

An End-Game in Syria?

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Syria's crisis is approaching the end of its second year with no definite conclusion in sight. Seventy thousand dead and counting; an estimated 150,000 in the regime's jails; millions of internally displaced persons and refugees in neighboring countries, and a destroyed infrastructure, are only a few horrific reminders of a seemingly unending conflict. And yet, everyone is looking for an end to the carnage in a country where neither the regime nor its determined opposition has been able to win in a long standoff that is slowly destroying the country's future and jeopardizing the entire Middle East.



Indeed, it is folly to definitively speak of an end-game in Syria, in terms of both time and outcome. To be sure, the crisis in Syria has dragged on much longer than any other in the 'Arab Spring' countries; only Libya's had the potential of being long, but NATO's intervention decidedly shortened it. As for outcome, the picture has never been

murkier, although it can be safely said that the regime has no future. Confusion rules the diplomatic landscape, initiatives and proposals are systematically shot down even before they are launched, and the UN-Arab League emissary al-Akhdhar al-Ibrahimi is frustrated. Even agreements that have some degree of international legitimacy, such as the Geneva Six-Point Plan of last June, have no chance in an atmosphere where no one wants to be caught blinking.

On the other hand, there are some determinants that influence the timing, process, and outcome of the putative end-game. First is the degree of cohesion with which the Syrian regime can continue to deal with two important facts on the ground: it has lost legitimacy with the large majority of the Syrian people and it is simply living on borrowed time from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Yes, the Syrian regime has maintained its control over its army, but defectors have told many stories about how each unit of the armed forces is under watch by regime loyalists and intelligence operatives ready to shoot deserters on site. Its popular base has shrunk to its Alawite core constituency and that of other minorities united by fear of the unknown. In a sense, and as an opposition leader once quipped, "The regime may claim that it controls Syria; but in reality it occupies it."

Moreover, and as has become patently obvious, the regime is no longer only fighting its own war of survival but that of Russia's position in the Middle East, Iran's

stance vis-à-vis the international community, and Hezbollah's fortunes in Lebanon's future and against Israel. Consequently, any change in the basic facts of these parties' support is likely to upset the existing (dis)equilibrium, forcing the collapse of the regime.

Second is the ability of the Syrian opposition to formulate for itself a winning provisional agenda and for Syria's future a stable and trustworthy governing arrangement. What has been obvious over the last few months have been the opposition's contradictory announcements on how to proceed, and efforts to get to a satisfactory end.

Many have decided long ago that only military action is worth pursuing against a regime uninterested in ceding any control. Others who are under international pressure, including the leader of the umbrella 'Syrian National Coalition' Ahmad Maathe al-Khatib, to seek a peaceful resolution, notwithstanding the regime's atrocities and intransigence. No one, however, can fathom a solution that could keep al-Assad in power for even a provisional period during which Syria's institutional future could be arranged.

The Syrian civilian opposition also seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place. As the Free Syrian Army continues to score victories against the regime's military machine, so do other factions associated with al-Qaeda and operating on almost all fronts. Libya's troubles with its militias would pale in comparison to a potential post-conflict Syria where jihadist fighters

might be in control of vast swaths of land. Armed to the teeth, they are sure to demand a constitutional and social setup that not even Osama bin Laden dreamed of being able to fashion on the Eastern Mediterranean.



Indeed, this is the essence of the third determinant deciding the end-game in Syria. The Arab countries, Turkey, the United States, the European Union and its major actors, in addition to Russia and Iran, cannot accept a role for al-Qaeda in the current or future Syria. The US and European countries have been pilloried over at least the last year for not helping to arm the Syrian rebels against the regime's military machine.

But media reports about disputes and skirmishes between jihadist al-Nusra fighters in areas under their control in northern Syria and local residents about dress codes and codes of conduct, are alarm bells warning all as to what to expect in the future. Needless to say, no one is interested in repeating the experience with 'al-Qaeda in Iraq' between 2004 and 2007, 'al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula' in Yemen between

2011 and 2012, or the recent 'al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' experience in northern Mali.



Syrian Air Force MiG 23 in action:

<http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-oi3O4dtKwXM/UCNuOU1-t1I/AAAAAAAAAyk/nnjGuXGbaoI/s1600/SyAAF+MIG-23BN.jpg>

Thus, and unfortunately for Syria and its people, what is happening today indicates that the end-game in its crisis is far off and undetermined, and that it will continue to bleed for a while to come. Syria indeed has become victim to a myriad of determinants and considerations, combining as they are the priorities of domestic and international actors, each utilizing whatever means necessary to make its adversaries blink.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International

Images Accessed: 16/02/2013

Sunni Syrian protesters:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0712/Evidence-exists-to-bring-Syria-war-crimes-case-French-diplomat-video>

Al Nusra fighters:

<http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2012/12/20/Al-Qaeda-Strength-In-Syrian-Opposition-Continues-To-Grow>