MEI@ND
www.mei.org.in
Middle East Institute @ New Delhi
...for Openness and Credibility

COMMENTARY

No. 252 Wednesday, 17 December 2014

The Assad Regime's Political "Achilles' Heel"

Yezid Sayigh

Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

The Assad regime has repeatedly exuded its confidence over the improvement of its strategic situation during the past twelve months. Territorial gains on some fronts, especially around Aleppo, in parts of the Hama and Homs countryside, and in the Qalamoun region and vicinity of the capital Damascus have encouraged it to maintain its hard-line approach in dealing with the stubborn Syrian rebellion. This focuses on military action, to the complete exclusion of any political process that might involve credible reforms in any area of public policy, not to mention meaningful power sharing. But the regime is increasingly stretched, militarily and financially, and so its refusal to engage politically with its own constituencies, let alone its adversaries, threatens it.

Despite the importance of regime gains and the threat its armed forces currently pose of completing the encirclement of Aleppo city in particular, it is visibly becoming more vulnerable in other parts of the country. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has been making incremental gains in eastern Hama and Homs provinces, where in theory it could eventually try to break through towards Idlib or Qalamoun. And local coalitions of moderate rebel groups and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra have made significant gains south and southwest of Damascus, and reappeared in the Qalamoun region. This is forcing the regime to pause its offensives further north and disperse its military effort, at a time when it must also face growing pressure from ISIS on its last remaining stronghold in Deir az-Zor city in the east.

As numerous commentators have noted, the fact that the regime is calling up reservists who have already performed their military service and diverting conscripts from the National Defence Force, where they had previously been allowed to serve, back to the regular army, points to a worsening shortage of combat manpower. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult for

regime forces to shore up the frontline at all points. The army has been compelled repeatedly to rush battle-hardened units from one weak point to another in fire-fighting mode, whenever the irregular militias it relies on give way. Military sources say its hesitation to take Aleppo, which would be a big prize, is because it simply lacks the strength to do so.

The regime has not yet lost its edge over its opponents. The army's extensive fortified positions and influxes of new Russian military technology mean that tough battles lie ahead before it might lose the Jabal Sha'er gas fields—which are now under its firm control once again—or Deir az-Zor to ISIS. But even if rebel or ISIS advances in any one area can be reversed, any significant new loss of life by the army—as at the Tabqa air base in August—or a direct threat to loyalist areas will have a powerful psychological impact on the regime's social base. This has been showing growing discontent over constant human losses and declining living and economic conditions for months.

At the same time, the regime's ability to contain dissent within loyalist constituencies—through subsidies and compensation for the families of war dead, for example—is decreasing due to a deepening financial shortfall. This also makes it harder to import its fuel and energy needs, as U.S. air strikes on ISIS oil refineries in the east and ISIS attacks on regime natural gas processing plants have cut electricity production just as winter approaches. Iranian assistance has declined and is unlikely to revive in light of the sharp drop in global oil prices, while Russia is reported to have refused a recent regime request for a new US$1 billion credit line, while offering smaller amounts of aid and investment. Some economists anticipate that the regime will run out of funds by the end of 2015; even if this over-states the extent of the challenge or under-estimates its hidden reserves, it reduces the regime's options for simply continuing its present policies indefinitely.

Dissent does not yet amount to an acute political crisis. But this may change with strategic shifts on the ground. In particular, the reappearance of Jabhat al-Nusra as a leading rebel force signals that the armed conflict in much of Syria may reduce to three main armed actors (excluding the Kurdish enclaves) within coming months: the regime, ISIS, and al-Nusra (acting as a coordinating framework for moderate rebel groups that agree to work with it). Instead of an armed rebellion that has been exceptional in its fragmentation and slow operational and political evolution, the regime will face two armed movements in ISIS and an al-Nusra-led coalition that have demonstrated a much higher level of command and control.

In the short-term, the regime will portray this as incontrovertible proof of what it has claimed all along—that its real opponents are all jihadist extremists—and offer itself once again as the obvious, natural ally of the U.S.-led coalition combating ISIS. Speaking to French periodical Paris-Match on 28 November, Assad dangled such an alliance clearly, arguing that "Terrorism

cannot be destroyed from the air, and you cannot achieve results on the ground without land forces who know the geographical details of the regions and move in tandem with the airstrikes."

But if, as remains most likely, the U.S. and its coalition partners disappoint Assad's hopes, the regime will come under increasing strain internally. Having lost the crucial advantage of its previous, relative superiority over the armed rebellion, the regime will need to generate even greater domestic and external resources, but these are already at the limit and cannot be increased without a high political price. Domestically, it will struggle to retain its already loose control over the semi-autonomous military and economic actors whose rise it encouraged as a means of devolving the burden of defence and revenue generation in loyalist areas. And if the regime appears unable or unwilling to protect vulnerable population centres or to mitigate the financial strains of loyalist communities, its home front may start to crumble.

At present, these remain only potential trends. So far, the regime has responded by intensifying security measures and centralizing control in Assad's hands even further. Although he has used this in some instances to reinforce the regime's policy of promoting what it calls "reconciliation" in some Damascus suburbs, the striving to micro-manage also betrays its inability to ensure compliance by society with other government policies—such as reporting for military service—or effective performance by its various coercive agencies. Similarly, when senior officers boast that they already anticipate moving on to Raqqa after retaking Aleppo, they exaggerate army capabilities; overlook the regime's resource constraints, and under-estimate the threat of losing a second provincial capital in Deir az-Zor. Regime hopes of luring Syrian businessmen into repatriating their capital or reinvesting it in areas like Aleppo's industrial zone have had modest results, and will continue to do so.

In theory, the regime could ease its material and political burden by engaging seriously with proposals to reduce levels of violence in the country—whether through a unilateral, general truce or the "Aleppo freeze" advocated by U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura. This would show a convincing responsiveness to the concerns of loyalist constituencies, which are being asked to bear the brunt of what is not only an endless battle, but one in which foes are once again increasing in potency.

The regime clearly believes that loyalist constituencies have no choice but to continue fighting, but its margin for manoeuvre is narrowing. It realizes that credible reforms would set it on the path to dismantling itself, but by insisting on an exclusively military approach, it takes itself closer to the point where it has no political or social cushion domestically. This is its Achilles' Heel.

Note: This article was originally published in *Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut* and has been reproduced under arrangement.

Web Link: http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/11/assad-regime-s-political-achilles-heel/hwdw

Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org

---