

Neighborhood Watch

Why regional players will be indispensable to achieving peace in Syria.

By Rachel Brandenburg

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After nearly 30 months of conflict in Syria, millions of refugees have fled across the country's borders, and violent spillover has touched Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. What has been characterized as a civil war has already morphed into a regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and heightened sectarian polarization that is eroding stability in Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. Regional powers are using Syria as grounds for proxy wars, supporting factions -- both regime and opposition -- within the country to avenge their own grievances and wrest power from the other. Extremist militias in Syria predominantly consisting of foreign fighters have gained the advantage over more moderate rebel forces; when these fighters return from the battlefield, they bring volatility back home. And the war now threatens to spark greater regional confrontations, in particular in Lebanon and Jordan, where the conflict's effects have already strained economies and led to resentment among local populations.

Amid ever-changing dynamics, Syria's conflict is likely to continue to unfold in myriad ways, each of which will pose new challenges and threats of differing magnitude not only to the Syrian people and opposition forces, but also to regional actors and the international community. Any approach to mitigating violence or negotiating a political settlement must involve regional powers and address conflict and grievances not only within Syria, but also among its neighbors.

There are at least three critical regional challenges on the road to peace in Syria.

Refugees. The U.N. estimates that more than 2.1 million registered Syrian refugees have fled Syria, with more than 775,000 registered in Lebanon, nearly 530,000 in Jordan, over 600,000 in Turkey, nearly 200,000 in Iraq, and over 125,000 in Egypt. Additionally, there are an estimated 4.25 million people displaced within Syria's borders. The humanitarian crisis is enormous.

Each refugee population places significant strain on the respective host country. Jordan hosts three official refugee camps; its largest, Zaatari, has over 120,000 people, making it equivalent to Jordan's fourth-largest city. However, many Syrians also live within urban centers, in particular in northern Jordan. Consequently, Jordanian schools exceed capacity, hospitals are over-burdened, and jobs are increasingly given to Syrians willing to accept lower wages than Jordanians. Jordan's already scarce water resources are even more taxed, and its suffering economy has been made worse. Jordanians are increasingly resentful of the Syrians who have sought refuge. The Jordanian monarchy remains highly concerned that the Syrian conflict will rattle Jordan's already fragile state to a breaking point.

Lebanon hosts no formal refugee camps but faces similar challenges from the Syrian refugee influx. Refugees live sprinkled across major cities, in ad hoc camps, or with local families. Not only do they present new competition for jobs and create strain on municipal services, but rising food, fuel, and housing prices have caused extra societal tension.

In Turkey, while official refugee camps sit along the southern border, it is estimated that two-thirds of Syrian refugees live outside the camps, predominantly in Turkey's southern cities. The Turkish government has maintained a self-proclaimed "open-door" policy, although it has occasionally closed the border during clashes. Syrian refugees cause similar social tensions and economic strains locally as they do in Lebanon and Jordan, though the effect is lessened somewhat because of Turkey's size and economic capacity.

Cross-border violence and destabilization. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Israel confront negative effects of spillover from Syria, including live fire and other violence, even if sporadic and contained thus far. In Lebanon in particular, existing societal divides are being exacerbated by explosive sectarian tensions within Syria. In Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, the Lebanese army has intervened on occasion to respond to clashes between pro- and anti-Assad forces. Both targeted attacks and skirmishes have erupted elsewhere along the Lebanon-Syria border, too.

Although it hasn't yet experienced the same level of Syria-related violence, Jordan is concerned not only about conflict spilling across Syria's borders and the implications of a potential Syrian state collapse, but also increasingly about the Jordanian jihadists who travel to join the fight in Syria and thereafter return home. Their repatriation has the potential to cause friction in their respective communities, and more so if they should turn their attention to fighting Jordan itself. The Jordanian army remains deployed along the border, ready to squelch violence that should arise related to conflict in Syria. The government has attempted to avoid taking sides in the conflict, while keeping its borders relatively open to humanitarian aid entering Syria. But more and more, Jordan is restricting access for refugees, particularly those of Palestinian descent.

In Turkey, clashes have erupted in the towns along its southern border, where many Syrian refugees live. Most recently, violent protests emerged in Kurdish areas along Turkey's southern border in response to planned construction of a border wall. The Turkish government alleges the barrier will enhance security and reduce smuggling; Turkey's Kurdish population argues that it is intended to separate Turkey's Kurds from their Syrian Kurdish relatives across the border. Resurgent Turkish Kurdish separatist movements have been of chief concern to Turkey throughout the Syrian conflict, particularly as Syrian Kurds -- who initially remained relatively neutral and removed from the conflict -- have gained political stature and increasingly asserted their own plans for self-governance.

Although Iraq was far from stable even before the conflict in Syria, violence next door has arguably rolled back earlier gains in stability, in particular as the al Qaeda-aligned Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) has joined the fight and gained ground. ISIS leadership continues to hold and expand its battleground in Iraq as it becomes emboldened in Syria.

Thus far, violence has only occasionally affected Israel. Errant mortar shells have landed on the Israeli side of the border, and a few incidents of alleged fire aimed at Israeli targets have been reported. Although Israel has called for Assad's removal, it has otherwise stayed away from direct involvement in the conflict. Israel maintains the position that its primary concerns emanate from Hezbollah -- and thus far has reacted militarily only to threats related to the militant group.

Each country near Syria remains chiefly concerned for its domestic stability and has attempted to maintain it in different ways. The Turkish and Jordanian governments continue to allow international and NGO offices to facilitate the transfer of humanitarian assistance across their borders. Jordan has argued for the creation of humanitarian corridors, which have also been proposed by the U.N., to enable the secure transport of much-needed humanitarian aid into Syria. Humanitarian corridors would ensure demilitarized areas through which aid could pass. Turkey at times has advocated an internationally established no-fly zone in Syria, but it has been unwilling to take the lead in pursuing such an option and would not be able to facilitate it without others' support and involvement.

Regional powers fighting by proxy. As conflict in Syria has transformed from revolution against the regime to civil war, it has essentially become a playground for regional proxy wars. Although Jordan has attempted to avoid incurring Assad's animosity for the sake of protecting its own homeland, other regional neighbors have chosen sides. Gulf monarchies in particular have taken advantage of their physical distance, which largely protects them from retaliation, to directly support opposition forces fighting Assad. Aiming to dislodge Syria from the Iranian orbit, they see their actions as part of a larger campaign against Iran.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have provided funding and resources for rebel forces, and Saudi Arabia has provided arms. These countries' interest has been less focused on bolstering a coherent political opposition than on winning the fight against Assad militarily. However, traditional differences between Riyadh and Doha have played out on the Syrian front as well. Qatar has thrown much of its leverage behind both Muslim Brotherhood-aligned forces and more extreme Islamists, while Saudi Arabia -- threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood -- supports other factions of the opposition, including elements of the Syrian National Coalition and Salafists. Private Gulf donors, primarily from Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, have complicated matters further. Iran, meanwhile, continues to fund and arm the Assad regime, its military, and militia -- including through the deployment of Hezbollah forces to aid in the fight.

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It will be impossible to mitigate violence in Syria, much less arrive at a negotiated settlement to the conflict, without involving and gaining the buy-in of regional powers. It will be critical, too, to consider in any future reconciliation, reconstruction and stabilization efforts the implications of the conflict -- past, present, and future -- on Syria's immediate neighbors.

The opportunities to restrain the regional implications of the conflict in Syria are few, especially in the absence of a coordinated external military response. However, the threats posed by turmoil in Syria for each of its neighbors may present opportunities to engage these respective regimes not only in efforts to continue to allow for humanitarian assistance, but also in containing the conflict and mitigating sectarian tensions on their own soil.

Arguably, the balance of power on the battlefield could shift if Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran ceased support for extremist opposition forces -- and ceased trying to needle one another through involvement in Syria. If Qatar and Saudi Arabia put aside their differences and directed support toward developing a coherent opposition coalition -- or interim government -- that coalition might be stronger and better able to unify. Support channeled directly to different elements of the opposition has contributed to its fragmentation, often intentionally, but sometimes inadvertently. By contrast, support for the Assad regime has been channeled to one address, which is then responsible for its dispersal, and a unified chain of command has therefore been better maintained. Although difficult to control, if private Gulf financing of extremist forces was curbed, violence could be mitigated further.

U.S. and Western diplomacy could be directed at encouraging or incentivizing countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait) to encourage them to cease supporting rival opposition forces, in particular those that directly contradict moderate Syrian opposition interests and run contrary to easing the conflict and sectarian tensions.

Far greater than Saudi Arabia's interest in supporting the Syrian opposition is Saudi Arabia's stake in countering Iran's influence -- diminishing its power and prying Syria away from its orbit. This could be leveraged more vigorously as an incentive for Saudi Arabia to seek an end to the conflict and support the establishment of a friendly, alternate leadership in Damascus, rather than fuel the fight against Assad militarily.

Although involving Iran in a diplomatic solution has and will continue to be difficult to facilitate, it will be crucial to continue to target diplomatic efforts at bringing Iran to the table alongside others. Involving Iran in a negotiations process, even if indirectly or through back-channel communications, will likely have a better chance of resulting in a ceasefire inclusive of Hezbollah and an agreement in which Iran pledges to cease military support for the Assad regime, even post-conflict. The recent negotiations and initial deal on the Iran nuclear program may provide a greater opening to bring Iran to the table for negotiations about Syria's future.

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