

## The Increasing Complexity of the Internationalised Syrian Conflict

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### ***Summary***

Into its third year, the Syrian conflict has been fuelled by a multiplicity of interest groups and countries, overshadowing the initial cause of the protests. Gains for either side in Syria have come to mean corresponding losses for different regional and international stakeholders.

When the Syrian conflict began in March 2011, the parties to the conflict were quite evident. The international response clearly demarcated the camps into supporters of the 'status quo' i.e., Russia and China and supporters of 'change' i.e., the West and the Sunni neighbours of Syria. As the uprisings wore on, the changing balance of power in the region and the rise of Islamist Sunni governments in North Africa released a new wave of tensions, both for 'secular' Western states as well as Shiite Iran and Hezbollah. The latter have been keen to preserve their base in Damascus and keep secure the Shia sphere of influence. Moreover, both the Shia militia - Hezbollah and the Alawite minority regime in Syria are combating existential threats in the war.

Into its third year now, the Syrian conflict has been fuelled by a multiplicity of interest groups and countries with their own agenda, overshadowing the initial cause of the protests. The war has seen gains and losses for both sides and both sides have indulged in acts of human rights violation including, as it turns out, the use of chemical weapons albeit at a small scale. The scenario has turned disastrously murky and the commitment of the range of actors involved has become ambiguous, particularly within the opposition. With the regime capturing the strategic town of Qusair and steadying itself in the latest showdown in the Northern city of Aleppo<sup>1</sup>, the further participation of regional and international actors is threatening to pull apart the fabric of West Asia. Gains for either side in Syria have come to mean corresponding losses for different regional and international stakeholders.

This issue brief attempts to chart some of the reasons for the latest upswing in the fortunes of Assad regime - an illustration of which was witnessed in the capture of the strategic town of Qusair in May 2013, and the regional and international response to the latest phase of the war that is seeing gains for Assad.

## I. Opposition Weakness and Regime Resurgence

Central to the recent successes of the regime's campaign has been the sheer divide and constant feuds among the opposition's armed and political wings as well as differences within the political groupings and armed groups. The latest political alliance of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has been criticised for its factionalism and ineffectiveness despite being an improvement on the earlier formed Syrian National Coalition. Moreover, the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC), which consists of leftist and Kurdish parties and independent political and youth activists, distinguish themselves from the other rebel alliances in that they support dialogue with the government and largely reject violence.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Syrian army units engage insurgents around Hama, Aleppo', *Press Tv*, 25 June 2013, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/06/24/310590/syria-army-engages-rebels-in-hama-aleppo/>, accessed 25 June 2013.

The Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the opposition too, has been unable to coordinate multiple rebel forces that include the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) as well as myriad militias and Islamist fighters. Compounding this lack of unified military command among the rebels has been the absence of a civilian political structure to report to. Illustrating the dispersed nature of the armed opposition campaigns are the various local insurgent groups that have sprung up against regime forces in different provinces. It is also increasingly becoming clear that it is the jihadist groups and extremist militants like the *Jabhat al-Nusra* that have been responsible for the recent offensives in Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, Deir al-Zor and the Damascus region and not the soldiers under the SMC.

Nevertheless, the Friends of Syria, a group of 11 nations that include Western powers such as Britain, France Germany and US as well as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar among others, have had to reconsider their hesitation in supporting Syria's anti-government fighters. The brutality of some of the militants such as Abu Sakkar of the Islamist al-Farouk Brigade and the proliferation of other extremist outfits have raised fears over the legitimacy of the rebels, yet the deteriorating humanitarian situation has impelled earlier supporters of the opposition to provide aid in any way possible.<sup>2</sup> Further, some organisations such as the CIA have been discreetly arming rebels through Turkey and Jordan.

In stark contrast to the fractured rebel efforts, the Syrian army has been able to turn around from its early losses through extensive military and security restructuring. Its experiences of fighting in 80-100 locations at a time, often without clear frontlines, have forced the regime to learn and adapt while in action.<sup>3</sup> Tight command and control, credible intelligence sources, and 'task-organized combat formations'<sup>4</sup> with a still stable political command to report to, have secured several critical gains for Assad. Coverage of the recent government offensives has highlighted the concerted support of Hezbollah and Iranian militias. And, the regime has been able to maintain the loyalty of its fighting units and paramilitary forces as defections greatly decreased with the momentum turning in favour of the regime. Further, the control and security of the regime's rear regions, population centres, supply routes and the maintenance and disposition of strategic facilities have been delegated to

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<sup>2</sup> The latest meeting of the 'Friends of Syria' on 22 June 2013, at Doha, Qatar published a communiqué stating that each nation involved shall "act in its own way" to support the opposition fighters. All military aid will be channelled through the SMC and the UK will provide £175 million in humanitarian aid. More information available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-friends-of-syria-agree-to-supply-all-the-necessary-material-to-rebels-fighting-president-bashar-alassad-8669631.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Yezid Sayigh, 'Syria's Strategic Balance at Tipping Point', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 June 2013, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/06/07/syria-s-strategic-balance-at-tipping-point/g95b>, accessed 11 June 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

trusted militia-type Popular Committees and a new Popular Defence Army that is around 50,000-60,000 strong. Such alliances have ensured that the regime forces are not overburdened with fighting and maintenance, particularly as the war has pushed the army's movement towards the centre of the rebel reserves. The most recent payoffs for such a planned combat have been seen in the battle for Qusair.

### The Importance of Qusair

Fiercely contested between government forces and the rebels, Qusair is strategically located near the Lebanese border and major supply routes from Homs, Damascus and the Mediterranean port of Tartous, 'a gateway to the mountainous Western coastal region that is the heartland of Mr Assad's Alawite sect'.<sup>5</sup> The regime's latest tactics have indicated the government's intentions in securing its grip on the heavily populated parts in the south and west – from Damascus to Latakia, through Zabadani, Homs, Qusair and Tartous<sup>6</sup> as well as Deraa, Golan Heights and the Jordan border for the control of the international highway to Jordan. Following this, the campaigns to retake the north and the east will be effectively undertaken<sup>7</sup>, especially Aleppo<sup>8</sup>, Syria's commercial centre that has been the opposition's stronghold for awhile.

The battle for Qusair has most importantly highlighted Assad's physical support in the Shiite Hezbollah militia based in Lebanon with 12,000 Hezbollah fighters now fighting alongside Assad's troops and paramilitary militias drawn from his Alawite sect.<sup>9</sup> This has led Iran to consider sending 4000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards in support of President Assad<sup>10</sup>, a decision that has been in the pipeline for awhile now. These figures seem overly exaggerated but it is clear that Hezbollah's intervention in the war has been rooted in the assessment of its strength and future by its leaders and partners in Tehran, particularly in the potential aftermath of a Sunnification of Syria. Shiite Iran has always had its own ambitions in the region and has consistently sought to counterbalance, if not overtake, the oil-funded dominance of the Sunni Arab GCC states. This has inevitably led to wider

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<sup>5</sup> 'Syria conflict: Qusair's strategic importance', *BBC News*, 5 June 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22595767>, accessed 11 June 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Yezid Sayigh, 'Syria's Strategic Balance at Tipping Point', n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Space War*, 19 June 2013, available at [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Assad\\_forces\\_build\\_up\\_for\\_Aleppo\\_offensive\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Assad_forces_build_up_for_Aleppo_offensive_999.html), accessed 22 June.

<sup>9</sup> Hardeep S. Puri, 'A Syrian fire that could consume all', *The Hindu*, 10 June 2013, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-syrian-fire-that-could-consume-all/article4797899.ece>, accessed 12 June 2013.

<sup>10</sup> 'Report: Iran to send 4,000 Revolutionary Guards to bolster Assad's forces', *Al-Arabiya*, 16 June 2013, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/06/16/Report-Iran-to-send-4-000-troops-to-aid-Bashar-al-Assad.html>, accessed 19 June 2013.

unrest in the strategic calculations of Western states, particularly Britain and France as well as a war weary USA. Hezbollah's open participation in the war has accelerated sectarian polarisation upsetting Hamas<sup>11</sup>, its Palestinian ally in the region's anti-Israel network as well as its own home government<sup>12</sup> with the conflict now also spilling over into Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

## II. Regional Worries

Syria's sensitive geography has clearly amplified the impact of the protracted conflict and threats of a spill over have been factored in long and hard by its neighbours. Jordan with more than 500,000 Syrian refugees has been closely monitoring the situation in its backyard. Wary that its occasional support of the Syrian rebels could raise tensions in the aftermath of the regime's successes, it has become the latest country to pre-emptively prepare its defences, receiving a despatch of Patriot missile batteries from the US to secure its border with Syria<sup>14</sup> just as Turkey in January.<sup>15</sup> A detachment of F-16's and a unit of US Marines on amphibious ships off the Red Sea coast will also remain in Jordan after the conclusion of the well-timed Eager Lion exercises that will together 8000 personnel from 19 Arab and European nations and will train Jordanian commandos in border security, irregular warfare, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency.<sup>16</sup>

Israel too, has been watching the conflict, wary that a prolonged conflict would further militarize the Levant with old battle lines converging with new ones. Israel is caught between a rock and a hard place in that its security has been compromised by Assad's actions but the opposition forces have proven to be dominated by Islamist elements and the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, while Assad is a familiar and old enemy, he is a lynchpin

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<sup>11</sup> *Associated Press*, 17 June 2013, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/hamas-urges-former-ally-hezbollah-leave-syria-154307330.html>, accessed 20 June 2013.

<sup>12</sup> 'Lebanese president tells Hezbollah to end Syria campaign', 20 June 2013, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-20/220986-lebanese-president-tells-hezbollah-to-end-syria-campaign.ashx#axzz2Wk1XNIS3>, accessed 21 June 2013.

<sup>13</sup> *The Independent*, 24 June 2013, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/dozens-dead-as-syrian-war-spreads-to-sidon-in-lebanon-8672131.html>, accessed 25 June 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor Luck, 'Jordan starts deploying Patriot missiles, F-16s in northern region', *The Jordan Times*, 15 June 2013, available at <http://jordantimes.com/jordan-starts-deploying-patriot-missiles-f-16s-in-northern-region>, accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>15</sup> 'Second set of NATO Patriot missiles in Turkey go active', *Reuters*, 29 January 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/29/us-syria-crisis-patriot-idUSBRE90S0MJ20130129>, accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>16</sup> 'US war games send signal to Bashar al-Assad', *The Indian Express*, 19 June 2013, available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/us-war-games-send-signal-to-bashar-al-Assad/1130985/0>, accessed 19 June 2013.

in the anti-Israeli alliance between Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas and provides Iran with steady access to its proxies in Damascus. Yet, in the potential wake of Assad's defeat and the absence of a powerful and legitimate central government, Syria could become overrun with chaos, serving as an ideal base for terrorist activity; a highly dangerous and existential threat on Israel's north eastern border. In fact, the heightened Shia-Sunni rivalry underlying the Syrian conflict has even left Hamas rethinking if it should support its Shiite backers in Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah or its Sunni allies in Egypt, Turkey and Qatar<sup>17</sup>.

All of these concerns have pushed world powers and different foreign actors to heavily invest in if not reconsider their strategies in the conflict and its overflow into the region.

### III. International Response

Throughout the conflict, Turkey and Qatar have been behind the opposition groups inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood while Saudi Arabia has supported the Salafist rebels. Qatar has in fact, convinced the Arab League to hand over Syria's seat to the opposition and have provided the rebels with upto US\$ 1-3 billion in aid.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Qatari single minded support to anyone who will bring down the House of Assad has negatively impacted the legitimacy of opposition groups. Saudi-Qatari rivalries have further fragmented the Syrian opposition coalition and opportunistic jihadi fighters have exploited the access to arms and money. Further, Saudi Arabia has been beckoned by the US<sup>19</sup> to involve itself deeper in the Syrian crisis to offset the repercussions of Qatar's reckless financing. The battle for Qusair was the first to be fully sponsored by Saudi Arabia<sup>20</sup> and its loss to the Syrian regime forces will have important consequences for the Kingdom's investment in the conflict.

Russia has at the moment backtracked on its earlier statements and has agreed to freeze its existing arms deals to deliver S-300 air defence systems to Syria<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, the US has accepted Russia's requirement that Assad's future be decided by the outcome of

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<sup>17</sup> 'Syria's sectarian war causes Hamas split: Analysts', *Ahram Online*, 21 June 2013, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/74572/World/Region/Syrias-sectarian-war-causes-Hamas-split-Analysts.aspx>, accessed 21 June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, 'How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution', *Financial Times*, 16 May 2013, available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html#axzz2WeseayNm>, accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Hassan Hassan, 'Syria is now Saudi Arabia's Problem', *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 6 June 2013, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/06/syria\\_is\\_now\\_saudi\\_arabias\\_problem?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/06/syria_is_now_saudi_arabias_problem?wp_login_redirect=0), accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Alex Jones' *Prison Planet*, 14 June 2013, available at <http://www.prisonplanet.com/russia-keeps-freeze-on-s-300-contract-with-syria-%E2%80%93-kremlin.html>, accessed 19 June 2013.

negotiations or the people's will. Washington has now put its weight behind the idea of an orderly transition of power than an outright capture of the government by rebel forces, many among whom have been blacklisted as terrorist groups like the Jabhat al-Nusra. Despite the US confirmation of long drawn reports from Britain and France over the regime's use of chemical weapons coinciding with Assad's gaining momentum, the US is extremely cautious of tipping the scales in favour of dubious forces in the opposition exploiting the civil war à la Afghanistan in the 1980's and the Kosovo Liberation Army in the mid-late 1990's. Nonetheless, its lack of public strategy and covert supply of weapons have left US policy makers increasingly worried. Meanwhile, though Britain and France have supported the lifting up of the EU arms embargo on weapons to Syrian rebels, they acknowledge the dangerous pitfalls of weapons reaching the wrong rebels.

Moving onwards, the US and Russia have agreed to co-sponsor the resumption of negotiations that had begun last year. Termed the Geneva II Conference, it was agreed in May this year that US Secretary of State John Kerry would convince the opposition for talks whilst his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov would deliver the Assad camp. While the latter agreed, the former have been too disparate their response. The conference intended for May has since been postponed to June and now possibly July or later. However, June's G8 Summit in Northern Ireland culminated with world leaders acknowledging the importance of a political than a military solution.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

According to Yezid Sayigh, the regime possesses 'escalation dominance', that is, the ability to control the pace of escalation'.<sup>23</sup> To counter this, the FSA and other rebel fighting units should ideally cohere towards a 'negotiating framework'<sup>24</sup> without attaching unrealistic preconditions like Assad's exit. Assad on the other hand, has utilised the delay in the stunted negotiating process to achieve the regime's hold over as extensive an area as possible to ensure superior bargaining power. Meanwhile opposition allies have had to reconsider their hesitations due to grave losses among the opposition fighters and the escalation of the humanitarian crisis. Further, the sectarian underpinnings of the conflict mean that a bloody retribution is most likely if either side achieves total victory, which will ensure the blockage of any meaningful political settlement.

At this juncture, with the tremendous rise in human and economic costs, diplomacy is the only way to cool down the lethal momentum of the conflict. Foreign and regional actors

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<sup>22</sup> *The Independent*, 19 June 2013, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/g8-summit-outcome-britain-will-not-plunge-recklessly-into-deeper-involvement-in-the-syrian-civil-war-says-david-cameron-8665154.html>, accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Yezid Sayigh, 'Syria's Strategic Balance at Tipping Point', n. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

need to clarify their strategies in the conflict though covert interests might prevail in the end. Both Western and regional allies need to maintain realistic expectations as a political solution is bound to require steady compromises; a military solution or intervention only providing a bloody and untenable alternative of the last resort. All of this means that the Geneva II Conference is at present the clearest diplomatic forum available to restore the rebellion's legitimacy and root out extremist elements and foreign fighters. Otherwise, Assad's objective to manage his presidency till the 'Syrian people decide' in 2014 will be much easier to secure and Syria will be thoroughly destabilised.