

Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications

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Western news media outlets have paid considerable attention to the civil war in Syria, but much of the coverage is simplistic and melodramatic. Too many accounts portray the conflict as a Manichean struggle between the evil, brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad and noble freedom fighters seeking to create a new, democratic Syria. The reality is far more complex and murky. Syria's turmoil has troubling, long-term implications not only for that country but for the Middle East as a whole, and even for the international system.

The searing images of civilian casualties coming out of Syria have been hard to watch. Several thousand innocent people perished between the eruption of resistance to Assad's regime in March 2011 and the beginning of 2013. There is little doubt that government forces were responsible for the majority of deaths. The prospect that Assad might be overthrown is understandably appealing to Westerners from a moral standpoint, but we need to be fully aware of the potential for unintended, and possibly quite unpleasant, consequences.

The Complex and Murky Syrian Civil War

Syria is a fragile ethnoreligious tapestry that could easily unravel. The country's population is divided among Sunni Arabs (a little less than 60 percent of the population); Christians (about 10–12 percent); Alawites, a Shiite offshoot

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(also about 10–12 percent); Druze (about 6 percent); and various, mostly Sunni, ethnic minorities, primarily Kurds and Armenians. The Alawite Assad family has based its power for more than four decades on the solid loyalty of its religious bloc in a loose alliance with Christians, Druze, and, sometimes, one or more of the other smaller, ethnic groups. A prominent feature of the 2011–12 rebellion is a largely Sunni Arab bid to overthrow that “coalition of minorities” regime.

Evidence has mounted about the extent of Sunni domination of the rebel Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council, the insurgents’ political leadership in exile. David Enders, a reporter for McClatchy newspapers, spent a month with rebel forces in northern and central Syria in the spring of 2012. He found that while the early anti-Assad demonstrations were sometimes multiethnic and multireligious, “the armed rebels are Sunni to a man.” Enders also found another common perception in the West—that rebel ranks include numerous defectors from Syria’s military—to be erroneous. Although there were a few military defectors, most fighters turned out to be Sunni civilians. “The Sunni rebels have made overtures to other religious groups to join their struggle,” Enders noted, but they had “little success.” Despite some attempts at window dressing, the SNC is dominated by Sunnis, and in particular by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a staunchly Islamist faction.¹

The bitter sectarian divisions in Syria make the situation especially volatile. Alawites make up some 140,000 of the approximately 200,000 career soldiers in Assad’s military of 300,000 active-duty personnel. Many of the others are Christians or Druze. About 80 percent of the officers are Alawites, and nearly all of the other 20 percent are members of the regime’s ethnic allies. Given that the Free Syrian rebels are overwhelmingly Sunnis, the conditions exist for the kind of sectarian civil war that convulsed Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s and still plagues Iraq today.

James Jay Carafano, a scholar with the conservative Heritage Foundation, notes that “many of the same toxic dynamics that drove the frenzy of violence

1. David Enders, “Weeks Spent with Syrian Rebels Reveal a Force of Sunni Muslim Civilians,” McClatchy Newspapers, 25 June 2012.

2. James Jay Carafano, “Serious about Syria,” *Washington Examiner*, 1 July 2012, [washingtonexaminer.com/serious-about-syria/article/2501105#.UE9mVK6eKRI](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/serious-about-syria/article/2501105#.UE9mVK6eKRI).

in Iraq in 2006 are present in spades in Syria.”² Robert G. Rabil sees a similar explosion of sectarian hatred and concludes that the battle in Syria is now primarily “over consolidating sectarian cantonization, or the creation of sub-national units, each of which is dominated by a predominant sect.”³

There is yet another troubling aspect of the Syrian violence. Although the Assad coalition is primarily secular, the ideological composition of the opposition is far more opaque. The extent of radical Islamist participation in the rebellion is uncertain, but there are some worrisome indicators that the presence of those elements is substantial and growing.⁴ Beginning with the massive suicide bombings in the city of Aleppo in early February 2012, there was a proliferation of episodes reminiscent of terrorist attacks in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. Such factors underscore the naïve nature of comments like those of Senator Joseph Lieberman (Independent of Connecticut) that US and allied intervention, especially air strikes, would “break the will” of pro-Assad forces and put “an end to this terrible waste of life.”⁵ The Assad regime is only one player, and perhaps not the most unsavory player, in an extremely bloody drama.

Syria as a Cockpit for Regional Rivalries

The regional context for the Syrian conflict is at least as complex as the internal setting, reflecting both a triangular geopolitical contest for dominance among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey and the ancient bitter rivalry between the Sunni and Shiite factions of Islam. Unfortunately, the United States and its European allies seem only dimly aware of those dynamics and the dangers they pose.

Historians have remarked that the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, pitting Francisco Franco’s fascist forces against the left-leaning republican gov-

3. Robert G. Rabil, “Syria and the Power of Sectarian Strife,” *National Interest*, 2 July 2012, nationalinterest.org/commentary/syria-the-power-sectarian-strife-7153.

4. Jonathan Robinson, Tal First, and Einav Yogev, “Jihad in Syria: The Penetration of Radical Islam in the Syrian Conflict,” Institute for National Security Studies *INSS Insight*, no. 355, 17 July 2012, www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=6893; Charlie Skelton, “The Syrian Opposition: Who’s Doing the Talking?” *Guardian* (UK), 12 July 2012.

5. Quoted in Carlo Munoz, “McCain, Lieberman Slam White House’s Syria Strategy on Senate Floor,” *Hill*, 7 June 2012, thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/policy-and-strategy/231523-mccain-lieberman-slam-white-houses-syria-strategy-on-senate-floor-

ernment, was in some respects a proxy war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. There is a similar aspect to the Syrian conflict. The domestic divisions in that country are very real and are the prime driver for the fighting, but regional rivalries also play an important role. Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies, backed by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, want to remove Assad, not just because he is a brutal, corrupt leader, but because he is Iran's primary ally in the region. Both the Saudi bloc and the Western powers want to further isolate the Iranian regime, both because of Tehran's persistent nuclear ambitions and because of the clerical regime's support for movements that threaten conservative ruling elites in the Arab world. Assad's fall would significantly undermine Iran's position.

The Syrian conflict is only one theater in the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That rivalry also has been an important factor in the simmering tensions in Bahrain, where a Sunni monarchy rules a majority Shiite population. Tehran has sought to galvanize discontented Bahrainis, and Riyadh has backed the current government to the hilt, even sending in Saudi security forces in 2011 to bolster the monarchy and crush antiregime demonstrations.

Iraq is an even larger prize in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The Shiite-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has increasingly tilted toward Iran on an array of issues, and Baghdad has firmly resisted pressure from Sunni governments in the Middle East (as well as from Washington) to support stronger sanctions against Syria. Sectarian violence inside Iraq reignited during the summer of 2012, with many of the attacks directed against Shiite targets. It has been an open secret for many years that wealthy Saudis—and perhaps even the Saudi government—have funded and armed Sunni factions in Iraq, and the Maliki government is suspicious that such support has greatly contributed to the violence that plagues the country.

It is not coincidental that Saudi Arabia has been especially adamant about calling for Assad's ouster and for a transitional government in which the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council would play a major—if not the dominant—role. The fight inside Syria is a microcosm of the regional struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. Having largely lost the

contest for influence in Iraq, and having had to fend off the Iranian government's political probes in Bahrain, Riyadh seeks to turn the tables by undercutting Tehran's principal ally.

There is another key player in the Syrian conflict, though, and that is Turkey. Just a few years ago, the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan annoyed Washington by pursuing a rapprochement with Iran—and with Iran's ally, Syria. That strategy has been fading for some time, though, as Tehran's uncompromising attitude on the nuclear issue frustrated Ankara. When the Syrian conflict exploded in 2011, the Erdogan government soon made common cause with Saudi Arabia in trying to bring about regime change in Damascus. The religious aspect of the Syrian conflict was a key factor in that policy shift. As the violence in Syria escalated, it became untenable for Erdogan's ruling conservative Sunni party to tolerate the sight of the mostly Alawite and Christian Syrian military slaughtering Sunni insurgents and civilians. Ankara has provided sanctuaries inside Turkey to the Free Syrian Army and has given funds and other aid to the insurgents.

Halil Karaveli, a senior fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, describes how the Syrian conflict is merely part of a larger sectarian, geopolitical feud. Writing in the *National Interest*, Karaveli notes that Turkey has now “embraced an exclusively Sunni cause in Syria.” That is important because “sectarian considerations have acquired an importance in Turkish foreign policy as never before. Ankara not only is embroiled in a confrontation with the Alawite Syrian regime but also is in conflict with the Shiite regime in Iraq. In addition, the historic geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Iran, the champion of Syria, has resumed after a brief interlude.”⁶

Ankara's strategy entails multiple risks, however. A definitive victory by the Free Syrian Army might lead to enhanced Saudi influence in Turkey's immediate neighborhood, a development that Ankara would not welcome. Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu told the parliament that a “new Middle East is about to be born” and that Turkey “will be the owner, pioneer

6. Halil Karaveli, “Why Does Turkey Want Regime Change in Syria?” *National Interest*, 23 July 2012, nationalinterest.org/commentary/why-does-turkey-want-regime-change-syria-7227.

and servant” of that new Middle East. But Turkish leaders understand that both Iran and Saudi Arabia might have other ideas concerning which power should shape the region’s future.

Furthermore, Turkey’s ability to control developments in Syria may be far more limited than the Erdogan government believes. Syria’s ethnoreligious strife increases the probability of a fragmented Syrian state. Assad’s Alawite-dominated military already shows signs of trying to establish an Alawite-Christian redoubt in the mountainous western part of the country.⁷ However, the creation of an Alawite-led ministate would likely be the first, not the last, stage of Syria’s disintegration. And that process could cause major problems for Ankara, especially involving the Syrian Kurds.

There is also the Israeli factor. Israel certainly has no love for the Assad family and its rule, having waged several wars against it since the late 1940s. But the prospect of a Saudi- and/or Turkish-influenced Sunni regime in Damascus holds no greater appeal to Israel’s government or population. Indeed, if the Syrian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood came to dominate the new regime, Israel would probably find that neighbor even more unpalatable than Syria under the Assads. Moreover, it is not clear that the breakup of the Syrian state would serve Israel’s security interests either. The weakening of Lebanon’s central institutions led first to the rise of the threat posed by the Palestine Liberation Organization on Israel’s northern frontier and then to the even stronger threat posed by Hezbollah. A fragmented Syria would be an arena for endless brass knuckles maneuvers by all the contending Middle East powers, much as Lebanon has been.

A related risk is that the multisided power struggle in Syria could spread well beyond Syria’s borders, including into Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. Already there are indications that Damascus has retaliated for Ankara’s backing of the Free Syrian Army by reviving Syrian support for Kurdish rebels, the Marxist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), in Turkey. The PKK certainly has become more active since the Syrian civil war began. Syria’s own Kurds may pose a dilemma for Ankara as well. The ambitions of Syria’s Kurds for a

7. Zena Karam, “Breakaway Alawite State May Be Assad’s Last Resort,” Associated Press, 25 July 2012; Franck Salameh, “An Alawite State in Syria?” *National Interest*, 10 July 2012, nationalinterest.org/commentary/alawite-state-syria-7173.

self-governing region appear to be on the rise. Kurdish leaders are not waiting passively for the civil war to play out; they are taking steps to protect their enclaves and exploit any opportunities for greater political autonomy that might emerge. One of the two major Kurdish factions, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), established numerous armed checkpoints in Syria's Kurdish region as the authority of Damascus waned. The PYD has close ties to the PKK.⁸

That development raises the concern of whether Ankara would—or even could—countenance another autonomous Kurdish region on Turkey's border.⁹ Ankara has had volatile relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, and Turkish leaders would not be happy about the emergence of a similar neighbor in northeastern Syria. There is also the issue of what ties would exist between the KRG and a counterpart across the border in Syria. It is possible the cooperation between an Iraqi and a Syrian Kurdish autonomous region could become the foundation for a larger, de facto independent Kurdish state—a development that Turkish leaders would find profoundly worrisome.

All of this confirms that the Syrian conflict is not merely a civil war; it is one theater in a very dangerous regional struggle. The United States and its NATO allies are making a dubious assumption that Assad's fall from power would dampen the violence in Syria, much less that it would lead to a more stable Middle East. It might well have the opposite effect.

The Syrian Conflict and the Surge of Great Power Tensions

The Syrian civil war also has potential negative global implications. It already has had a corrosive effect on the West's relations with both Russia and China. Disagreements about how to deal with the fighting in Syria have

8. Thomas McGee, "The Kurdish Issue in Syria and the Role of Massoud Barzani beyond Iraq," *Mideast Flashpoints* (Aspen Institute), 20 July 2012, www.aspeninstitute.it/aspensia-online/article/kurdish-issue-syria-and-role-massoud-barzani-beyond-iraq.

9. Jacques Neria, "Kurdistan: The Next Flashpoint between Turkey, Iraq, and the Syrian Revolt," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 5 August 2012, jcpa.org/article/the-future-of-kurdistan-between-turkey-the-iraq-war-and-the-syrian-revolt/. Also see David Pollock, "Syria's Kurds in Play as Turkey Ponders Options," Washington Institute, 27 June 2012, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-kurds-in-play-as-turkey-ponders-options.

produced bitter denunciations and recriminations on both sides. That development does not bode well for effective international cooperation on a host of important issues in the coming years.

The degree of bitterness, especially on the US side, surprises even veteran observers of international affairs. Following a February 2012 decision by both Moscow and Beijing to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the violence in Syria and calling for an immediate end to the bloodshed, US ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice denounced those vetoes and stated that her country was “disgusted.” The Chinese and Russian actions, she added, were “shameful” and “unforgivable.”¹⁰

Later that month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used equally harsh language. “It is distressing to see two permanent members of the Security Council using their veto while people are being murdered—women, children, brave young men,” Clinton said the Russian and Chinese actions were “just despicable, and I have to ask whose side are they on? They are clearly not on the side of the Syrian people.”¹¹

The tone of the discourse has not improved since then. At an international Friends of Syria meeting in July 2012, Clinton charged that Russia and China believed they were not “paying any price at all for standing up for the Assad regime.” They “should pay a price,” she contended, and she urged the diplomats in attendance to “demand that they get off the sidelines” of the Syria crisis.¹² Her comments suggested that the United States was moving beyond verbal denunciations of continuing Russian and Chinese resistance to sanctions against the Assad regime. It implied that Washington favored substantive penalties against the two governments if their recalcitrance continued.

Chinese and Russian officials reacted angrily to the shrill rhetoric and the thinly veiled threats coming from the Barack Obama administration.

10. Quoted in Luis Martinez, “U.S. ‘Disgusted’ by Russia, China Veto of UN Resolution to End Violence in Syria,” ABC News, 4 February 2012, abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/02/us-disgusted-by-russia-china-veto-of-un-resolution-to-end-violence-in-syria/.

11. Quoted in “Hillary Clinton: Russia, China ‘Despicable’ for Opposing UN Action Aimed at Stopping Bloodshed in Syria,” Associated Press, 24 February 2012.

12. Quoted in Robert Marquand, “Clinton Says Russia, China Should ‘Pay Price’ over Syria,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July 2012, www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0706/Clinton-says-Russia-China-should-pay-price-over-Syria-video.

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov accused Washington of engaging in “elements of blackmail.”¹³ Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, openly questioned US and NATO motives in the debate leading to the February 2012 veto. Although he condemned the bloodshed in Syria, Churkin stressed Russian suspicions about “regime change” intentions by “influential members of the international community.”¹⁴

Chinese officials exhibit a similar lack of trust. Wang Keihan, a deputy director at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, told reporters in early August 2012 that “some Western countries” had hindered and even “sabotaged” the diplomatic process by pushing for regime change in Syria.¹⁵ His comment was clearly directed at Washington and its NATO allies, who have repeatedly demanded that Assad step down. The solution to the Syrian crisis must be solely a political one, Wang argued, with the option of military intervention taken off the table.

Bringing down Assad’s government (even if it were not merely a prelude to ousting the current regime in Tehran) does not serve Russian or Chinese national interests. Moscow has long-standing economic and strategic ties with the Syrian government not only under Bashar Assad but earlier under his father as well. The Soviet Union supplied Damascus with generous amounts of economic and military aid throughout the Cold War, and that relationship has persisted since the collapse of the USSR. Moreover, Russia’s “naval maintenance facility” at the Syrian port of Tartus is the only military installation that country has today in the Mediterranean region.

China’s substantive ties with Assad are more limited, but far from trivial. China was Syria’s largest trading partner in 2011, with Syrian exports to that country totaling more than \$2.4 billion. China is also a major participant in Syria’s oil industry, which until the onset of fighting was on the rise.

Policy regarding the Syrian civil war has exacerbated fundamental disagreements between the Western powers and both Russia and China, about not only Middle East issues but the permissible extent of great power interven-

13. Quoted in Jim Heintz, “Russia Accuses West of Blackmail on Syria Plans,” Associated Press, 16 July 2012.

14. Quoted in Martinez.

15. Quoted in Associated Press and Yoel Goldman, “China Blames West for Syria Impasse,” *Times of Israel*, 4 August 2012, www.timesofisrael.com/china-blames-west-for-syria-impasse/.

tions in the international system. The United States has implicitly embraced the “responsibility to protect” doctrine. That doctrine asserts that when a regime brutalizes its population in a systematic way, the “international community” has not only a right but also an obligation to intervene to protect vulnerable civilians and, if necessary, to depose an offending regime. Although Washington has been somewhat inconsistent, if not hypocritical, in applying that standard, it certainly has done so regarding regimes, such as those of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, which US leaders regarded as adversaries for other reasons.

Moscow and Beijing, by contrast, continue to endorse the traditional state system embodied in the Peace of Westphalia, the series of seventeenth-century treaties that ended the massively bloody Thirty Years War in Europe. The core principle of the Westphalian system is a general prohibition against outside interference, especially by the great powers, in the purely internal affairs of other countries. In the view of Russian and Chinese leaders, the new Western fondness for forcible regime change threatens to end such restraint. That shift, they worry, creates the potential for chaos in the Middle East and other regions and, even worse, increases the risk of dangerous confrontations between major powers.

An even bigger concern for Russia and China is that US policy regarding Syria is just the latest manifestation of an overall strategy of forcible regime change to advance the interests and policy preferences of the United States and its Western allies. That policy was on display in the Balkans during the 1990s, in Iraq during George W. Bush’s administration, and more recently in Libya. To officials in Moscow and Beijing, it looks suspiciously like a power play to achieve undisputed US/Western global dominance.

Keeping the Syrian Dispute in Perspective

Both great power factions, but especially the West, need to keep the dispute over Syria policy in perspective. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be happening; instead, the trend is toward deeper and more bitter differences regarding the Syria issue. The Russian government of Vladimir Putin seems determined to continue backing the tottering Assad regime, and the Chinese government, at least thus far, supports that policy. For its part, Washington

has not tempered its accusations and threats against Moscow and Beijing for daring to thwart US policy preferences.

The importance of good relations between the West and Russia and China goes far beyond the issue of Syria. It would be a tragedy if policymakers allowed differences regarding Syria policy to disrupt those crucial relations and trigger an East-West cold war. Unfortunately, the danger of such an outcome is no longer far-fetched. The palpable chill during the summer 2012 summit meeting between Obama and Putin was a warning of the permanent damage to great power comity and cooperation that could occur.

All of the cases of the so-called Arab Awakening involve the potential for regional instability and international repercussions. But the rebellion in Syria has that potential to an exceptional degree. The fighting in that unhappy country, whether or not it ultimately unseats Bashar al-Assad, has already had a major impact on the Middle East and the overall international system. That impact, for good or ill, is likely to continue, even if the guns ultimately fall silent. The United States and its Western allies need to exercise greater caution and flexibility regarding this complex conflict, lest they cause additional problems for an already troubled country and region and poison relations with international players whose cooperation the West will need in the future.