to continue to provide shelter for the increasing number of Syrian refugees, particularly the families of army deserters and break away members of the regime. The second is to continue providing cover for the opposition to meet and organize. Most recently, the Syrian National Council was announced in Istanbul, the latest in a long line of meetings, conferences, and councils all hosted on Turkish soil. The third and perhaps most important is the opposition would look to Turkey to intervene militarily to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe should a city like Aleppo rise up against the Assad regime. The creation of a safe haven by Turkey would then open the door to the Benghazi scenario.

Conclusion

After seven months of ongoing unrest and an ever-mounting casualty rate, it is now clear to the neighbors and the region as a whole that the Syrian regime is unlikely to survive in the long term, with blowback from the ongoing unrest increasingly likely if the Syrian regime is allowed to persist in its current handling of the situation. Consequently, this has led to a rapid erosion of any real or tentative support for the Syrian regime; even staunch allies such as Iran may well be beginning to reassess the value of their relationship with their long-term ally.

Yet, so far, the Syrian regime appears incapable of any response other than ever increasing repression against the opposition. It exhibits a defiant acceptance of its isolation, coupled with an arrogant belief in its own self-righteousness and imminent victory against its enemies. By its own playbook, Damascus is following what it believes to be a well perfected "wait and see" posture that has worked remarkably well for it time and time again. Back in 2005–2007, faced with pressure from the international community over the Hariri assassination, the Assad regime

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and across the Middle East to identify key vectors of influence that Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict, to forecast how the ongoing conflict in Syria will affect the delicate and volatile regional balance of power, and to examine how the Syrian opposition and the Syria regime are factoring in regional and cross-border dynamics. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives, and Scott Lasensky, a senior program officer. Through this series, workshops and ongoing programs that bring together experts, civil society figures and officials, the Institute aims to provide applied analysis and on-the-ground conflict management tools in support of political transitions across the Arab world.

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simply laagered the wagons, hunkered down, and waited for the storm to pass. In managing to outlive all its key detractors thus far, the Assad regime has deluded itself that it will continue to do so again, no matter the odds.