

COMMENTARY

No. 65

Tuesday, 7 August 2012

What Must Now Happen in Syria?

Rajendra Abhyankar

Kunzru Centre for Defence Studies and Research, Pune

The latest reports from Aleppo, Syria's largest city, paint a grim picture of unending instability and targeted violence between government forces and opposition groups. The same is true in all the country's other major cities, a sign that the opposition, though fractious, is getting increasingly better arms from its sponsors abroad. The sectarian war—there is no other description for it—has become a bubbling sinkhole. No sooner does the regime re-establish control in one city, or part of it, and it is challenged elsewhere. In Damascus, the high ground of Mt. Kassioun is being used by both sides to fire shells on selected quarters of the capital. The danger of non-combatants becoming “collateral damage” is now very real. Many long-term residents have started moving out to safer areas.

In April I wrote here that the Syrian people still preferred stability over change, fearful as they were of a violent and uncertain outcome. Today they are coming to accept that anything may be better than the present situation. This has tilted sentiment against the regime. Furthermore, with externally based forces ranged against them, Syrians believe that the regime no longer has the ability, or even interest, to resolve the situation. The Assad regime's single-point agenda – to survive at any cost - and its total disregard for the population, make it morally repugnant even to what were once its strongest supporters. Yet an agreed-upon transfer of power will require bringing both the government and the opposition to the table. Failing that, the splintering of Syria and widening of the sectarian conflict in the region will be inevitable.

The relentless onslaught on the regime, backed by the West together with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, has three components: supply of sophisticated weapons and communications equipment to the opposition; an international media barrage intended to delegitimize Assad; and action by the United Nations Security Council, in the form of stronger sanctions and possible

military involvement (based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter). The Western powers' refusal to condemn the suicide bombing last month that killed Syria's defence minister and his deputy, regime strongman Assef Shawkat, was a clear sign that the die is cast against Syria in the Security Council.

But for the steadfast position of Russia and China, the Assad regime would be long gone from the scene. As it stands there is not even a cease-fire in place, and the killings and depredations continue. The latest veto by Russia and China, both of which continue to feel that they were fooled last year into supporting the Western-backed UN resolution on Libya, starkly highlights the impasse there. Last month's veto was also provoked by the resolution's patently unbalanced text, which called for stringent sanctions against the regime, but none on the opposition, which the West is assiduously arming. The extension by the Security Council of the mandate of the toothless UN observer force for another 30 days will save the Kofi Annan initiative in its present form.

The Assad regime, ready to exploit the few cards it still has left to play, added one more dimension to the matrix when it warned that it would use chemical weapons against "external aggression." Just uttering the threat did untold damage to the regime, invoking images of the chemical weapons Saddam Hussein used against his own country's Kurdish population in 1988, and sent shock waves through Western chancelleries, eliciting a flurry of warnings from the Obama administration and others.

Although its chemical arsenal was an open secret, this was the first time that Syria had admitted its existence. The regime is believed to have mustard gas as well as such nerve agents as tabun, sarin and VX. Western nations have also expressed concern that the weapons may fall into the hands of the divided opposition groups, or even the Al-Qaida and Salafist operatives increasingly visible in the conflict. While Israel should be worried, this development makes the case for Western military intervention even more tenuous.

With such heavy forces ranged against the Assad regime and the ongoing impasse in the UN Security Council, resolving the increasingly tragic situation is going to require out-of-the box initiatives: Namely, a U.S.-Russia summit. As the two states in the best position to bring other parties along with them, a meeting between the two powers will reinforce America's attempt to effect a "reset" of its relations with Russia, while making an important point to China. An agreed-upon framework to calm the situation will be well within their reach. It should include: cessation of violence by all sides, disarming of the opposition and return of the army to its barracks. Additionally, the UN force should be mandated to guard Syria's borders and enforce security in its cities, to issue a cease-and-desist injunction to other foreign interests (for example, Saudi Arabia and France) that have been interfering, as well as to convene discussions on a framework for change.

Rajendra Abhyankar is a former career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service and is currently Chairman of the Kunzru Centre for Defence Studies and Research, in Pune, India. He was India's Ambassador to Syria from 1992 to 1996 and in August 2011 visited Syria at the invitation of its government. Email rajendra.abhyankar@gmail.com

Note: Originally published in *Ha'aretz* on 3 August 2012 and the article is reproduced with the permission of the Author. Web link: <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/what-must-now-happen-in-syria-1.455677>

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**