Has the Assad Regime 'Won' Syria's Civil War?

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

May 15, 2018
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/hl-antsr-nzam-alasd-fy-alhrb-alahlyt-fy-swrya)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)
Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

Articles & Testimony

Not only is the war far from over, but a series of developments could undermine the regime's recent gains—and create opportunities for the United States.

President Bashar al-Assad has said about Syria's bloody civil war that "things now are moving in the right direction" and that "the worst is behind us." Senior officials from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the UN and former U.S. diplomats have gone even further, proclaiming Assad the victor and urging rebel groups and the U.S. government to reconcile with this unpalatable "reality." An analysis of regional conflict dynamics, however, reveals a more complicated picture, which indicates that Syria's agony may be far from over and that its military gains may be more tenuous than they appear.

Consolidating Victory with Insufficient Forces

Pro-regime forces now control more than 50 percent of Syria's territory and between one-half and two-thirds of its population. Yet the regime's hold on many areas remains uncertain due to a lack of loyal and competent troops and institutional capacity. While pro-regime forces have been able to "clear" many areas they have retaken, they are overstretched, so it remains to be seen whether they can "hold" them. (Indeed, ISIS has recently mounted stinging attacks in areas—like Palmyra and Deir al-Zor—that have been repeatedly "cleared" by pro-regime forces.) The transfer of rebel fighters and their families from recaptured areas to Idlib or Deraa provinces—as part of so-called reconciliation agreements that are in fact anything but—will facilitate this clearing task, but pro-regime forces could still face renewed armed resistance in these areas from a new generation of oppositionists. And as long as U.S. forces remain in and over northeastern Syria, they can veto the regime's reconquest of that part of the country—which includes some of its most productive oil-producing and agricultural regions.

The Syrian Army has perhaps 10,000-20,000 troops available for offensive operations throughout the country. These

are drawn mainly from the 4th Armored Division, the Republican Guard, the Tiger Force, and elements of the National Defense Forces (NDF). The rest of the Syrian Army—including the remnants of several regular Army divisions, most of the NDF, the recently formed IVth and Vth Corps, the Local Defense Forces (consisting of various pro-regime militias), and the regime's intelligence services—totals perhaps 100,000-150,000 men under arms. Many are poorly trained conscripts and volunteers of all ages, as well as militia auxiliaries responsible for local security in regime-controlled areas. They cannot be relied on for operations outside their home regions.

Much of the regime's offensive combat power is provided by fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah (6,000-8,000 fighters), Iran (2,000 fighters), Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (10,000-20,000 fighters), and a relatively small Russian ground and air contingent. Pro-regime forces have been able to tap large reserves of Shia foreign fighters to support their efforts—while the flow of anti-regime Sunni foreign fighters has been reduced to a trickle as the result of tighter border controls and ISIS's battlefield defeats. Moreover, many areas are currently controlled by foreign pro-regime forces, as well as "reconciled" rebel groups and tribes whose loyalty to the regime is conditional. Should these foreign pro-regime forces and fighters need to return to their places of origin, or should reconciled rebel groups and tribes switch sides once again, the regime would be hard pressed to hold on to many of the areas it currently controls. Moreover, Lebanese Hezbollah must balance its desire to draw down its presence in Syria and return its fighters to Lebanon with the ongoing need for them to remain in Syria.

A rule of thumb used by military planners states that 20 troops per 1,000 civilians are required for stability operations. This would equate to a force of 200,000-240,000 for the regime to dominate the 10-12 million people now reportedly living in areas it more or less controls. That is considerably more than pro-regime forces currently have at their disposal. But after seven years of war, rebel forces are depleted and exhausted too—and about as divided among themselves as ever. Indeed in most places, they may no longer be capable of sustained resistance.

Moreover, pro-regime forces have consistently acted with greater unity of purpose. They have benefited from the intense *asabiyya* (in-group solidarity) of the Alawi community and its allies—including Shia, Christian, and a smattering of Sunni supporters of the regime—as well as from the degree to which the interests of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia in Syria have been aligned. By contrast, the diverse local *asabiyyas* of the opposition and the competing agendas of their various foreign supporters have deepened the opposition's fragmentation. These tendencies have been further exacerbated by the predatory and fratricidal inclinations of the Salafi and jihadi groups fighting the regime, which have frequently led to internecine bloodletting in opposition ranks. Pro-regime forces may therefore be able to hold on to most of what they have retaken from the rebels—at least for now.

Iran, moreover, has never committed more than a fraction of a percent of its 450,000-man ground force to the fight in Syria (this total includes 100,000 in the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, or IRGC, and 350,000 in the Artesh, or regular Army). Likewise, it has never dispatched more than the minimum necessary number of fighters to keep Assad in power—so it is far from "tapped out" in terms of its ability to assist the regime.

Furthermore, IRGC advisers and fighters in Syria have been fairly risk tolerant, while decision-makers in Tehran have been consistently risk averse. If the IRGC were to gain a bigger say in decision-making in Tehran, Iran might send additional forces to Syria to enable the Assad regime to finish off its domestic enemies—although that, in turn, might generate backlash by Iranians opposed to their country's role in Syria. The U.S. government should therefore not be surprised if Iran further reinforces its position in Syria—as it did in September 2015, when it conducted a brief military surge in conjunction with Russia's intervention there to help repel a rebel offensive that threatened the Assad regime's survival.

Civil War Dynamics

The Assad regime will face several additional challenges that have been identified in the academic literature on

civil wars. First, countries that have endured civil war are much more likely to suffer a relapse. Syria is a case in point: It experienced a protracted antiregime insurrection by the Muslim Brotherhood from 1976-1982, so it is now enduring its second civil war. Other regional states have endured serial insurgencies, uprisings, and civil wars as well, including Yemen (1962-70, 1994, 2004-present) and Iraq (1961-70, 1974-1975, 2006-2010, 2014-2017). Other regional states that have experienced civil wars include Jordan (1970-71), Lebanon (1975-1990), and Algeria (1991-2002). Many Lebanese and Jordanians worry that regional tensions will again destabilize their countries.

Second, civil wars that end in an outright military victory by one side are less likely to lead to renewed conflict than settlements that leave significant military capabilities intact. It is not clear whether the Assad regime can achieve an outright victory; rebel enclaves remain in Idlib and Deraa provinces and in Kurdish-controlled areas in the country's northeast, and some of these areas are protected by foreign powers. Moreover, it is not clear whether the regime's victories will bring about a period of prolonged quiet, as occurred after the scorched-earth victories scored by Syria in Hama (1982) and Russia in Grozny (1999-2000), or whether it will resemble Iraq's unconsummated victory over al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from 2007-11, which paved the way for its return as ISIS in 2013-14 in response to heavy-handed regime policies.

The outcome in Syria, as elsewhere, will depend in part on the degree to which the Syrian people are exhausted and accept defeat, and on the effectiveness of the regime's internal security apparatus. Even in areas controlled by the regime, its "victory" may be incomplete; while some areas may be quiescent, others may remain troublesome. Moreover, the Turkish government's use of elements of the anti-regime Free Syrian Army in its fight against the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northwest Syria ensures the survival of at least part of the anti-Assad opposition.

Finally, experience has shown that it is much harder to stabilize a fragile state if its neighbors work to thwart these efforts. The best proof of this is the American inability to stabilize Afghanistan since November 2001 as a result of the support and safe haven provided by Pakistan to the Afghan Taliban, and the difficulty the U.S. military had in stabilizing Iraq after 2003 in the face of Syrian and Iranian efforts to the contrary. At present, none of Syria's neighbors are actively working to destabilize it; should this change, it could greatly complicate regime efforts to pacify the country. Conversely, a deterioration in the security situation in any of Syria's neighbors could have adverse consequences for it as well; for instance, the revival of ISIS in Iraq could catalyze its return in strength to Syria.

Regional Conflict Dynamics

The future of Syria's civil war is likely to be shaped by the action-reaction dynamic that has often led to pendulum-like swings of the regional balance-of-power, as well as the kind of great power interventions that have shaped other recent Middle Eastern conflicts. These have ensured that: (1) military victories are often ephemeral and are frequently undone by the very socio-political forces they unleash; (2) wars have often produced unintended consequences as vexing as the problems they were meant to resolve; and (3) wars are rarely definitive—more often than not, one conflagration sooner or later leads to another.

Thus, following Israel's stunning victory in the June 1967 war, Egypt—which was rapidly rearmed by the Soviet Union—launched the 1968-70 Egypt-Israel War of Attrition. The 1967 war also spurred the rise of the Palestinian guerilla organizations, paving the way for civil wars in Jordan (1970–71) and Lebanon (1975–90). The October 1973 Arab-Israeli war—launched to undo the consequences of the 1967 war—made the Egypt-Israel peace treaty (1979) possible, but it also led to a petrodollar-fueled Iraqi military buildup that enabled its invasion of Iran in 1980 and the costly eight-year war that followed.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) ended in a draw, but with Iraq claiming victory. Iraq tried to deal with the more than

$100 billion in external debt it racked up during the war by invading Kuwait (1990) and seizing its oil reserves, putting it on a collision course with the United States. The 1991 liberation of Kuwait by a U.S.-led coalition marked the high point in U.S. fortunes in the Middle East, but within a few short years, U.S. sanctions on and containment of Iraq engendered an anti-American backlash in much of the region. Moreover, the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia to enforce the southern no-fly zone in Iraq helped stimulate the rise of al-Qaeda, which later carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, leading in turn to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

The botched aftermath of the invasion of Iraq gave rise to AQI and a Sunni-Shia civil war, contributing to the sectarian polarization of Iraq, and then the region. Ironically, the support network that the Assad regime established in Syria to support Sunni jihadis fighting U.S. forces in Iraq subsequently joined, and then led, the rebellion against the regime. Moreover, America's post-2011 disengagement from the region led its Turkish and Gulf allies to support some of the extremist groups fighting the Assad regime and facilitated the emergence of ISIS. It also opened the door for Russia's return to the region.

Syria's civil war has already spun off a host of destabilizing consequences for the region and beyond, and it may yet give rise to additional conflicts. Indeed, while Syria's civil war is still not over, the "wars after the war" have already begun, with Turks fighting Syrian Kurds, the U.S. clashing intermittently with pro-regime and Syrian forces, and Israel involved in an escalating if still peripheral conflict with Iran. Clashes between Turks and Syrian Kurds would likely expand and intensify if the United States withdrew its 2,000 troops from northeastern Syria. And the return of pro-regime forces to Sunni majority regions, especially in tandem with a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, could catalyze a comeback by ISIS.

The potential for conflict is further increased by the newfound confidence of the Assad regime and its Hezbollah and Iranian allies. Syria is likely to once again use chemical weapons, perhaps prompting new U.S. strikes to enforce its red line. And just as the defeat of the Soviets by the Afghan mujaheddin spawned a generation of Sunni jihadis in search of additional victories, the victories of the Shia jihadists of the "Axis of Resistance" in Lebanon (2000), Iraq (2011), and Syria (2015-present) may lead Hezbollah and Iran—intent on transforming Syria into a platform for projecting power in the Levant, and for continuing the struggle against Israel—to overreach in their interactions with Israel or the United States. Finally, in a part of the world that is 75 percent Sunni Arab, it is hard to believe that this expanded Iranian role will be accepted forever; rather, it is a formula for enduring instability.

Regime Dynamics

Believing that the worst of Syria's civil war is behind them, tensions and divisions within the regime could also come to the fore. The civil war has created new regime security counter-elites in the Tiger Force, the National Defense Forces, and the Local Defense Forces, and commanders in these organizations may demand a greater share of the spoils of war and of governing what is left of Syria. The ever-present potential for internecine violence among the regime's thuggish security elite could intensify—especially if Assad and Iran drag Syria into a ruinous war with Israel that results in heavy losses to pro-regime forces.

Syria's security elite has closed ranks and generally avoided self-destructive violence throughout the civil war, though this group has always been riven by personal, family, tribal, and regional tensions and rivalries. Perhaps the most relevant precedent was the crisis that followed Syria's previous civil war, which occurred after former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad suffered a heart attack in late 1983. Fearing a coup by the President's younger brother Rifaat, who commanded the regime's premier praetorian unit—which had played a central role in suppressing the 1976-82 insurrection—key army officers ordered their units to occupy blocking positions in and around Damascus to thwart a power grab. The resulting military standoff was defused only when the elder Assad recovered, leading to Rifaat's exile and the disbanding of the military units and militias under his command.

This brief assessment of Syria's civil war yields several conclusions.

First, Syria's civil war is probably not over. The return of pro-regime forces to Sunni-majority areas may spur renewed resistance, while ongoing conflicts between Turks and Kurds, Israel and Iran, and the United States and the Assad regime may interact or escalate in unforeseeable ways. Thus, the Turkish invasion of the town of Afrin in northwestern Syria has drawn Kurdish fighters away from the fight against ISIS in the east, hobbling military operations there. Likewise, a war between Israel and Iran (and perhaps Hezbollah) might inflict major damage on pro-regime forces, loosening their grip over territories retaken from rebel forces, thus granting the opposition a new lease on life.

The factors that have often made it so difficult for the United States and its allies to consolidate military victories in the Middle East may also make it difficult for America's adversaries to do so, presenting Washington with opportunities to work with allies to undermine or roll back these military gains. Such coalitions are not self-organizing, however: To do this, the United States would need to work with local partners against their common adversaries, just as it did with respect to the Soviet Union in the Middle East in the 1970s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Thus, in Syria, overstretched pro-regime forces reliant on exposed lines of communication that run through majority-Sunni regions are vulnerable to a covert, cost-imposing strategy using guerilla proxies to prevent the Assad regime from consolidating its gains. And now that Tehran's entanglement in Syria has become a political issue in Iran, it is a source of Iranian regime vulnerability—especially if the costs of its intervention were to rise, and if a deteriorating economic situation back home were to force Tehran to cut back on the billions of dollars in annual economic aid that helps keep the Assad regime afloat.

Such a strategy might also tie down pro-regime forces in Syria, limiting their ability to threaten areas that remain outside of regime control, to produce new destabilizing mass refugee flows, and to make trouble elsewhere in the region. This strategy's appeal is that the bar for success is relatively low: It is much easier to be a spoiler than it is to create a stable, sustainable political order (as the United States has learned, to its chagrin, in Iraq and Afghanistan).

Renewed resistance to pro-regime forces in areas retaken by the latter could also provide additional opportunities for the United States to shape developments in Syria and to pursue a proxy strategy there. Indeed, relatively modest past programs to arm rebel forces with antitank missiles and other forms of military assistance succeeded in blunting regime offensives and fueling rebel offensives (though current conditions may not favor a revitalized effort). Should the U.S. government eschew this option, the next generation of rebels will likely once again gravitate toward extremist groups like ISIS and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an outgrowth of al-Qaeda's former local affiliate. In this way, fighting ISIS and countering Iranian influence are complementary rather than conflicting goals.

While efforts to shape the conflict and impose costs on pro-regime forces may lack the appeal of international diplomacy to end Syria's civil war, negotiations will not bear fruit as long as pro-regime forces believe there is a military solution to the conflict and Washington lacks military leverage over the regime. The evolving dynamic in Syria provides the Trump Administration with new opportunities—if it will only seize them—to deter or prevent additional regime offensives, mass refugee flows, and destabilizing regional wars in a part of the world that, like it or not, is still of critical importance to the United States.

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the ***American Interest website. (https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/05/15/has-the-assad-regime-won-syrias-civil-war/)*** ❖

The American Interest

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)