Workshop summary notes - Syria: A political track beyond chemical weapons?

In October 2013 the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) convened a high-level, off-the-record workshop on the Syrian civil war attended by European, Middle Eastern and international officials and experts from inside and outside of Syria. The following notes, which offer a range of opinions, reflect a summary of the key points raised during the discussion. The collected views should not be taken to represent the uniform assessment of the attendees, nor of ECFR.

Conflict dynamics

- The front lines have not significantly changed since 2012.
- The regime still holds key locations and all the regional capitals except Raqqa. It is regaining some lost strategic bases and deploying its resources in a more calculated way e.g. concentrating on key highways and supply roads.
- The regime is unable to re-take many of the ‘liberated’ areas and anyway would be unable to deploy the resources, notably the manpower, to hold them.
- The rebels are less able to push at the front lines and are notably less convinced that they will ultimately be victorious. Following the chemical weapons deal it has become clear that the West will neither strike militarily, nor provide significant arms in the immediate future, and the opposition are facing up to the reality of a struggle that, if it can be sustained, will last for years.
- The regime needs to do less than the opposition to survive. The regime could lose the entire North and it would still be in much the same position.
- Recently we have seen a major change in international media coverage where the opposition had previously enjoyed a very positive light. The focus has now shifted to the opposition’s extremist elements.
- There has been an increase in criminal activity and inter-group fighting on both sides.
- This is not one civil war. As with many civil wars: this is now being fought as a multitude of overlapping and intersecting struggles – where the neighborhood, village or town level is often more salient than the national picture.
- The economy is devastated and the cost of living is escalating. The Syrian population is exhausted and broken. For those who are not in direct conflict areas, the economy is the major issue. Food supply is very problematic (exacerbated by a bad harvest this year) especially in opposition areas, raising the question of whether people could turn back to the regime to get food, education, services etc.
- While the conflict battle lines often break down along sectarian/ethnic lines, it is still not a sectarian struggle per se. We must be careful to distinguish between what is considered a legitimate military target by the two sides and what is genuine ethnic cleansing.
• It is notable that in rebel-held areas the middle class is largely alienated and are staying at home/ not joining the opposition.

The opposition

• Significant fragmentation and increase in intra-fighting between rebel groups in the North.
• There is a clear radicalisation towards al-Qaida (AQ) leaning groups in the armed opposition. The Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS) is still small in numbers, but is very powerful. ISIS has managed to destroy many fledgling state structures in opposition areas, pushing out moderate and more Syrian-orientated groups.
• Foreign fighters are increasingly drawn to Latakia, directly to kill Alawites.
• A clear differentiation is emerging between Jubhat al-Nusra (JN) and ISIS. JN is more nationalist and appears to avoid overly antagonising local communities. ISIS is now the more malignant presence, and tends to attract more extremist foreign fighters. JN has become more Syrian as foreign fighters have left it to join ISIS.
• It appears there is an inevitable internal confrontation coming between Syrian and foreign fighters in the opposition ranks.
• ISIS thought they would be targeted by the US strikes. They are now trying to clear areas of groups they suspect could turn on them. ‘Sahwa’ has become a negative word. Islamists accuse some opposition groups of allying with the West to attack jihadists.
• More and more moderate opposition elements seem to be ‘sitting it out’ as the war becomes more ‘dirty’. They don’t have means to take ISIS on and seem to be waiting to see how things pan out. FSA finding it hard to encourage new sign-ups due to a lack of ammunition and prospects.
• To gain local support armed groups must provide either victories or effective local administration. The revolutionary councils are the best mainstream groups providing functioning local administration, though they are under-resourced. Jihadists are less interested in providing governance, except Sharia courts. The external opposition, the National Coalition (NC), has still not provided local administration capacity.
• The external opposition has failed to win support of the population. The SNC and General Idris do not control serious assets on ground. Idris is treated as a friend or a colleague by some opposition in the country, but he is not seen as their commander.
• Moaz al-Khatib remains the most popular opposition political figure inside Syria.
• The conflict has reached the point where opposing the regime has come to be solely equated with opposing it militarily, with no significant internal political opposition.

The regime

• The regime still has significant Sunni support that in part can be attributed to the lack of a viable alternative option. The opposition has no compelling model to present and as it radicalises it is losing middle ground support.
• If elections were to occur in the near future, Assad righty feels confident he would win.
• The regime is not a pure sectarian actor: it is brutal and will target anyone in its way – but it is not pushing to establish or ready to compromise with an Alawite state; it wants all of Syria. Militants associated with the regime do commit sectarian acts.
• Some initial massacres by pro-Assad supporters emerged as a result of local actors pursuing local issues – they were not commanded by the regime leadership. Since July 2012 the regime has shifted to a more Chechen style counter-insurgency, including assassinations and massacres, to induce popular fear.
• Increasing incidents of Alawite-on-Alawite violence, similar in ways to the opposition in-fighting. The regime has even arrested some Shabiha leaders as war-profiteering and criminality has soared.
• The regime has shown itself incapable of reforming. Over the past year it has not taken advantage of any military victories to try and co-opt moderates, nor does it have any strategy to do so. It continues to arrest and kill moderates and the unarmed opposition.

Political negotiations

• There is currently little prospect of meaningful negotiations between the two sides to “solve the conflict”. Neither is ready for a full political solution. The regime has demonstrated that it is not able to reform and the opposition will not compromise on their pre-requisite of Assad stepping down.
• The opposition/NC has not really put forward a political proposal. They promise big things for the future, but have no plan to get to that post-Assad era. The NC wants an outright victory, but this is: a) not viable and b) why should regime supporters join without concrete modalities of how power-sharing works, timetable, frameworks etc. Currently the opposition just seems to be saying “surrender and we will be nice to you”. The NC needs a specific platform with proposals on what a future Syria could look like.
• Internationally, there are new openings. US-Russia CW deal and new Iran talks could open up a space for more productive discussions/negotiations. The P5 have a common interest in moving the conflict to a different trajectory.
• A counter-terrorism narrative is increasingly prevalent in discussions and strategies for Syria - it could form a common interest for the US and Russia, for regional players and even some regime and non-AQ opposition element - but this framing is not, for now, the dominant driver in western thinking.
• In part due to the rise of Islamists and ISIS, the West is now considering what it would mean if Assad was to be defeated – would there be stability?
• Ongoing external support from the region for the continuation of fighting undermines efforts to find a way out. It prevents stalemate and war-fatigue from setting in and allows an increasing number of people to benefit from the developing war economy.
The Turkish border is a key entry/exit/delivery point for fighting by the opposition and notably foreign jihadists. Turkey therefore has a potentially critical role/leverage.

Syria remains a crucible of regional divisions. But the changing dynamic of the conflict and region are critical – important psychological shifts at work. Saudi and the Gulf facing new dynamic given growing radicalisation.

The missing element of Geneva I was that it didn’t contain a strategic vision for the region as a whole, which is worth considering for Geneva II. This possibility for regional underpinning opens the door to real-politik towards a regional deal. Potential trade-offs involving Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi-Iranian interests etc. suggest that a regional accord involving Saudi, Iran, Turkey, Qatar is needed.

Iran

- For the international community Syria is still clearly a side-show to the Iran nuclear file. The US and Europe see Iran as the more important issue: this may facilitate deal-making over Syria, or result in Syria being “sold out” for an Iranian deal.
- The potential US-Iran deal is a significant new element. If a deal is made on the nuclear issue, Iran could become more flexible in its support for Assad and on Hezbollah. Deep disagreement on this point.
- Syria as a conduit to Hezbollah will remain important for Iran. Syria cannot become anti-Iranian. Can the West accept continued Iranian influence in Syria?
- Conversely, what will be the impact on Syria of the potential failure of the US-Iran rapprochement?
- Opposition position: Iran cannot be at table. The US asked the NC if Iran could join Geneva II and Ahmed Jabra refused as this would be seen as selling out groups on ground. However, Iran could be considered as part of the Syrian regime delegation.
- Iran is trying to reach out to Saudi Arabia and smooth the path for various deals. The new head of National Supreme Council, Ali Shamkhani, was honored by King Abdullah for a past warming of bilateral relations and there are other reported rapprochement initiatives going out from Iran to Saudi.

Saudi Arabia

- Saudi Arabia came into the conflict very late, let other countries take control and acted haphazardly. But now focused. It is inconceivable to Riyadh to see a settlement that includes Assad (though remnants of the regime are acceptable), nor can Iran have a role in the future of Syria. These are its ‘fundamentals’.
- Nascent project to create new national Syrian army to take on Assad, and force him to negotiate from position of weakness and agree terms of surrender. Expanding to 40-50,000, with weapons and logistics training. There are unlimited funds at the disposal of the project.
• Moving on 1) blocking support for AQ groups; and 2) reining in other Arab actors - have stopped Qataris to a large extent.
• Riyadh feels let down by West: Obama administration gave the Kingdom firm assurances, then changed its mind. Europeans are not a significant factor.
• Riyadh now considers the conflict an Arab problem to be solved by them alone.

Geneva II talks

• Geneva process should not be seen as a method for a specific agreement, this would be too high a bar. But it could act as a locus for adversaries to work out necessary deals.
• A Geneva II process will only work if it is one track and all sides support it. If everyone is also working towards alternative plan B, doomed to fail.
• Geneva II needs to deal with both aspects of this conflict: the international one and the Syrian one. Following an international dialogue there should be an intra-Syrian one.
• At international level Geneva II must be fully inclusive. Iran and Saudi should be at the table.
• The empowerment of local government is key and preferable to a Dayton/Taif style sectarian agreement. Different groups can be accounted for on a regional basis thereby avoiding agreements based solely on sectarian identities. Emphasis should be placed on regional level – using existing structures. A decentralized governance structure as a step forward.
• Given that it is unlikely that a big political deal will be quickly struck, short term focus should be on local ceasefires and humanitarian access.
• In regime-controlled Syria there are pockets of opposition, such as Houla. These places want and need local ceasefires for provision of food etc. In opposition-held Syria i.e. in parts of Aleppo, there are isolated regime areas with similar needs. These could be building blocks. Could the international community help facilitate ceasefires?
• Despite difficulties, ceasefires are feasible (and have already seen some efforts bear fruit on very small scale). In Lebanon’s civil war there were over 600 ceasefires and were often made a mockery of; but in the end, less people were killed as a result.
• There is clearly no common position on Assad’s role and equally no real plan to depose him or accept his continued role. Assad’s role in any transition is not being honestly addressed in diplomacy.

Concluding thoughts

• Little hope for immediate deal-making between domestic warring parties but this is a moment for new international openings. The consensus is that there is no imminent deal that could be stuck, but the new political space could improve the situation.
• There are four levels to this conflict: International, regional, national and local. The top and bottom levels are the mostly likely places where progress could be made. The regional and national level seem the most stuck. Focus should be on using these levels to push for local ceasefire and humanitarian access.
• There might be some space to work with between “saying no need for Assad to go just now” and saying “he should not stay indefinitely”.
• What would Geneva II and the need to present a negotiating position mean for the Assad government?
• What would a strategic negotiating opposition look like?
• How you manage relations with your allies is clearly as challenging as how you manage relations with adversaries. For the US this principally means how to work with its Gulf allies.

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