

Syria's Crisis and the Possible Scenarios Ahead

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With the stalemating Syrian crisis and the resulting confused domestic and regional picture, a number of possible scenarios force themselves on the Middle East region, especially on Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel. While all-out civil war in Syria appears imminent, it has become clear that the Syrian regime will use a variety of 'Samson options' before it meets its unhappy demise. Ceding control of areas on the Syrian-Turkish border to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey considers a terrorist organization, and the possible



deliveries of chemical weapons and long-range missiles to the Lebanese Hezbollah are two such options that produce both an unstable environment and unwarranted contingencies.

The first of such possible scenarios is a move by Turkey to establish safe areas within Syria that would be bases for more

direct action to secure the collapse of the regime in Damascus. Turkey clearly needs to protect itself against costly raids by the PKK, the possibility of al-Qaeda terrorists from Iraq gaining a foothold in the area and along the eastern Syrian-Iraqi border, and the assured insecurity of a simmering civil war to its south. The Turkish military's training of Syrian rebels near the NATO base at Incirlik, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's recent visit to Iraqi Kurdistan (despite Baghdad's objections and accusations of sovereignty violations), and supporting the Free Syrian Army's takeover of the northern city of Aleppo were clear moves with strategic implications.

But should Turkey decide to go through with this scenario, it should be wary of Iranian reaction, now that Tehran is in credible fear of losing its only ally in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic has clear influence on Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki who, in turn, is on good terms with Iraqi President Jalal Talibani, himself a Kurd with a political and military base in northern Iraq. Should such an alliance succeed against Turkey, the latter may have more than it wishes to face in Syria.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah may yet again decide to go against popular will by unilaterally seizing power in Beirut, in an Iranian-sanctioned move to create an alternative to the Assad regime which has been its lifeblood for years. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March, 2011, both the party and Iran have been accused of secretly sending fighters to help against the

revolution. Party General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah has most recently lamented the death of regime stalwarts in Damascus as 'martyrs' and 'comrades in resistance,' thus fomenting speculation that the party, or Iran



for that matter, will not take regime collapse lightly and may want to compensate for it. Iran, it is also thought, would want a base to be used either to fight Israel or in negotiations with the international community about the fate of its nuclear program.

However, while this scenario is possible operationally and Hezbollah may be misguided enough to undertake it, it has great caveats. First, the party's takeover of the country would immediately be followed by the question of how to hold on to it. A majority of Lebanese reject the party's politics and alignment with Iran and Syria; the country's religious and social diversity makes it hard to govern by a Shiite religious party; and some in the party hierarchy itself are not quite keen on using its arms domestically.

Second, while it may be easy to take over power in Beirut, it may be impossible to dislodge over 12,000 UN peacekeepers

deployed since 2006 in the south of the country under the UN-mandated UNIFIL forces to supervise a ceasefire with Israel. Third, Israel may move against Hezbollah when it sees that the party is willing to allow the country to be a base for Iran's strategic reach.

Finally, while Israel will continue its current 'wait and see' position, it will work on multiple fronts. One Israeli scenario may be to foment an already-approaching civil war for two main purposes: delaying the possible establishment of an Islamist-inspired successor regime in Damascus intent on stirring trouble regarding the occupied Golan Heights, and/or dismembering and partitioning Syria into religiously- and ethnically-based entities that pose no threats to it.

Another scenario is to take advantage of Syria's weakness to secure some territorial gains in the Golan for possible use in future negotiations. But such scenario remains remote in the present circumstances because



it may bring sympathy to the Assad regime and complicate matters for the United States.

But one sure scenario is to continue to search for the alleged weapons of mass

destruction and long-range missiles Hezbollah supposedly got or will get from Syria. Finding such weapons will most assuredly be followed by one or multiple raids similar to the one Israel launched in 2007 to destroy a Syrian facility near the Iraqi border purportedly used for a nuclear program. In this scenario, both Hezbollah and Iran would be hard pressed to respond by bombing Israel because they risk a war against Lebanon and an Israeli strike against the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities, an action for which Israel seems to want an excuse.

These are only a few of the possible scenarios accompanying the slowly collapsing Syrian regime. Indeed, many of them are quite probable, given the number of uncertainties and actors involved. And the longer the international community and big players take to arrive at an acceptable solution to the longest Arab Spring, the more likely it is that more scenarios become more possible and quite probable. Syria once again, and through its crisis, has indeed proven that it is one of the most pivotal actors in the Middle East.



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Syrian chemical weapons:

http://www.ijreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/134216633077796630a_b.gif

Happier times, Assad's inner circle intact pre-July 18 2012: <http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/About/General/2012/7/18/1342620693913/Syrias-General-Assef-Shaw-008.jpg>

Hezbollah rockets in action:

http://defense-update.com/analysis/images/rocket_launch_Lebanon.jpg

Syrian Map:

http://mikeely.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/syria_map.jpg

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