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Syria: U.S. Policy Options

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Situational Update: The Syrian Crisis

The crisis in Syria is part and parcel of the Arab Spring. It is a national uprising against 48 years of authoritarian, single-party rule and 41 years of family rule.

Thus far, more than 12,000 have died; more than 1.5 million have been internally displaced; there are 130,000 Syrian refugees in other countries; and tens of thousands have been detained and others forcibly disappeared. Entire villages have been reduced to rubble, with entire populations fleeing.

Since the emergence of the joint UN-Arab League mission, headed by envoy Kofi Annan, Syrian human rights organizations and the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime have documented more than 1,500 deaths. The number of refugees increased markedly and massacres of those trying to flee government shelling and bombardment continue.

Since the beginning of the so called "cease-fire," on April 12 at 6:00 am Damascus time, more than 1,000 civilians have died. Although the Assad regime pulled back its tanks and heavy armor from some areas, it repositioned them in others. In some cases, tanks were moved temporarily to neighboring villages, only to return hours later. Eyewitnesses have provided evidence of regime security forces removing their military uniforms only to don civilian clothing before pursuing their missions of death.

Bombardment of civilian neighborhoods in Idlib, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and other areas has continued in the meantime.

In brief, while it may appear that the Assad regime reduced the level of violence in some areas, it is a fact that this reduction lasted two days only, and, given the Assad regime's track record over the 13-month uprising, there is no reason to believe that regime violence against the Syrian people will end any time soon.

Moreover, the Assad regime has been selective in its implementation of the six points in Kofi Annan's plan: it has not released any of the detainees (on the contrary, it has increased the number of arrest campaigns sweeping residential areas, including, but not limited to, Damascus and Aleppo); nor allowed any more journalists than it already had (from countries friendly to the Assad regime) – 28 in total (hardly a number appropriate for the Annan Plan's requirement to allow the international media unfettered access). Furthermore, the Assad regime continues to deal with unarmed civilian demonstrators with snipers and gunfire (case in point: security forces shot and killed student demonstrators in Aleppo, among others, last Sunday).

As of this writing, the Assad regime is posing a variety of conditions with regard to the UN monitors, their nationality, and their movement inside Syria.

The Syrian Opposition

The Syrian National Council, the largest umbrella organization, was established in October 2011 as a result of the national uprising. It is the political arm of the Syrian revolution and is mandated by the Syrian street with articulating its political demands. The SNC has received its legitimacy from the street.

As is the case with most opposition movements, the Syrian opposition is not monolithic. Other opposition groups have emerged, and there are differences in views among them. Still, the international media has generally exaggerated the Syrian opposition's woes: First, what the media calls "the fragmentation" of the Syrian opposition is problematic: Rifaat Assad's group, for example, should not count as opposition, as Rifaat al-Assad has a highly violent and corrupt past in Syria, leaving him with no credibility among most Syrians. Nor should Abdel Halim Khaddam's "National Salvation Front", or any of the myriad of two- or three-person groups calling themselves opposition groups, as they are former Assad regime cronies who, for the most part, are used by the regime in its attempts to put on a reformist face.

Foremost among the credible opposition movements is the "National Coordinating Committees" (NCC). Although the SNC and the NCC are united in their vision for a free and democratic Syria after the collapse of the Assad regime, the two differ on method: whereas the SNC is of the view that the international community must intervene to provide humanitarian relief, and that the international community should assist the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in defending peaceful civilian demonstrators against regime brutality, the NCC objects to any kind of international intervention and to the militarization of the revolution. A third point of contention has to do with dialogue with the Assad regime: while the SNC is of the view that there can only be a dialogue with Assad regime figures who do not have blood on their hands, this dialogue can only take place in the context of the trial of Assad and other regime elements who have blood on their hands.

Another important group is the Free Syrian Army (headed by Col. Riad al-Asaad) which did not arise in a vacuum but as a result of soldiers who preferred to defect rather than fire at fellow citizen, as per the orders of the Assad regime.

The relationship between the SNC and the FSA has been formalized in an agreement by which the SNC provides assistance to the FSA in its function of protecting unarmed civilian demonstrators, while the FSA recognizes the SNC as the political arm of the revolution. The "Local Coordination Committees" (LCC) are part and parcel of the SNC and the national leadership of that group is included in the SNC's Presidential Council. However, the LCC, in its capacity as the leader of the civil resistance movement in Syria, has difficulty with the slow pace of international assistance.

Second, the international media have also over-emphasized the differences between the “internal” and the “external” components of the Syrian opposition movement. In that regard, it is natural for SNC leaders to meet outside Syria. If they were to meet inside Syria, they would be made head shorter. Still, what is generally called the external opposition, the SNC, is thoroughly present on the ground in Syria through groups including the LCC, the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood, and others. Moreover, a large of number of SNC General Assembly members are inside Syria but their names cannot be divulged for security reasons.

Cohesion of the Assad Regime

Although the Assad family has seemingly maintained its cohesion, fissures in the Assad regime’s supporters are beginning to appear: an increasing number of major business groups (some in Dubai, some in Europe, some in Saudi Arabia, and still others in Syria) are jumping ship. The SNC is in the process of bringing these business groups under its umbrella. In addition, 25 Generals have thus far defected from the armed forces, in addition to dozens of ranking military officers who defect daily across Syria. Other defections have taken place within the ruling Ba’th Party, the ministerial cabinet, and the government bureaucracy. The process of defections – which will lead to the unraveling of the regime -- can be accelerated if the international community de-legitimizes the Assad regime and, simultaneously, recognizes the SNC as the sole, legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Effectiveness of Sanctions Against Syria

U.S. and other bilateral sanctions against Syria have had a biting effect on the Syrian economy. Sanctions against Syria’s oil industry in particular deny the economy around one-third of Syria’s total annual income. Sanctions against Syria’s Central Bank have also had a crippling effect on business. These measures have caused the Syrian Pound to depreciate, inflation to rise, and unemployment to increase exponentially. These measures have led many business people to jump ship; they have also delayed salary payments to middle-class public servants, thereby increasing their level of fear.

However, sanctions alone will not bring the regime down. Assad and his immediate entourage do not feel the pinch. Iran, Iraq, and, to a lesser degree, Venezuela, have come to the rescue of the Assad regime with financial assistance, trade deals, and oil supplies.

Opportunities for Diplomacy

Given the existential threat looming over the Assad regime, bilateral U.S.-Syrian and multilateral EU-Syrian diplomacy are exercises in futility. Even Arab diplomacy has failed

to convince Assad to stop the carnage. Assad has shown time and again that he will use any and all diplomatic initiatives to buy himself and his regime time -- in the hope that his security forces would crush the national uprising before his regime collapses.

That the use of diplomacy is an exercise in futility with the Assad regime holds true with regard to Mr. Kofi Annan's multilateral diplomacy as well. While the "Annan Plan" may have served to decrease the level of violence for the first two days following the announcement of the "cease fire," Assad's heavy weapons are back at work against civilian neighborhoods in Daraa, Idlib, Homs, Rastan, Hama, and Deir-ez-Zor.

Moreover, the "Annan Plan" does not specify a timeline: How long should the UN tolerate Assad's violence, even if reduced, against the civilian population? At what point will the international community declare the "Annan Plan" a failure? How is "failure" defined and who defines it?

Factors on the Ground and U.S. Policy Options

A major factor that increases US policy options is the humanitarian calamity that is taking place. How long can the United States watch massacres of unarmed civilians go on before implementing options other than economic and diplomatic sanctions?

Washington has tied its own hands by linking its options to a consensus in the Security Council – although historical precedents demonstrate that the US need not wait for a UN Security Council mandate.

Within this context, and given the challenges and opportunities available to the United States, a middle-of-the-road approach (there must be something that can be done between supplying the FSA with cell phones and going on a unilateral rampage) consists in the US threatening the Assad regime with the use of American force as this has a major psychological effect on Assad regime cronies should Assad elect to dig in his heels. Given the convergence of US values (freedom and dignity of the citizen) and US interests (geo-strategic), the United States would be well advised to act in concert with the international community (e.g., France, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia) and lead a humanitarian effort by establishing humanitarian corridors to funnel relief, and safe zones in which the FSA can regroup -- inside Syria. In this case, no American 'boots on the ground' are necessary. Conceivably, the only boots on the ground operating in the Syrian theater would be those of the FSA.

