

CURRENT HISTORY

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Syria’s Long Civil War

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The first year and a half in the current round of Syria’s long civil war took as many lives as the three-week orgy of violence in the city of Hama that ended the last round in 1982. In both cases, some 25,000 to 30,000 people were killed, and in both cases, the root issues and the competing sides have been the same: a minority-based regime, allied with other minorities along with privileged elements from the majority population, ruling over a poor and often dysfunctional state that does not tolerate dissenters.

The last round in the Syrian civil war began after the regime of Hafez al-Assad in 1976 intervened in Lebanon’s civil war. While that intervention had broad regional and international support, it was far more controversial at home. For Syrian forces to come to the aid of Lebanon’s Christians—who were on the verge of defeat at the hands of Muslim forces—was seen by pious Sunni Muslims in Syria as proof positive of the heretical nature of the Assad regime, a regime dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Islamic Shiism.

The resulting low-intensity civil war, instigated by the Muslim Brotherhood and fueled by forces that had given rise to the rapid growth of Islamist politics throughout the Middle East in the 1970s, continued in Syria for six years. Assassinations, attacks on Alawite military cadets, the mass murder of Muslim Brotherhood prisoners, and ultimately a crippling commercial strike brought the Assad government to the brink of collapse.

To ensure the survival of his regime, Hafez al-Assad cut a political deal with his bitter rivals, the Sunni bourgeoisie, heirs of the notable class that had dominated Syrian politics for centuries. This alliance between Alawite military power and Sunni (and Christian) economic muscle gave

Assad the political cover he needed to launch an assault on Hama, the stronghold of Muslim Brotherhood power in Syria. By leveling much of the city with a relentless artillery barrage, Assad drove the Muslim Brotherhood underground, thereby winning the first round of Syria’s long civil war.

A BIGGER LEBANON

Syria’s troubles go well beyond warring ethnic and confessional groups, to the fact that Syria as a political entity—as a nation—hardly exists. To be sure, the country’s two major cities, Damascus and Aleppo, have very long histories and strong localized identities. However, until the twentieth century, Syria was never a country unto itself. During the half millennium when it was part of the Ottoman Empire, Syria was not even constituted as a single administrative district within the empire, but was split among several districts.

The invention of modern Syria following the First World War was based largely on agreements between the French and the British. Syria was not unique in this. Indeed, the modern borders of scores of countries in the developing world were based more on the interests of the colonial powers than on any historical or geographic reality.

What was different about Syria was that both the French colonial power and the ruling Arabs in Damascus worked to deny the construction of a modern Syrian national identity. France went beyond its usual divide-and-conquer strategy, and actually tried to split the Mandate of Syria into a half-dozen nominally independent states. Given strong local opposition in the 1920s, this effort never fully materialized, but two of those proposed states ultimately went their own way: an independent Lebanon, and the Hatay (Alexandretta) province of Turkey, ceded by France on the eve of the Second World War.

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Syria's independence period, 1946–63, was marked by nearly constant turmoil. Political actors, both internal and international, sought to wield power and influence in the weak new state, often by using friendly surrogate forces inside the country. Egypt may have been the most successful at this, briefly merging with Syria to form the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1961.

When the Arab nationalist Baath party seized power in a military coup in 1963, it replicated one part of French colonial rule by denying Syrian nationalism and national identity. Syria's new rulers rejected national identity as a European colonial construct. Instead, they regarded Syria as a "regional command" of the Baath party and of the Arab nation, not as a separate country in its own right. It was not until the waning years of Hafez al-Assad's rule, and then a bit more strongly under his son Bashar, that the Syrian state began to use its powers of political socialization (in school textbooks, on state television, and in other media) to tentatively promote a separate Syrian national identity.

This failure to construct a strong Syrian national identity has left in place a broad Arab nationalism among a dying cadre of true believers, and very strong parochial identities along ethnic and religious lines. There is still little sense of a shared national Syrian community. In this regard, Syria is just a bigger version of Lebanon. Neither would be accused of having a "melting pot" political culture.

Syria encompasses five primary ethno-confessional parochial identities, and many more fragmentary ones. Because a proper census has not been conducted since French colonial days, one can only estimate percentages. Roughly two-thirds of Syrians are both Arab by ethnicity and Sunni Muslim by religion. The bulk of this population appears to oppose the regime in Damascus.

Alawites, Christians, and Kurds each make up about 10 percent of Syria's population. However, significant minorities exist within each of these minorities. For example, the Christian community, split among Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholics, Roman Catholics, Armenians, and others, hardly speaks with a single voice. The Druze, about 4 percent of the population, are an offshoot Islamic sect that incorporates strong folk traditions into religious practice.

HERETICS IN CHARGE

The Alawite community is the most politically powerful of Syria's minorities. Although it origi-

nated in Shiite Islam, the Alawite sect evolved in isolation over the past millennium in northwest Syria. Viewed as a "heretical sect" by orthodox Sunni Muslims, the Alawites have a long history of persecution by the Sunnis, resulting in a well-honed sense of grievance. They kept apart, scratching out an existence as subsistence farmers in the dusty hills overlooking the eastern Mediterranean. Historically, the Alawites have been among the poorest of Syrians, a position that has improved—but not markedly—in recent decades.

French colonialism paved the way for Alawite upward mobility. France's creation of a Syrian national army gave poor young Syrian minorities an opportunity for social advancement. Joining the army meant education, a chance to travel, and a steady job, all of which were in short supply at the time, and Alawites, along with Druze, signed up in large numbers.

Although the French army of Syria was disbanded in 1946 with Syrian independence, the tradition of military service among the Alawites was established. They enjoyed a good reputation at it; in fact, the French considered the Alawites a "martial race." As newly independent Syria rebuilt its army, the Alawites, eager to serve and to improve their lot in life, joined the army in droves. Their prevalence in the officer corps in particular helps explain why they were in such a good position to dominate Syrian politics beginning in the 1960s.

The Baathist military coup of 1963 was engineered by true believers in Arab nationalism, people who rejected on ideological grounds the importance of parochial identities. But the sociological changes outlined above guaranteed that many leading members of the Baathist regime came from minority groups, especially from the Alawite and Druze communities. By 1966, Syria had its first Alawite president, while many Sunni Baathists were purged from leading ranks. Druze Baathists were purged next, so when Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, virtually all the top power brokers in Syria were Alawites. In a volatile country, the politics of trust trumped ideological purity.

The dominant Alawite narrative today is "kill or be killed." Memories of persecution at the hands of vengeful Sunnis remain strong. Most Alawites appear to believe that, were the regime to collapse and the opposition come to power, some version of ethnic cleansing would be undertaken against the Alawite community as a whole. They are right to be concerned.

It is the same fear of a hard-line, vengeful Sunni Islamist regime that keeps other minorities tacitly supporting the regime, even after a year and a half of bloody repression. Christians, an important part of the business community and professional classes, do not necessarily fear a bloodletting so much as relegation to second-class status as a persecuted minority under an Islamist regime. They appear to prefer a flawed but secular regime, sharing the concerns of many Coptic Christians in Egypt under a post-Hosni Mubarak regime.

Historically, the Kurdish community in north-east Syria has had troubled relations with the Baathist regime. Since they are not Arabs, Kurds could not be expected to cheer on pan-Arab nationalism in Syria. However, the Kurds realize that a hard-line Islamist regime would not likely be supportive of Kurdish rights, either. Furthermore, in mid-2012, the regime negotiated a withdrawal from Kurdish population centers. While this was likely done as retaliation against Turkey, which fears independence demands from its own Kurdish population, the reality is that today the Kurds of Syria have an autonomous homeland. Kurds from northern Iraq, including the well-trained Peshmerga militia, are widely reported to be crossing into Syria to support their Kurdish brethren. It is doubtful that any future regime in Damascus will ever be able to extend the writ of government into Kurdish Syria.

When one adds up the active support for the regime from the Alawite community with the tacit support of most Christians, many other minorities, and a small slice of the Sunni bourgeoisie, this government can count on the backing of about one-quarter of the Syrian population. That is far from a majority, to be sure, but it likely would be enough to hold onto power for a long time, barring a change in the logic of civil war.

THE SECOND ROUND

The second round of Syria's long civil war began iconically (rarely are periodizations so precise) in March 2011, when regime thugs brutalized boys who were writing anti-regime graffiti on walls in Dara'a. This dusty border town just north of Jordan had previously crossed the Western imagination only as the place where Ottoman soldiers briefly imprisoned and sexually tortured Lawrence of Arabia.

The daily stories from Syria since the outbreak of protests and violence have been well covered elsewhere, but several issues should be underlined. One involves the influence of hard-line Islamists and jihadists within the opposition, and whether Christians and other minorities have a reasonable fear for their future in an opposition-led Syria. The short answer is yes, but not for the reason that media accounts usually proffer, that of an influx of jihadists from other countries. Foreign jihadists have entered Syria, but their numbers are still very small, and their influence is limited.

Syria has plenty of its own homegrown jihadists, from two primary sources. The first is Syria's underground Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike the situation in North Africa and Jordan, where the Muslim Brotherhood has been part of the political process for decades and has been "tamed" by having to negotiate with various groups that do not share its ideology, Syria's Muslim Brotherhood never left its militant phase. After the Syrian group was defeated militarily in 1982, a few leaders went into exile in London and Paris and reformed their

goals, but the actual fighters just went home, nursing their wounds and their grudges. They and their sons have returned for round two, determined to exact revenge.

On top of this, the US invasion of Iraq bred a new generation of Syrian jihadists who went east to help fight the Americans and their Shiite allies. From 2003 to about 2007, the Assad regime clearly encouraged these Sunnis to fight, and perhaps die, in Iraq. But those who returned to Syria had learned valuable urban warfare skills, and had likely grown even more attuned to the "heretical" nature of the Alawite regime in Damascus.

Perhaps the best evidence of the early presence of jihadists in the current round of Syria's civil war is the body count. While the earliest protests were nonviolent, as elsewhere in the Arab Spring, the regime immediately succeeded in militarizing the conflict for its own interests. But the opposition was not so ill-prepared for a militarized conflict. The estimated body count ratio from the earliest months of the conflict last year ran about 4 to 1: For every four opponents killed, one regime security member was killed.

This ratio is quite good for an unorganized opposition, and suggests a certain skill set present from the beginning. By contrast, in the long

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Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the kill ratio is typically about 20 to 1 in Israel's favor. In the 2009 Gaza conflict, it was over 100 to 1. During 2012, the kill ratio in Syria narrowed to 2 to 1. Then the regime adopted the tactics of Russia's second Chechen war.

OUTSIDERS IN THE MIX

The role of outside powers is another issue worth underlining. Given the number of Russians who are in Syria helping the government, it is no surprise that the Assad regime has implemented a Chechen war strategy. The Russian military, humiliated by Chechen secessionists in the 1994–96 war, seized the opportunity for payback in 1999. Vladimir Putin gave the military a free hand. The dominant new tactic was to use air power against urban targets without regard for civilian casualties, something considered since World War II to be beyond the pale of civilized warfare. As of this writing, the results in Syria have not yet been as bloody as those in Grozny. Still, it is clear that the use of air power against a largely civilian insurgency comes straight from the Russian experience in Chechnya.

Iran is playing an equally direct role in Syria. The linchpin of Iran's regional Arab strategy, Syria is the only Arab country that Iran can count as an ally. The alliance dates to 1980, when their mutual rival, Iraq, invaded Iran; it has withstood the test of time and runs considerably deeper than most analysts thought. Ideas of "flipping Syria" out of the Iranian orbit seem superficial in hindsight. By its own admission, Iran has sent Revolutionary Guards to help the regime win the civil war, an admission prompted when the opposition captured a bus full of Iranian fighters. Outside analysts believe thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guard members are in Syria.

A final point to be made about the conflict today: In the years before the second round of the long civil war, Bashar al-Assad significantly narrowed the base of his regime, antagonizing the broader Alawite community in the process. Whereas Hafez al-Assad made sure that all major segments of the Alawite community benefited from regime jobs and largesse, Bashar al-Assad cut out the broader community in favor of his immediate family. Political and economic power was concentrated in the hands of Bashar, his brother Maher, his brother-in-

law Asef Shawkat, his cousin Rami Makhluf, and a handful of others.

Now the opposition has assassinated Shawkat and (according to Russian reports) seriously wounded Maher al-Assad. With regime and perhaps community survival at stake, the Alawites have rallied around Bashar al-Assad. However, given the discontent within the Alawite community, it is not inconceivable that there would be support for abandoning the Assads as part of any grand political bargain that ends the conflict.

WHICH OUTCOME?

Logically, the current round of Syria's civil war must end in one of four ways: regime victory, opposition victory, stalemate with no end, or stalemate leading to a political resolution. The first two outcomes are the worst for all parties, and the last is the best plausible outcome. But for the better options to be plausible, both sides must believe they can actually lose the civil war. This is key. Without an acknowledgment of possible defeat, neither the regime nor the opposition will accept a grand bargain in which compromise is central.

Although the Arab Spring has caused a number of governments to fall, a victory for the Syrian regime is a very real possibility. It is also one of the two worst outcomes.

International sanctions likely would remain in place for years to come, leaving Syria isolated and poor. Russia, Iran, China, and a few others could be expected to ignore such sanctions and provide an economic lifeline. But there can be no doubt that Syria would be a grim place for a long time.

A regime victory, moreover, likely would guarantee a third round of civil war sometime in the future, since the country's basic structural problems would remain. The regime will never allow the majority population to essentially vote it out of power. A government victory would also prompt greater emigration among those able to leave: typically, that part of the population most essential for rebuilding the economy.

While most Syrians "lose" under this scenario, the winners would be the quarter of the population that backs the regime—and the Kurds. An autonomous Kurdistan in Syria would almost certainly remain, creating a serious political problem for Turkey, among others. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah (the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Islamic militant

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group in Lebanon) would also enjoy a major strategic victory in the region, while US allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar would suffer a significant foreign policy defeat after their support for regime change in Damascus.

Regime collapse and an outright opposition victory (never mind that there is not a unified opposition) represent an equally unappealing outcome. To the degree that any one group would be able to consolidate power in Damascus after a complete collapse of the government, it would more likely than not be an Islamist regime hardened by many months of violent insurgency and repression. The democrats of Syria—and there are many—are not strategically positioned to come to power or even to wield significant influence over a victorious opposition.

Such an outcome would almost certainly lead to significant levels of revenge killings against Alawites, and perhaps even to ethnic cleansing of Alawites in areas outside of their historic Latakia homeland. An opposition victory would also certainly lead to the emigration of hundreds of thousands of Syrian Christians. Tens of thousands already have taken up residence in nearby Lebanon, waiting out the civil war.

Many thousands of (mostly Sunni) Muslims are already refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan; they would likely return to Syria if the regime were defeated. Christians and perhaps Alawites would likely take their place as refugees, while those who are able to would leave for Europe and the Americas. As with any plausible scenario, the now autonomous Kurdish region would maintain its newly won status. From the perspective of the United States and its allies in the region, the one positive result under the scenario of an opposition victory—besides the downfall of a brutal regime—is the strategic black eye it would give the Iranians, Russians, and Hezbollah.

MORE OF THE SAME?

A third logical outcome is continuity, with the current civil war settling in for the long haul, though probably at a somewhat lower level of violence. The analogy for such an outcome is Lebanon from 1975 to 1989, albeit without an external occupying force. Central authority would officially remain in place, but be honored mostly in the breach. Zones with no formal governmental authority would be sprinkled widely throughout the country, with various militias having their own checkpoints. The external patrons of the opposing

forces would make sure “their” side does not lose, keeping munitions and other resources flowing and extending the life of the civil war.

Such an outcome carries obvious downsides: most of all, the suffering of ordinary Syrians. From a strategic perspective, the likelihood of regional spillover is high. Since all of Syria’s neighbors have friendly relations with the United States, including NATO member Turkey, the possibility of regional destabilization cannot be dismissed.

At the strategic level, however, a continuing civil war may be preferable, from America’s perspective, to a victory for either the regime or the opposition. The rough balance of power would be maintained; competitors such as Iran and Russia would slowly be drained of resources; the very negative consequences of the first two scenarios would be avoided; and the local populations would largely find ways to muddle through, protected in part by their regional allies.

Under this scenario, Syrians and the region would await some structural change in the calculation of civil war in the years ahead to bring the war to an end, much as the denouement of the cold war led to the curtailing of the Lebanese civil war. If the spillover effects for other countries could be minimized, a continuing civil war scenario is troubling, to be sure, but less bad than the first two scenarios.

A political compromise forged among the various sides would easily be the best outcome for Syria and the region. The analogy for this scenario is Lebanon today: hardly an example of a fully functioning state, but certainly better than the plausible alternatives. Lebanon’s national pact, struck at Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989, maintains the politics of corporate groups, albeit in somewhat altered form. Each ethno-confessional group gets its own recognition, protection, and slice of the patronage pie. The president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the defense minister a Druze, the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite, and so on down the line. Parliament is split 50-50 between Muslims and Christians.

This is a recipe for gridlock, but each group at least has some guarantees and a stake in the system. It is ironic that Hezbollah is the major voice of reform inside Lebanon, wanting to do away with corporate representation in favor of a one-person, one-vote principle. Something like Lebanon’s system would be the best transition out of civil war in Syria.

Currently, neither the regime nor the opposition has any interest in reaching a deal with the other side, and two requirements are mandatory for such a resolution. First, each side must fear that it could actually lose the civil war, with disastrous consequences for its own people. Second, the major powers must likewise agree to such an outcome and pressure their own sides; this is something that has not happened to date—and may never happen.

THE UNCONVENTIONAL OPTION

The United States and its allies are wise to resist direct military involvement in Syria in the form of invasion, an air campaign, or a “no-fly zone” (which would quickly lead to direct military engagement). Likewise, Washington has been smart to resist providing advanced military hardware, such as anti-aircraft missiles, to an opposition with significant elements that would just as easily turn these weapons against American targets.

That said, the flow of funds and small arms to the opposition from various parties has been an important source of balancing in the civil war, preventing the regime thus far from winning outright. However, the turn toward a Chechnya strategy of using airpower to destroy urban pockets of rebellion does threaten the opposition with outright defeat and should be countered in smart ways.

The West was sometimes criticized for adopting a Machiavellian posture during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war by hoping that neither side won outright, but such criticism was not warranted. A clear victory for either side would have been a

disaster for the region and the world. The same approach is warranted in Syria: working to prevent either side from winning a total victory so that both sides will be more inclined to reach a compromise.

To accomplish this, the United States and its allies must consider the use of unconventional warfare techniques undertaken directly by very small numbers of allied forces, not indigenous Syrian ones. For example, Turkish special forces, working secretly with their American ally, could surreptitiously shoot down a handful of Syrian jets that are attacking Syrian cities. That alone might ground the Syrian Air Force entirely; in addition it would settle the score with Syria for shooting down a Turkish military jet (and reportedly executing the pilots after the fact).

By carrying out small-scale unconventional warfare, the United States and its allies could work toward balancing the conflict and putting a fear into the Syrian regime that it might actually lose the civil war. At the same time, this strategy would not allow for independent military capacity-building by the opposition, which might give it the sense that it could win the war. Both sides must fear defeat.

This type of unconventional warfare campaign might also bring the Russians and Iranians to the table in an attempt to salvage something of their alliance with a new national-pact regime. They too must fear that the old regime could lose entirely.

Such a balancing approach might get us to the best plausible outcome—a negotiated solution—and it would likely prevent either of the two worst outcomes. It is not pretty, but it might actually work. ■