Executive summary

It is now 18 months since the current crisis erupted in Syria. Although it was initially peaceful, at least on the part of the demonstrators, the brutal and violent responses of the Assad regime, particularly the gratuitous viciousness of its paramilitary militias, the Shabiha, have effectively transformed the crisis into an armed insurrection. Since last October, the struggle in Syria has been slowly transformed from a non-violent populist demand for change into what is today a civil war with global implications as regional and global powers are drawn into the conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia see Syria as a surrogate arena for their struggle for regional dominance, and the United States, with its allies in Europe and Israel, is determined that China and Russia should not undermine its own strategy for an end to the conflict, given the geostrategic implications were they to succeed.

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The armed rebellion

So far, as a result of the conflict, between 17,000 and 21,000 people have died, according to United Nations and Syrian opposition sources, including at least 5,500 soldiers, police and militiamen and 5,000 amongst the insurgents. Another 27,000 people have been detained by the authorities, and 1.5 million have been displaced, of whom over 200,000 are refugees. At least 2.5 million Syrians are in dire need of aid, according to Baroness Amos, the United Nations special humanitarian envoy, who was in Damascus in mid-August.

The rebels now control nine significant areas along the spine of Syria from Dera’a in the south up to Idlib and Aleppo in the north and most of the area around Dayr az-Zur in the east. However, they consist of disparate groups with poor coordination amongst themselves and with the fragmented non-military opposition movements inside Syria and abroad. There is also disagreement on whether the groups should follow an urban-based strategy, to draw in the Syrian army and weaken its overall control, as has apparently been recommended by U.S. advisers, or control of territory should be the objective.

The dominant group is the Free Syrian Army, formed by dissident army officers in July 2011, with between 40,000 and 60,000 fighters, half of whom are defectors from the Syrian army. However, its discrete units are still poorly coordinated. Then there is also the 6,000-strong Liwa al-Umma, created last autumn and part-staffed by Libyans under Mahdi al-Harati, the former deputy-head of the Tripoli military council in Libya, although 90 per cent of its complement is Syrian. Now, since last February, there are also between 500 and 900 foreign mujahidin, predominantly Iraqi but also including North Africans and even Kosovars as well. Their agenda is increasingly one of global jihad, even if, ironically enough, their major supporters are, in effect, the United States and its regional backers.

Foreign supporters

The growing success of the rebellion has been largely due to the growing material help of regional states that wish to see an end of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. Since last spring, the rebellion has been furnished with increasing quantities of lethal equipment by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, delivered mainly through Turkey. There are, however, growing suggestions that the Jordanian desert will become a major transit route, despite the frantic objections of the Jordanian government, desperate not to be drawn into the crisis. The Turkish government, too, is becoming increasingly anxious about the unforeseen consequences of its enthusiastic calls for the Assad regime to go.

Quite apart from the burden of tens of thousands of refugees – a burden it shares with Jordan and Lebanon – Turkey has become particularly anxious about the situation now facing Syria’s Kurds. It was originally concerned that the Assad regime might encourage the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) once again as revenge for the hostility the Erdoğan government had shown to Damascus. Now it is far more concerned by the Syrian withdrawal from vast areas of Syrian Kurdistan in order to recapture cities threatened by the rebellion, leaving an impromptu Kurdish administration to fill the power vacuum. Half of Syrian Kurdistan now appears to be under autonomous control, just like Iraqi Kurdistan next door! For Turkey, that raises the spectre of renewed demands by its own 20 million Kurds for similar treatment.

For Lebanon, the crisis is far more acute. Ever since independence in late 1943, the country has been a proxy arena in which Syrian tensions are often worked out. This has traditionally been particularly true of Tripoli in the north, given that its social and geographical hinterland really lies inside Syria itself. However, since the Israeli invasion of 1982, it has become true of the Biqa Valley in the hinterland to Beirut as well, as Hizbullah has become a major power inside the country. Already clashes between Sunni and Alawi have been reported and there are fears that soon Lebanon itself will be dragged into the Syrian civil war as well, given Hizbullah’s close links to the regime in Damascus.

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Even Israel seems to have decided that it should review its regional positions as well. It was recently reported that a ministerial aide has been meeting Syrian dissidents in Bulgaria – to the intense displeasure of the foreign minister, Avigdor Liebermann. Presumably Tel Aviv has concluded that the Assad regime has backed itself into a corner from which it cannot escape so that its downfall is now only a matter of time. In such circumstances, it would be only prudent to consider how best Israeli security interests might be met. Of course, given the Netanyahu government’s inveterate hostility towards Hizbullah and Iran, other reasons may play as big a role as well!

The ‘Great Game’ in the Levant

In fact, the Israeli initiative highlights an even more worrying aspect of the Syrian crisis beyond the purely regional implications, for its security interests reach far beyond Syria’s borders. Tel Aviv has always considered that Hizbullah is little more than a cat’s-paw for Iran, giving the Islamic republic a pulpit from which it can directly threaten Israel. Indeed, despite the fragile peace that has persisted between Syria and Israel for decades, Israeli politicians have increasingly been concerned about Iranian influence in Damascus and Syria’s engagement with Hizbullah.

Now that Israel’s predominant security concern appears to be related to Iran’s nuclear programme – to such an extent that there are growing fears in Washington that Tel Aviv may embroil it in an attack on Iran before the U.S. elections in November – the impending collapse of the Assad regime must seem to be a golden opportunity of ending Iran’s influence in the Levant. Iran, for its part, is well aware of the importance of its longstanding alliance with Syria in making it into a regional power and giving it access to Hizbullah as well. It, therefore, has every interest in preserving the Assad regime; hence the diplomatic support given by Teheran to Damascus and the military and financial support that accompanies it.

Given that Israel is not alone in its fears of the Iranian nuclear programme and of Iranian ambitions for regional hegemony, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that Saudi Arabia and Qatar should wish to intervene in Syria to undermine Iran as well. What is less easy to understand is the peculiar vehemence of Saudi and Qatari attacks on the Assad regime and their willingness to supply weapons as well. Even if both countries feel they must support the majority Sunni population in Syria against the longstanding tyranny of the heterodox Alawi sect, both must also realise the dangers of prolonged sectarian conflict provoked by the civil war. The minorities, such as the Druze, the Christians and the Alawi, whom the Assad regime has always protected, are bound to defend their interests in the wake of its collapse.

Of course, in terms of the longstanding struggle for regional influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia – King Abdullah of Jordan’s ‘arc of Shi’a extremism’ in the new regional ‘Cold War’ – the current disposition of forces is hardly surprising. In effect, Saudi Arabia is using the Syrian crisis to reinforce its position against Iran as the hegemonic power and the defender of Sunni interests in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, whilst Qatar seeks to bandwagon on its past success in Libya last year. However, in terms of regional stability, Saudi and Qatari policy seems profoundly irresponsible, too. Nor is such irresponsibility confined to regional powers alone, for both Gulf states have been roundly backed by the United States, supported by both the United Kingdom and France. France, of course, as the former colonial power, has long detested the Assad regime, as has the United States, whilst the United Kingdom seeks, as always, Washington’s approval to give it the global stature that it can no longer claim alone.

Yet Washington must also know the horrifying regional implications of the impending collapse of the Syrian state, even as it, with its two European allies, feeds non-lethal equipment and intelligence to rebel forces. It is true that Iran will be diminished by a Syrian collapse, but that will do little to persuade the leadership in Teheran to abandon its nuclear programme; just the opposite. It is true, too, that Hizbullah will be seriously affected by the loss of Syrian diplomatic and material support, but the link with Iran will not be broken, nor will Hizbullah’s hold over the politics of Lebanon, nor its ability to threaten Israel.
Global strategy

Perhaps, then, alongside all the inevitable calculations of how the United States’ resolute stand against the Assad regime and alongside Israel, given U.S. determination to face down Iran, will play out in terms of domestic politics in an election year, there are other, wider calculations as well. For Syria has not only benefited from Iranian support; as important have been the diplomatic support and arms it has received from Russia – to a crescendo of Western protest – together with diplomatic support from China as well. Despite the calumny heaped upon both states as a result, one reason for the positions they have taken has been their objection to Western abuse of the United Nations Security Council to achieve ‘regime change’. That was certainly the lesson that they drew from the Libyan civil war in 2011; hence their refusal to accept further sanctions on Syria and their demands for a negotiated solution between the parties to the conflict instead.

In U.S. eyes, the independent Russian and Chinese stands over Syria reflect their development of a multipolar strategy in world affairs. However, the United States is not prepared to cede the dominant position it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War as the sole power capable of ensuring global hegemonic stability, despite the financial crisis and the catastrophes of Iraq and Afghanistan. Given its massive military dominance, it sees no reason to make such concessions and believes that its own global objectives would be threatened if it did. In addition, it has identified the Pacific as its future geostrategic arena, with China as its potential adversary, irrespective of whether Chinese intentions coincide with such a view. Against that background, the confrontation over Syria and the fate of the Assad regime take on a global significance in which the Syrian people become the inevitable, if incidental, victims.