



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 5, Issue 1

January 2014

Syria's Civil War: No Resolution in Sight

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While at a lunch some time ago attended by several of my former U.S. Foreign Service colleagues, one, whom I had worked for and respected, told our Israeli guest that it was quite predictable that the Arab people would explode onto the streets against their dictatorial governments. You could see it coming, though holding my tongue, I wanted to blurt out, when did you or anyone else write a high-profile article about the coming Arab revolutions? His remarks reminded of the comment that economists had predicted 10 of the last six recessions.

It is true that those who worked in or on the Arab countries were well aware of the pent up popular frustrations and the poor records of the regimes that claimed to govern them. Yet, these same regimes had been in power for 40 years or more, largely following the same policies and practices. They trumpeted "security and stability" as their virtues. Challenges to their rule had been few and far between, not to mention short lived. You see, these regimes had become quite adept at coup-proofing themselves. They created overlapping and redundant security and intelligence services, all competing with one another and each one reporting to the leader or his most trusted family members. These family members were appointed to sensitive positions and allowed to profit from their offices and connections, as were other non-family loyalists who had proven themselves. Thus, since the 1970s, few threats existed to the entrenched regimes and almost none came from within the ranks of the militaries or security/intelligence services. Nevertheless, there is almost nothing the autocratic Middle East regimes feared more than large, widespread, and prolonged demonstrations and rioting. Knowing that their police forces might not be able to restore order, they would then face the dreaded need to call upon army units to confront their fellow nationals.

Secular liberals and human rights activists did not enjoy strong popular support and thus were easy for the regimes to silence. The only organized opposition in most Arab countries were Islamists. The most disciplined groups with the most committed followers were able to survive, often despite being outlawed. Their followers often endured torture and years of incarceration. Some were even executed or died in prison of mistreatment. Some Islamist groups came to denounce violence and were tolerated to a certain degree, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while others groups remained officially proscribed, with even membership punishable by death. Such was the case in Saddam's Iraq and under the Assads of Syria.

Despite the regimes' efficient and ruthless state security organs, popular frustrations were building for years accelerated by a huge youth demographic. Arab countries have many similarities, but they also have plenty of differences, making it unfair and unsound to just stereotype the lot of them. However, among their similarities is the startling youth of their populations. About half of all the people in the Arab states are under 21 and about two-thirds

MES Notes

This issue of *Insights* carries an abridged version of a talk presented on 20 November 2013 as part of the Middle East Lecture Series hosted by the Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University. With the Geneva II Conference on Syria just recently concluded, Ambassador Kattouf's insights remind us of the complex challenges facing those trying to resolve the Syrian crisis.

Information about the MES Lecture Series is available at the MES website at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/SitePages/Middle%20East%20Studies.aspx>, or you can contact Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcmil.edu.

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are under 35. A youthful population can lead to rapid economic growth or, failing that, cause tremendous instability.

Unfortunately, another trait most Arab countries share is a weak public education system. The school systems seem intent on producing obedient, passive citizens. A great deal of rote learning and teaching to the test occurs. Inquiry and discussion in the classroom are the exception rather than the rule. In general, Arab society instills deference to authority figures and is characterized by paternalism. This is true at home, in school, in matters of religious instruction, and finally in dealing with governmental authority. Perhaps, these authoritarian aspects of the culture explain to some degree why the Arab revolutions didn't occur sooner and why some opposition movements are themselves authoritarian.

What the brash, brave, and innovative young people organizing the initial demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt didn't foresee was the degree to which their quest for dignity and a voice in their governance would come to benefit some of the more authoritarian and reactionary opposition movements in their countries. Although neither Tunisia nor Egypt are known for harboring the more extreme forms of Islam, they both had well organized, highly disciplined Muslim Brotherhood parties that were prepared to mobilize their supporters behind their candidates for the constituent assemblies and interim parliaments.

Both Tunisia and Egypt are relatively homogeneous countries. Their respective militaries' loyalty is to the nation, institutional values, and their perquisites. This homogeneity and the values of their professional militaries contrast markedly from Syria's. Those differences go far in explaining why Bashar Assad was not overthrown and why a terrible civil war has ensued. In Syria, the professional military identified with and was much more loyal to the regime and to their religious sect. On what basis do I make this claim? I served at the U.S. Embassy in Syria on three separate occasions—in the 1970s, the 1990s, and at the beginning of the New Millennium.

To understand this conflict, it is important to understand who the Alawites are, how they came to dominate the military and eventually the rest of the country's power centers, and why they fight as a cohesive minority. It is said that the Alawites came from Shi'a Islam, but their belief system has evolved into something far removed from other forms of Islam. While official census data for religion is unavailable, it is estimated that Syria's Alawites comprise about 12% of the population; the Christians, who have been emigrating, once may have been 20% of Syria, but today probably number only about 10%; the Druze are another 3%; and the Shi'a may be 5%. The Sunni Kurds in the northeast of Syria account for another 9%. The majority of Syria's populace, probably 60%, are Sunni Arabs. Regarded as heretics or even infidels, the Alawites suffered scorn and persecution during much of the Ottoman rule over Syria. They took refuge in the hard-scrabble coastal mountains overlooking Tartus and Latakia. So poor were many Alawite families that they sometimes sold their daughters as indentured servants to city folk. When the French after WWI were awarded the mandate for Syria and Lebanon, they followed their traditional divide and rule strategy. The Alawites were not only offered an autonomous area in their mountain redoubts but they also joined the French-officered gendarmerie in large numbers. Meanwhile, the majority Sunnis saw service in a colonial force as unpatriotic and beneath them. So Alawite men received military training and discipline that held them in good stead when the French finally evacuated Syria in June 1945 and the new Republic of Syria needed its own army. Successive coups and countercoups from 1949 through 1966 led to group after group being cashiered or retired until the Alawites were the only sect with dominant power. They then settled scores among themselves, with Hafez al-Assad's becoming President after the final coup in November 1970 that toppled his military and governmental rival, the Alawite general Salah Jadid.

In the past, the regime ruled effectively through the aforementioned series of overlapping security and intelligence services dominated by the Alawites and elite military units that had the best training and equipment. These units were either wholly Alawite—the Presidential Guard, or largely so, including the Special Forces. However, before the uprising, the Syrian army totaled between 250,000 and 300,000 soldiers and was largely a conscript armed forces. Most young Syrian males serve and acquire military training, including, of course, familiarity with various armaments. This reality looms large in today's situation.

Bashar's Formative Experiences

When Bashar al-Assad became President of Syria in July 2000, he had been understudying his father for six years. Originally, he was to become an ophthalmologist and was doing a medical residency in England when his brother, Baasil, the heir-apparent, died in a car accident. Bashar claims that his father left the choice to him as to whether to prepare for leadership of Syria.

In my talks, I cannot resist comparisons to the famous novel by Mario Puzo, *The Godfather*. My take is that Bashar al-Assad is Michael Corleone, the son who was going to make the family proud by pursuing a prestigious career outside the family business—governing Syria. And yes, the methods used by the Syrian leadership to remain in power and profit from its leadership have strong similarities to the classic Mafia families. Bashar, as Michael, thought he could make the family more legitimate. He began by encouraging some open discussions by intellectuals and other luminaries, who apparently took him much too seriously. His fathers' stalwarts and advisors are reputed to have intervened to school him on the limits of such initiatives, and very soon a crackdown occurred. The experiment was never tried again. Bashar came to understand that to maintain power, he would have to adapt to the family's ruthless system.

His confidence increased when he convinced himself that the Bush Administration had a plan to unseat him and that he had thwarted it. It didn't, but the Bush Administration did seek to isolate the Syrian regime especially after the assassination of the prominent Lebanese leader Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005. His new circle of international friends, most importantly Turkey, helped him break out of beleaguered status. This further led him to believe that he was a gifted international strategist and knew best what his people needed. A formerly self-effacing young man had now acquired quite a bit of hubris. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview Bashar gave to Jay Soloman in January 2011, he dismissed any thought that the uprisings in Tunisia or Egypt could spread to Syria. He followed those statements by condescendingly stating that the introduction of democratic practice required a long period of dialogue with and among one's people, and that Syria was a long way from being ready.

Of course, less than two months later, the citizens of the impoverished southern border town of Dera'a came into the streets to protest the arrest and harsh treatment of their teenage boys for scrawling anti-regime graffiti around town. The regime quickly turned to lethal force, arrests, torture, and mass punishment to make an example of the town and to deter others from joining. This should have worked, but it didn't.

Post Dera'a

Even as Dera'a protests were being brutally put down, other protestors emerged on to the streets of midland cities such as Homs, Hama, and Latakia, as well as the eastern Euphrates city of Deir al-Zor. The regime largely used loyalist units and the intelligence services to gun down and arrest peaceful demonstrators. In areas in which large Alawite populations existed, militias dubbed the Shabiha (ghosts) terrorized protesting neighborhoods.

It has been clear for some time that this conflict is a sectarian civil war. Civilian fighters, many of whom have military training, have been joined by defecting soldiers. Most military resistance is being locally coordinated. Makeshift clinics have sprung up after the regime began to kill and arrest those at hospitals being treated for their wounds. Small unit militias began to pick off regime convoys, checkpoints, and Shabiha thugs. More ominously, extreme Islamist movements with substantial financing were bringing in fighters from a wide variety of countries to fight the Assad regime. However, unlike most Syrian oppositionists their goal was not a free, democratic, pluralistic Syria. Their ideology calls for the establishment of a caliphate encompassing as much of the Islamic populations as possible, starting with Syria and Iraq. Their narrow-minded and distorted interpretations of Islam revolve around strict segregation of the sexes, the domination of women by their husbands or close male relatives, the expulsion or extreme marginalization of not only religious minorities, but fellow Sunnis who do not adhere to their practices, and the belief that coercive violence in pursuit of their ends is sanctioned by God. They seek to return to a time in early Islam that never was. In their view, Shi'a Muslims are heretics and the Alawites, who are an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, are outright infidels. For both sides, then, this has become an existential conflict—neither side believes it will survive a victory by the other.

Facing an enemy that potentially has most of the country's population to draw upon for recruits and support, morale among the military and security units was plummeting as they found it increasingly difficult to control territory and protect themselves and their comrades. There are now whole regions in the north and east of the country that the military has largely ceded to the opposition. Some reports exaggerated the defections from the military, but late last year and early this year they appeared to be growing as soldiers could envision safe-haven areas for themselves and their families. The minorities, however, largely stayed loyal and willing to fight.

The regime has a powerful hand to play, even now, and cannot be easily dislodged. Despite agreeing to surrender their arsenal of chemical weapons, they still have a wide arrange of heavy weaponry and an air force that they can employ at will. More recently, it has become apparent that the theocratic Shi'a regime in Iran and their Shi'a co-religionists in Lebanon, who largely give fealty to Hezbollah, are providing highly trained and effective fighters to the Syrian regime. Some from these groups are also training Alawites not in the armed forces to be a home guard to protect their locales, intimidate opposition sympathizers, and augment the armed forces in their areas.

And what of U.S. policy? In my opinion, President Obama called for Assad's ouster without a plan for achieving it. He may have believed in the inevitability of an opposition victory. The U.S. government also leaned on allies such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to provide only basic arms to well vetted groups, while resisting taking an active role itself. Only since last spring has the U.S. begun in earnest to train and equip several hundred fighters in Jordan. Much of the hesitance understandably results from fears that the arms will fall into the hands of jihadists and be used to commit crimes against humanity. U.S. policy seems to be largely focused on humanitarian aid to assist the millions of refugees and displaced persons and to work with the Friends of Syria group and the Russians, who are not members, to try to convene a Geneva II meeting to advance a diplomatic settlement. But, what did Geneva I accomplish? In late June 2012, a number of countries gathered in Geneva to develop a roadmap of sorts to end this conflict. There was consensus on the need to form a transitional government drawn from both sides that would revive government functions and prepare for elections. However, the U.S. and Russia came away with widely differing interpretations of the role of President Assad and his close associates in all of this. The U.S. stated that once a transitional process was in place, Assad must leave office. The Russians maintain that the Syrian people must ultimately decide on who should lead

them and that Assad and his regime could not be excluded during the transition period. What we can say is that the U.S. position looks increasingly untenable as Assad's forces have won several strategic battles of late that are helping to consolidate his hold over the capital and the routes to the coastal mountains and port cities.

Moreover, the recently Russian-brokered deal on relieving Assad of his chemical weapons yielded some tangible gains for the Syrian president. First, his cooperation is necessary to rid Syria of this WMD and, thus, in a perverse way the U.S. has a stake in his survival for now. Second, by concentrating so heavily on CW, Assad may believe he has a freer hand to utilize other highly lethal arms against the rebels and their supporters.

So How Does It End.....Or Does It?

Two Boston-based academics who studied civil wars had this to say. "The historical record suggests that most insurgent movements fail." Typically this is due to the disparity in resources available to the opposing sides. Established states enjoy an advantage in terms of well-organized militaries, heavy firepower, and deep financial pockets. However, when the insurgents do prevail, it is because of their strong will to win. In the cases of Algeria and Vietnam, the insurgents were willing to accept horrendous losses and sacrifices for their respective causes. They also enjoyed broad popular support. In both of these cases their main adversaries were foreign armies not fighting on their home soil.

In the case of Syria, we have already seen the opposition's courage, willingness to sacrifice, and substantial popular support. They realize that failure will result in their slaughter. However, the Assad regime is not a bunch of outsiders. They have their backs against the proverbial wall and imagine the same fate for themselves and their families. Bashar al-Assad is further helped by the history of persecution the Alawites endured at the hands of Sunni rulers and by the growing presence and strength of radical, al-Qaida-like elements among an opposition movement that may not like them, but respects their fighting prowess and is not prepared to dispense with their help.

I do not believe that either side can win an outright victory. To my mind, even the assassination of Assad or the collapse of most aspects of his regime's governance, is more likely to result in a country divided de facto among several factions that are unwilling to negotiate with each other. The Alawites come from the coastal mountains of Syria and can regroup there, while trying to maintain control of the two key port cities of Tartus and Latakia. The Kurds are largely concentrated in Syria's northeast and abut their fellow Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. The Arab Sunni opposition as some predicted has splintered into several factions, including those disparate and loosely affiliated militias that fight under the banner of the free Syrian army. And the extreme Islamists, the most prominent of whom is Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have vowed their allegiance to al-Qaida and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The bloodshed and suffering in Syria is bad enough, but it threatens to eventually engulf neighboring Lebanon and Iraq that have similar, if not identical, sectarian and ethnic divides. It is not entirely unthinkable that borders rather arbitrarily drawn up by Britain and France after WWI could be defacto redrawn by force of arms and "ethnic cleansing." The growing hatreds, militarization of disputes, and desire for revenge and rough justice could even pull in Israel and destabilize Jordan. For the U.S. much is at stake, but no solutions present themselves.

What Can Be Done

The prospects of a negotiated peace agreement leading to a democratic, pluralistic Syria that respects human rights and is at peace with its neighbors are now slim. The circumstances are not ripe for successful negotiations and may not exist for many years. A military stalemate on the ground may be taking shape but it is far from consolidated. Neither side believes that a satisfactory negotiated solution is currently possible. Moreover, no party or group can clearly speak in the name of the opposition. If the jihadists come to dominate the armed opposition and control much of northern and eastern Syria, ask yourself, what incentives they would have to negotiate. They cannot hope to receive recognition or legitimacy from the international community for their emirate of Islamic Syria or Iraq. Yet they would have a populace to rule, new resources, and a huge base of operations. As I said, the U.S. and the international community currently have no good options. We must provide humanitarian aid and services; we need to continue diplomatic efforts; and finally, we need to assist allies such as Jordan and Turkey in insulating themselves as much as possible from the most destabilizing aspects of the Syrian conflict.

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