

COMMENTARY

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Syria's Very Local Regional Conflict

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A few months after Syria's uprising began in March 2011, it became common place to portray the country as the battleground for a proxy contest between regional and international powers. Since then, Syria's descent into full-fledged civil war has prompted an equally widespread view that any resolution depends wholly on reaching an understanding between those powers. But the highly localized nature of the Syrian conflict means that its evolution and eventual resolution, whether this comes through diplomatic or military means, will elude the control of outsiders.

Syria appears to have returned to the turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, when its lack of domestic political consensus and weak societal cohesion left it vulnerable to Arab regional rivalries and Cold War politics, resulting in frequent changes of government and military coups d'état. The crowning achievement of Hafez al-Assad—the father of the current president, Bashar al-Assad, who held power from 1970 until his death in 2000—was to insulate Syria from foreign intervention and stabilize its domestic politics. But that legacy has been lost. Outsiders now penetrate Syria's politics, society, and economy to a degree unprecedented since the country gained independence from France in the 1940s.

Bashar al-Assad has consistently portrayed the current crisis as a foreign-inspired conspiracy and presented himself as the defender of Syrian sovereignty against an all-out assault spearheaded by non-Syrian jihadists. For many of his opponents, conversely, what they initially perceived as a popular struggle against a repressive domestic regime has additionally turned into a battle against foreign occupation by Iran and its proxies, the Lebanese Hezbollah and mainly Iraqi Shia militias.

Regionalization of the conflict nonetheless proceeded slowly at first. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—which were to become the Assad regime’s most implacable regional foes—did not speak out until the regime shrugged off their mediation efforts and brutally repressed unarmed protesters during the holy month of Ramadan in August 2011. Even then they refrained from following suit when U.S. President Barack Obama and several European leaders called on Assad to step down and announced the first of a mounting list of sanctions.

The League of Arab States, in which the Gulf monarchies have played an increasingly assertive role, was similarly slow to act. It launched an initiative to end the bloodshed on November 2 and followed this with an observer mission to Syria in late December. It was debating a one-month extension of the mission when the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states forced an abrupt shift in direction and pace by announcing the withdrawal of their observers on 24 January 2012. At the urging of the six, the Arab League demanded Assad’s resignation and formally requested that the UN Security Council implement a resolution to that effect.

Diplomatic escalation reflected the conviction that the Syrian army was splintering and the Assad regime’s collapse was imminent, a belief that was shared almost universally by decision makers and intelligence analysts in the West, Russia, and Israel, not to mention by the Syrian opposition. It was at this moment that the Saudi leadership, which had very recently appeared to be drawing back from an assertive policy on Syria, went on the offensive against Assad. The timing was probably linked to its perception that the likelihood of U.S. military action against Iran’s nuclear program was receding: depriving Iran of its Syrian ally and cutting it off from Hezbollah in Lebanon offered Riyadh an alternative means of weakening Tehran strategically.

For Russia and Iran, conversely, the turning point came with major rebel offensives in Aleppo and Damascus in the second half of July 2012. The intensity of military operations, coupled with the scale of defections from the Syrian regime and the cumulative impact of economic and financial sanctions imposed by the Friends of Syria, stretched Damascus’s resources. External assistance became increasingly critical to the Assad regime’s survival, although the fact that Hezbollah did not fully commit itself militarily until the battle for the city of Qusayr in spring 2013 indicated that the regime seemingly still had significant reserves.

Since then, the Syrian conflict has morphed into a regional contest between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey on one side and Iran on the other. Iraq and Jordan both play more discreet supportive roles on either side of the divide. Israel has so far maintained a low profile as well, but it is being gradually drawn into a more active defence of the status quo as fighting between Syrian government troops and rebels threatens to spill over the 1973 ceasefire line separating Israel from Syria in the Golan Heights. The Syrian conflict has, moreover, contributed to the deterioration of U.S. and EU relations with Russia (which, with Iran, is the Assad regime’s other

principal external ally) to their lowest level since the end of the Cold War. This has in turn impeded any prospect for a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Iran, in particular, has taken a direct hand in conceiving and training pro-regime militias such as the National Defence Force, sent contingents of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Syria, and channelled Shia “jihadists” from other countries to fight in Syria. Conversely, most of the “core group” of eleven leading states within the Friends of Syria run operations in neighbouring Turkey and Jordan to support the Syrian rebels and—jointly or bilaterally—train and arm or equip them. The core group also plays a direct role in engineering alliances within the opposition’s main political wing, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces; supports the provisional government it has established in Turkey; and funnels funds to build local governing councils at the village level and above in opposition-held areas of Syria.

External non-state players additionally act as drivers, not just agents, in regionalizing the Syrian conflict. Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias, such as Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, provide powerful military backing for the regime and are believed to spearhead “Shia-zation” among certain Syrian communities. Arrayed against Assad are Jordanian and Lebanese Salafist groups, Arab and non-Arab jihadists recruited by al-Qaeda affiliates, and diverse private donors in the Gulf monarchies. Adding to the complexity, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey back Kurdish counterparts in Syria, the most important of which is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has established self-rule in three northern enclaves.

But this is no ordinary proxy conflict. The hollowing out of the Syrian state, significant demographic shifts resulting from the displacement of some 9 million Syrians, and the rise of sub-national identities as a remarkably diverse society fragments have turned Syria into a kaleidoscope of local conflicts and miniature civil wars. New political actors, social trends, and economic dynamics continue to appear on the ground and evolve constantly. In many cases they are increasingly integrated into cross-border networks, communities, and economies in ways that may be difficult to reverse.

The highly localized nature of the Syrian conflict suggests that no external actor can fully grasp, let alone control, the intricacy and fluidity of complex dynamics at the grassroots level. But given the Assad regime’s dependence for its survival both on its external allies and their proxies, as well as on the diverse array of local actors it has brought into being since the start of the conflict, it has little hope of regaining meaningful sovereignty. Indeed, no matter who eventually “wins” the war, the scale of destruction, the loss of economic opportunity, and the degree of capital flight Syria has experienced mean that the country will remain completely dependent on external assistance and subject to foreign influence for decades to come.

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