

COMMENTARY

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Syria's Strategic Balance at a Tipping Point

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The Syrian conflict has entered a critical phase with the fall of the town of Qusair to regime troops backed by Hezbollah fighters in the early hours of 5 June. Both sides have made gains and suffered losses over the past six months, so this should be no different. But the discrepancy between the regime's underlying strengths and the armed opposition's enduring weaknesses is starting to tell.

If the strategic equilibrium that has emerged since November 2012 tips further, it will be a decisive shift in the regime's favour. The political and military wings of the opposition must address their most serious shortcomings. If they do not, they will be in retreat, if not full flight, by the end of 2013.

Strategic Implications

The fall of Qusair has serious strategic implications for the ongoing conflict in Syria. Most immediately, it closes off a major route that opposition fighters use to infiltrate and send weapons to the province of Homs—a strategic gateway to the rest of Syria—from nearby northern Lebanon. It additionally helps the regime secure the main roads connecting Homs and Damascus to the coastal region around Tartus and Latakia, which are principal transit corridors for military materiel, fuel, and basic goods being shipped by sea. The rebels will face an uphill struggle to dislodge pro-regime garrisons left in the region around Qusair and rebuild a secure supply and staging area there. The town's fall moreover frees up experienced combat units to fight elsewhere.

But the real takeaway is that the regime is increasingly well positioned to capitalize on its strengths and secure itself for the long term. Its ability to survive has been grossly underestimated from the outset.

The battle for Qusair was just one part of an ongoing strategic campaign in which the Syrian army has made significant gains. Since early April the army has encircled rebel-held areas to the east and southwest of Damascus, pushed the rebels further away from the heart of the capital

itself, and broken through rebel lines to reinforce and resupply besieged garrisons in Wadi Deif near Idlib and around Aleppo. It has also retaken much of the ground recently lost to the rebels in southern Syria around the city of Deraa, in the Golan area, and along the border with Jordan and is fighting for full control of the international highway to Jordan. The army is trying to encircle the northern and southern sides of Aleppo, its strategic prize, in a bid to cut off rebel strongholds prior to taking full control of the city.

Loyalist forces are not able to achieve total military victory. The army in particular suffers a severe manpower shortage and will become dangerously overstretched and once again vulnerable if it seeks to regain too much lost territory. The battle for Aleppo alone could bog it down for months of costly urban combat. But the regime has shown very considerable resilience and ability to learn and adapt. It remains the stronger party, in terms not only of its ability to field well-trained, well-armed, and determined fighters, but also of its organization, coordination, and, consequently, better access to and use of intelligence.

The war is far from over for the rebels. They could still fight the regime to a draw. But although they claim 180,000–310,000 men under arms—the lower estimate is more authoritative—they are on the strategic defensive. The regime is a unitary actor politically and has a cohesive military command and control structure. The rebels remain badly fragmented. They face ongoing problems of internal cohesion, poor command and control, and repeated disruptions in the supply of arms and ammunition from their principal supporters in the Gulf.

Above all, the rebels lack strategically savvy political leadership. At this crucial moment, the main opposition umbrella framework, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, is on the verge of breaking up over endemic internal squabbles. And its international supporters, the Friends of Syria, are clearly getting cold feet: The United States has reportedly withheld US\$62 million in assistance it had promised to the National Coalition's humanitarian relief and aid coordination sections. And European Union diplomats privately acknowledge that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will remain in office under any predictable scenario.

Chronicles of a Death Foretold

That was not always the outlook. The regime's imminent demise has been predicted by a host of players since January 2012, including the commander of the rebel Free Syrian Army, Riad al-Asaad; Arab, Western, and Israeli policymakers, including Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Chief of Staff Benny Gantz; the German federal intelligence service; various opposition voices, such as Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, deputy comptroller of the Muslim Brotherhood and deputy chairman of the Syrian National Council, the most dominant force in the National Coalition. Even the most sober rebel sources anticipated that the much-touted battle for Damascus would get started by May 2013.

The tables have clearly turned since then. Still, former Syrian National Council chairman Burhan Ghalioun continues to dismiss claims of regime successes as having “no basis in truth.” The regime, he insisted on 20 May, “is panting and riddled from the inside,” already “a thing of the past.”

The regime might prove unable to extend or retain all its gains indefinitely. But the opposition cannot continue to meet a resourceful regime with revolutionary hubris. It needs to reassess how the regime has managed to survive a large-scale armed rebellion, the loss of territory and main sources of revenue, and punishing economic sanctions—and still come out fighting.

Many explain the staying power of the regime by pointing to the massive military and financial assistance it has received from Russia and Iran, and more recently from Hezbollah. It is also believed to have relied heavily on advisers sent by its allies. But it is not just outside assistance that matters; it is what the regime has done with it. And the Assad clan has proven adept at making effective use of material support and at internalizing advice and applying it.

The Assad regime has made egregious political and military mistakes at its own expense over the past two years, but it has also shown that it can think strategically, husband its military assets, and bide its time. The Syrian opposition, which has not displayed the same resources, ignores this crucial fact at its peril.

The regime has benefited from several other advantages. First and foremost, it needs only to survive. This is a huge challenge, but it nonetheless simplifies things for the regime.

The opposition, in contrast, has set total victory as its goal, measured by the removal of Assad and the regime's inner core—estimated by former National Coalition chairman Moaz al-Khatib at some 500 persons. This means defeating the army, other loyalist forces, and the regime's allies, requiring a maximal effort and superior organization. In the meantime, the opposition must prove its ability to govern liberated areas effectively and ensure food and water supply, medical care, and shelter to retain its popular base and legitimacy. So far it has failed to achieve either requirement.

In its fight for survival, the regime is behaving more like a militia than a state. It is not attempting to regain domestic and international political legitimacy or to ensure societal compliance with state policies. Instead, it is transforming the economic calculations of fighting a protracted internal war by disregarding the costly business of ruling.

One of its early responses to the imposition of economic sanctions by the Friends of Syria well over a year ago was to drastically increase its savings by slashing public investment, which represented 45.5 per cent of the approved state budget for 2011. Since then the government has also shed a considerable part of the operating costs of delivering public services and law enforcement, not least in areas outside its control.

The sanctions were supposed to incapacitate the regime and “tip” key constituencies, such as the private business sector or civil servants against Assad. But that has not happened. By cutting costs elsewhere, the regime has continued paying most public sector salaries—even in liberated areas. Meanwhile, it has taken on the added cost of recruiting tens of thousands of loyalist militiamen and providing relief—at very basic levels—for internally displaced persons and people in need that are sheltering in government-held areas.

Russian, Iranian, and Iraqi assistance has compensated partially for the massive drop in government revenue from oil exports, import duties, and direct taxes and for the freezing of Syrian state and regime assets held in countries most sympathetic to the opposition. This compensation has included cash transfers; reserves to uphold the Syrian currency's value; the supply of military hardware, fuel, food, and other commodities against future Syrian oil sales; and the purchase of Syrian goods. Pro-regime businessmen still contribute to the government's war chest, as do profitable enterprises such as the country's mobile telephone duopoly, which is controlled by Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhoul.

Ironically, the influx of funds from Friends of Syria governments and private donors in the Gulf to opposition civilian bodies and rebel groups in Syria has almost certainly alleviated the shortage of liquidity throughout the country. The amounts cannot be verified, but the large volume of informal trade and supply between government- and rebel-held areas makes currency highly fungible. Extensive international humanitarian relief, the bulk of which is channelled through the official Syrian Red Crescent Society—which continues to operate in rebel-held areas—and through NGOs based in government-controlled areas, also offsets some costs of public service delivery.

This combination of factors has helped keep the Syrian regime afloat. A simple gauge is the relative robustness of the Syrian currency. Much has been made of its decline from an exchange rate of 47 Syrian liras to the U.S. dollar at the start of the crisis to its current level fluctuating between SL135 and SL150 to US\$1. But it has fared immeasurably better than the Iraqi dinar, which went from US\$3.2 at the official rate (US\$0.33 in the black market) on the eve of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the imposition of sweeping international sanctions to 3,000 dinars for each dollar in 1995. The Syrian lira has also been far more stable than its Lebanese counterpart, which dropped from LL3 to US\$1 at the start of the second phase of the long civil war in 1983 to LL2, 500 by 1992.

Buoyed by its successful stabilization efforts thus far, since early 2013, the regime has made a show of restoring public services and infrastructure in war-torn areas it controls. This is little more than a public relations gesture so far, but it could evolve into an important part of the regime's wider counterinsurgency strategy as the 6.8 million Syrians who are internally displaced or in need approach a third summer of water and food shortages and the prospect of a third, harsh winter.

The Syrian Army of 2013

The regime's ability—and willingness—to learn and adapt is most evident in its military, which has weathered the twin strains of fighting a vicious internal war and suffering mass defections and desertions. The Syrian army of 2013 is not the army of 2011. Today it is a leaner, meaner fighting machine.

At one level, this is because the regime has been selective in where it invests its limited human and material resources, prioritizing and maintaining strategic reserves. It has long been obvious that the regime prefers to relinquish rural areas and more remote parts of the country to the rebels

rather than incur losses in trying to retake lost ground. But it is equally noticeable that its troops have for the most part not given up their positions without a fight, even when rebel advances seemed unstoppable. Garrisons that have been under siege for many months are still holding out, tying down rebel forces, providing firebases to destabilize liberated areas, and, as one opposition activist in Aleppo warned, potentially acting as stepping stones for government offensives.

The Syrian army was ill-prepared for the sort of military confrontation it has been forced to wage since early 2012. Its previous experience of counterinsurgency operations and of combat in urban areas was in Lebanon in 1976–1982. That was both a limited engagement and largely an exercise in what not to do. Yet since mid-2012, if not earlier, it has been fighting in 80–100 locations on any given day, often on a 360-degree arc and without clear frontlines.

This reveals the army's considerable cohesion—certainly in the most loyal units—and, since early 2013, the restoration of morale. Rebel officers in Aleppo, for example, reported in mid-May that their counterparts in the besieged Kowairis air force base are able not only to spend leave in Damascus but also, more importantly, to return to base afterward. The tight command and control this shows is additionally reflected, according to well-informed intelligence sources, in the regime's ability to keep its chemical weapons under secure guard. The regime and army command have their wits about them, know what is needed, and can see it done.

At another level, the regime and army command have conducted at least two reviews since February 2012 leading to military and security restructuring, innovative use of mixed “task-organized” combat formations, and the replacement of ineffective commanders. A younger generation of officers, keen to show their mettle and earn promotions, has assumed command in many combat units and key support structures such as military intelligence. Effective new tactics have been developed, almost certainly with the help and advice of the regime's external allies, who have trained hundreds, possibly thousands, of officers in urban warfare. The exchange of information between the armed forces and the security services has reportedly also improved.

Maintaining continuous effective control over paramilitary regime maintenance forces may prove challenging in the future. But as the battle for Qusair confirmed, the army is able to achieve the difficult task of coordinating separate chains of command with them and with Hezbollah in joint urban operations.

The regime has also mitigated its shortage of combat manpower, although this remains a critical and probably its greatest challenge. Estimates of loyalist losses vary widely, but the toll taken by defections, desertions (conscripts and reservists not reporting for service), and casualties is certainly high, and mounting continuously. Replacing losses among career personnel is particularly difficult. This is especially true when it comes to non-commissioned officers, who are the backbone of the Special Forces and infantry units that must bear the brunt of urban combat, as well as specialized officers such as combat pilots.

The regime has devolved part of the burden of protecting its rear areas and strategic facilities, loyalist population centres, and supply routes to militia-like Popular Committees and a new Popular Defence Army, believed to 50,000–60,000 strong. As the Algerian and Turkish

militaries found when confronting Islamist and Kurdish insurgencies in the 1990s, subcontracting the war to village or communal guards eases the strain on the regular armed forces. Although this reduces the flow of badly needed conscripts into the army, it allows them to serve in their home regions and lowers the political costs of enforcing conscription in loyalist communities, which are increasingly dismayed at rising casualty rates. Conversely, Assad's legislative decree of 27 May raising the badal fee exempting Syrians living abroad from conscription—from US\$5,000 to US\$15,000—may be an attempt to derive revenue from the many Syrians who prefer to avoid combat without incurring penalties for desertion should the regime ultimately win.

Still, the army's manpower shortage persists. This has been underlined by Hezbollah's direct intervention in the fighting, the call-up of Syrian reservists in March (or earlier), and the 10 March *naḥīr* (alert) issued by the pro-regime Higher Fatwa Council (for Sunni Muslims) considering service in the army a religious duty.

But the problem may soon ease. Defections have slowed among the Sunni rank and file. Senior rebel commanders' estimate that up to 60 per cent of Sunni officers and 80 per cent of Sunni enlisted personnel have defected from some of the worst-affected units, but the percentages are lower elsewhere, and those who remain appear to be obeying orders. The battle for Qusair has sharpened the image of the Syrian conflict as one between Sunni and Shia Muslims across the region, but its outcome may generate a reverse trend within the Syrian army. By demonstrating the strength of the regime and its alliances, it could dissuade further defectors, increase the number of conscripts reporting for service, and enable the army to deploy previously unreliable units for combat.

The Regime's Escalation Dominance

These grim realities and worrying trends present the Friends of Syria with few choices, none of them truly palatable. They could cross the lesser Rubicon of supplying the Syrian rebels with advanced man-portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, since they are not willing to cross the greater one of establishing safe havens or no-fly zones and protecting them militarily. But the regime has “escalation dominance,” that is, the ability to control the pace of escalation. It has already applied scorched-earth tactics to depopulate large areas around Damascus and elsewhere. And it could respond to the rebels' acquisition of more potent weapons by deliberately generating massive new refugee flows into Jordan and Lebanon, which are already heavily burdened. Serbia pursued similar tactics in Kosovo in response to the start of NATO bombing in 1999, confronting the Western allies with the prospect of having to commit ground troops to protect the Kosovar population.

Ironically, the Syrian regime's reputation for using chemical weapons may make it even easier to stampede large numbers of refugees. Talk of establishing a buffer zone in southern Syria to shelter refugees and prevent them from pouring into Jordan was hardly credible to begin with—since the zone would have remained at the mercy of conventional regime artillery—but it has vanished with regime advances around Deraa.

For now, at least, the Friends of Syria are committed to the “Geneva 2” framework for a peace conference proposed by the United States and Russia rather than arming the rebels. But here, too, Assad has upper hand, especially after retaking Qusair. The head of the rebel Higher Military Council, Brigadier General Salim Idris, sensibly argued that “for the negotiations to be of any substance, we must reach a strategic military balance, without which the regime will feel empowered to dictate, or at least stall for precious time.”

There is little prospect of this happening. The rebels put up a skilled defence in Qusair and are likely to do so in Homs and Aleppo. But the regime’s military potential is still far from exhausted. It has not yet used a majority of its units or armour and artillery, and it can leverage any threat to its strategic dominance to mobilize the Alawi community and levy recruits in even greater numbers. So unless the Friends of Syria are ready to accept that Assad may remain in office and take part in next year’s presidential election, there can be no peace agreement.

The opposition needs a negotiating framework more than any force in this battle to stabilize, consolidate, and generate credible political options for transition. But so far it continues to reject vehemently any diplomatic process that does not ensure the departure of Assad as a precondition. It should harbour no illusions. The Friends of Syria will go no further, and the failure of Geneva 2 will leave Assad’s opponents stalemated politically and militarily.

A prolonged stalemate will not be stable, as the regime has the greater ability to retain the initiative and keep the rebels on the defensive. It can seize opportunities to retake territory and drive political wedges between different rebel factions, warlords, clans, and other local power brokers. Should the armed rebellion falter, its fault lines and divisions will deepen, offering yet more opportunities for the regime to reassert its control.

The regime will not achieve a total military victory, but it can consolidate its grip on Syria’s cities, stabilize its economic situation, and hold the rebels at bay in peripheral parts of the country. Assad would be left ruling a Myanmar on the Mediterranean, boycotted by the West and some Arab states but surviving on the support of its external allies and the informal economic and trade networks that are already forming across its borders.

Something has to give—and soon. Time is running out. The regime cannot win. But the opposition can lose.

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