

Safety First

Ending the violence in Syria is only the first step in improving the country's security.

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Civil war has created a nationwide security vacuum across Syria. Conflict rages in virtually every one of the country's 13 provinces. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed or wounded, and millions have been displaced, causing the worst humanitarian crisis since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Prospects for improvement of the security context in Syria are poor, and they are contingent on a resolution of the civil war, a ceasefire, or the emergence of conditions conducive to the restoration of legitimate and credible governance. At present, however, both domestic trends and the intervention of regional actors perpetuate lawlessness and the consolidation of "rebel governance" across Syria.

The presence of foreign fighters aligned with both the opposition and the regime further contribute to an environment of lawlessness and arbitrary violence. In both regime- and opposition-held areas, conflict has destroyed the vestiges of a weak and thoroughly politicized justice sector. The radicalization of armed opposition groups, rampant criminality, and the emergence of conditions fostering the kind of warlord rule evident in Libya are additional destabilizing factors.

At the same time, the Syrian war has become a proxy for regional tensions that pit the likes of Saudi Arabia against Iran, Sunnis against Shi'ites, and both of those groups against Kurds, Christians, and others. Some participants and observers characterize the conflict as a regionalized war, with Syria as the focal point.

While Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States, among others, have supported various opposition political groups and fighters, regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has not only survived what once seemed an inevitable collapse. It has also benefitted from the support of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, permitting it to turn back opposition offensives and regain strategically important territory around Damascus and along its western border with Lebanon. Iraq has also been drawn into the conflict, with the government of Adnan al-Malaki lending quiet support to the Assad regime, Iraqi Sunnis assisting their Syrian counterparts, and Iraqi Kurds enmeshed in political struggles among contending Syrian-Kurdish factions.

There are several drivers of insecurity in Syria that must be addressed, if peace is to be achieved.

Sectarian polarization. The involvement of a multitude of other nations, militant groups, and private backers in Syria's conflict, including Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and Arab Gulf states, has amplified the sectarian polarization that already existed in Syria. The result has been an intensifying conflict that has created a crucible of violence and resentment among large swaths of the population.

Sectarian tensions are increasing the potential for territorial fragmentation, as Islamist armed groups gain territory across the country in pursuit of the ideological aim of building an Islamic-based state. Islamist fighters have drawn Syrian Kurdish militias into battle by attacking Kurdish areas near the Turkish border. As the

effects of war continue to harden positions among the different actors within Syria, the likelihood that the country will emerge as one state is decreasing.

The armed opposition remains fragmented as the fight for territory becomes increasingly polarized across sectarian and ideological lines. Although General Salim Idriss, a Syrian Army defector, has tried to unite the Free Syrian Army (FSA) under his Supreme Military Council (SMC), his mainstream battalions continue to lose support to more radical Islamist competitors.

In recent months, several new coalitions of battalions formerly affiliated with the SMC have broken off to establish alternatives to the SMC, including the Islamic Front, which has the potential to supersede the power and influence of the FSA. This new Islamist coalition is just the latest in a string of shifting alliances among an opposition that remains profoundly fragmented. The incoherence of the armed opposition, and the growing influence of its most radical battalions, has eroded the confidence of the West in the FSA/SMC and diminished its already limited interest in providing the SMC/FSA with lethal support. It has also led to the demoralization and defection of many of the SMA/FSA's supporters and fighters.

Regionalization and border security. The porousness and lack of unified authority at the Syrian borders has exacerbated the inability to control people, territory, guns, and goods. Opposition groups on all sides fight for control over border crossings in order to secure passage for supplies necessary for battle. Refugees flee Syria, while weapons, foreign fighters, and funding flow in. All these factors not only contribute to extreme instability inside Syria, but also threaten neighboring countries.

As many as 10,000 fighters are estimated to have come from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Chechnya, and elsewhere to fight on behalf of jihadist groups and pro-regime militias. Many foreign fighters come to Syria with extensive experience from previous fronts, contributing to their outsized strength in the conflict.

Violence associated with conflict in Syria has spilled into Lebanon and Turkey. Some Lebanese reportedly believe that the Assad regime, having been forced to withdraw its forces from Lebanon in 2005, is purposefully trying to expand the conflict to reassert regional power. Border crossings between Lebanon and Syria are still controlled by pro-regime forces for the time being.

Turkey's relatively open border, primarily controlled by opposition fighters, also allegedly contributes to the conflict by allowing an influx of jihadist fighters into Syria. Recently, Turkey began building a wall along its eastern border with Syria, where primarily Kurdish populations live. Turkish officials cited concerns about illegal migration and the risk of violence, but affected communities have protested this shift toward what they see as an extreme form of newly increased border enforcement. Within Syria, marginalized minority groups, particularly the Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG), are also increasing the risk of the country's fragmentation by carving out autonomous territory to ensure their own security.

Jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which consists predominantly of foreign fighters, and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) are battling the regime. But they are also engaged in armed competition for power with one another and against more moderate -- if still Islamist -- FSA battalions. Jihadist groups in Syria are supported largely by private, Gulf-based donors, though some battalions receive funds from Qatar and perhaps other Gulf regimes as well. Thanks to that support, they have become the most effective and aggressive forces in the armed opposition military and have recently been able to pull groups that had been integrated into the SMC into their fold. When the jihadist groups have been successful in gaining control of territory, they often impose harsh versions of sharia law.

Iran and its client, Hezbollah, fan sectarian fears of a post-Assad Syria controlled by the largely Sunni opposition as a rationale for providing direct military support to the regime. In a sign of increasing complexity, while they still support the regime, some in Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed elements are reported to be operating autonomously in the country, though still fighting the opposition. Rebel supply lines through Lebanon have been cut, opposition-held pockets around Damascus have been wiped out, and even insurgent strongholds like Aleppo are now threatened.

In similar fashion, Iraq has been drawn into the conflict not only because of sectarian-driven concerns that a Sunni replacement for Assad next door would be threatening to the Shi'ite-led government in Iraq, but also because Sunni fighters on the Iraq side of the border have been remobilized by both domestic and neighboring violence.

On the broader international stage, Russia and the U.S. have contributed to the polarization with their opposing political positions at the United Nations and their military support of the respective ally on each side. When the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons became irrefutable this summer, Western powers led by the United States planned to use force in response until Russia proposed a solution requiring Syria to give up its chemical weapons. That shifted the momentum to negotiations, and the military option receded, immediately dealing a significant blow to the morale of the military and civilian opposition.

Civilian security and rule of law. Under the Assad regime, militia law prevails. In some opposition-held areas, ad hoc sharia courts have been established to provide a semblance of justice, but these operate with widely varying standards and are themselves often under the control of jihadist armed groups. In other areas, civilian councils have negotiated settlements with armed groups and defected police to provide patchwork systems of civilian security.

The willingness of the regime and certain elements of the opposition to use illegal warfare, such as use of chemical weapons, unlawful killings, and torture, have intensified the brutality imposed on civilians over the last 30 months. Although both sides have committed abuses, it is important not to draw false comparisons between regime and opposition fighters. The U.N., noting opposition abuses, continues to hold the Assad regime principally responsible for atrocities, crimes against humanity, and systematic violations of international human rights law.

Groups that support Assad are fearful that any transition would leave them vulnerable to targeted abuses, including revenge killings. The Alawite and Christian communities, for example, which have largely but not exclusively supported the Assad regime, have already experienced instances of sectarian violence that have reinforced their sense of vulnerability and deepened their reliance on the regime for security.

Similarly, those who support the opposition and its aims fear for their lives and future should the Assad regime retain power. Irrespective of who governs a post-conflict Syria, mechanisms for providing security for all segments of the population will be critical for stabilization and recovery.

Industrial and agricultural infrastructure has essentially collapsed. That, coupled with the inaccessibility of vital supply routes, has led to shortages of many essential products and services. In particular, the shortage of heating fuel will cause further suffering for the population this winter.

The current stalemate in Syria has yet to reach the tipping point where parties both inside and out are ready to compromise on their positions and resolve the conflict. As the costs of the conflict continue to mount, it seems increasingly likely that external actors will need to take the lead in defining a pathway to peace.

External support to both the regime and the opposition has bolstered their fighting strength just enough to prevent either from gaining significant advantage while still encouraging all forces to fight on for what may be an illusory military victory. Instead, battlefield conditions have taken on the character of a “dynamic stalemate” in which shifts in momentum and control over contested territory have not altered the fundamental stalemate that has existed for the past year.

From the perspective of the international community -- particularly the United States and Russia -- the rising human toll of the conflict will increase pressure to seek a negotiated settlement. Additionally, increasing regionalization of the conflict compounds the risks for all players.

For regional actors -- Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, and others -- the increasing likelihood of regional spillover should also motivate action. In particular, Gulf countries -- including but not limited to Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- could be pressured to stop fueling violence with fighters and weapons, and instead support a united approach to achieve a resolution. They also could limit the ability of their private-citizen financiers to foment conflict within Syria.

Restoring security for civilians will require, at minimum, a cessation of violence; that itself will not be easy to negotiate. Among other hurdles, it will be critical that regional actors supporting disparate fighting forces be pressured to shift tactics from encouraging violence to easing the conflict.

Due to the dispersed nature of the opposition and pro-regime militias, and the appetite for revenge that is likely to be sustained even once a settlement is agreed, a peacekeeping force will be needed to enforce any short-term ceasefire or longer-term end to the violence.

Establishing control of the Syrian border, in coordination with its neighbors, will be another key element of any negotiated agreement. Large influxes of Syrian refugees are likely to both return to Syria and continue to flee from the country for the duration of the conflict and afterward, until genuine stability returns. The flow of fighters and weapons also will need to be brought under control, an issue that could spur follow-on conflict as the new Syrian authorities seek to wrest control from the various militias who’ve taken up residence -- and territory -- during the war.

The sectarian divisions that have been exposed and amplified amid the conflict are likely to linger for many years, posing risks of reigniting tensions and compromising any tentative peace achieved. Quickly establishing strong institutions and processes to deliver civilian security, rule of law, and transitional justice to punish those responsible for crimes during the conflict could go some way toward alleviating those tensions.

Existing state institutions should not necessarily be demolished wholesale, where relevant and functional elements are still operational and salvageable for a future government. Although difficult, it will be critical to consider how to utilize existing structures, both of the state and those established by local opposition elements, to quickly point Syria in the direction of a durable peace.

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