

The Syrian Regime's Military Solution to the War

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Dec 18, 2013

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Brief Analysis

Victory is not assured for the regime, but trends are moving in its favor.

It has become commonplace to say that "there is no military solution" to the conflict in Syria. That claim, invoked by Western officials including the U.S. secretary of state, is used to justify an emphasis on diplomacy (the Geneva II process) and limitations on assistance to the armed opposition.

The war could indeed have a military outcome, and in light of current trends, that outcome could be a regime victory. The outlines of a regime strategy for winning the war are visible. This strategy hinges on the staying power of the regime and its allies, the generation of adequate forces, operational success, and continued divisions within rebel forces. It is subject to serious constraints, especially limitations on the size and effectiveness of regime and associated forces, and "game changers" could alter its course. But a regime victory is possible -- and that is what the regime is counting on.

Strategic Principles

The regime fights its war under three broad strategic principles. The first entails using whatever level of violence it believes is necessary to defeat the armed opposition and break the will of its civilian supporters. No doubt, this process has involved incremental but continuous escalation to higher levels of violence in the face of increasing armed opposition. This principle, in effect since the beginning of the armed uprising, accounts for the regime's steady escalation in weapons used, including chemical weapons, and in attacks on the civilian population. In line with its targeting of armed rebels and their civilian supporters alike, the regime -- after seizing an area formerly under rebel control -- kills armed rebels and also engages in what are essentially reprisal attacks on area civilians: executions, looting, the burning of homes and businesses. Each town taken by the regime serves as an example for the next town.

The regime's second principle is to exploit diplomacy to prevent effective support for the rebels while also avoiding political isolation. With the assistance of its allies, especially Russia and its UN Security Council veto, the regime has

successfully fended off every diplomatic threat from the West and other opponents of the regime. It has played along with various ceasefire initiatives as long as they did not impede its military operations, and when cornered on its chemical weapons use, it defused the threat of U.S. military action without relinquishing the heft of its ability to wage war as it wishes. Syrian officials may well travel to Geneva, but, as their spokesmen have declared, they will not be there to surrender the keys to Damascus -- but rather both to keep the rebels' backers entangled in fruitless negotiations and to deepen divisions among the rebels.

The third regime principle is to keep telling its story. In the regime's narrative, its forces are winning a war against "terrorists" and the regime remains strong and cohesive. Using all available media, domestic and foreign, to further this narrative, the regime has increasingly succeeded in advancing perceptions of a growing terrorist threat in Syria and focusing attention on its own battlefield victories.

Regime Objectives

The regime's goals are to reduce armed opposition to a manageable terrorism problem, eliminate serious political opposition inside Syria, and ultimately restore regime control throughout the country. Although never indicating a willingness to settle for less, the regime may be compelled to do so, given the scope of the rebellion and its own resource limitations. Still, the regime is fighting to maintain at least a hold or influence in all provinces. This is quite different from fighting for a rump state, although the regime's strategy and operations certainly could support that objective as well. In the collective mind of regime members, Syria should be one and indivisible -- and theirs.

Preconditions

Whatever overconfidence the regime may project, certain political and military conditions are necessary for it to triumph. Political conditions include continued diplomatic support from its allies, continued divisions among the rebels, and the continued absence of a consensus among Western and allied states on forcefully dealing with the regime. Military conditions for regime success include maintenance of the military alliance with its partners Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah; growth in the size and effectiveness of the regime's irregular forces (the National Defense Forces, or NDF); the continued ability of regime regular forces to provide critical firepower for operations; and the avoidance of direct foreign intervention or significant foreign military support to the rebels. While there are no guarantees, most if not all of these conditions seem likely to be met for the foreseeable future.

Constraints

In implementing its strategy for the war, the regime faces serious constraints, beginning with the limited size of its forces relative to the rebel forces and the geographic scope of the rebellion. It must pick its battles, fighting aggressively in some places and just holding on in others. A second, related concern has been the loss of regular forces through attrition and defection, resulting in an increased reliance, even dependence, on irregular and allied forces. Related to the regular forces' decline is a third constraint: that on the amount of air, ground, and missile firepower that the regime can employ in a given period. Here, the regime's decision to eliminate its chemical weapons stockpiles has effectively capped its escalation of force. Fourth, the regime appears to have problems sustaining offensive operations. Even in successful efforts such as in Homs in spring 2013 and al-Safira in Aleppo province in the fall, regime forces seem to have failed to fully wrap up operations. The fifth major constraint is the need to avoid antagonizing its allies, whose critical support means the regime must listen to them on the conduct of the war. This was one of the major reasons the regime accepted the deal to eliminate its chemical weapons.

Operational Implementation

Within its constraints, the regime can conduct effective, if not yet decisive, operations that advance its strategic goals. It has combined battle and wide-ranging maneuver to achieve important victories and has been willing

to engage in narrowly focused attrition-type operations, grinding down the rebels. Regime forces have developed tactical methods involving the heavy use of firepower, siege, joint air, ground, and missile forces, and combined operations with allied forces to overcome stubborn rebel resistance. Indeed, force limitations compel the regime to sequence operations. Key units of regime regulars (Fourth Division of the Republican Guard) and allied forces (Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiites) are probably shifted from one operation or battlefield to another. Regime decisions over which battles to focus on, as discussed earlier, help account for its successes and failures -- and correspondingly the successes and failures of the rebels.

Progress

Battlefield trends favor the regime, even if the outcome of every battle does not. In particular, four important operations in which the regime has invested considerable effort and resources have yielded a measure of success: in Homs in spring 2013, in southern Aleppo province in the fall, in the southern Damascus suburbs also in the fall, and in the Qalamoun region north and northeast of Damascus beginning in late November. In each of these operations, the regime has effectively applied its warfighting concepts, even while sustaining casualties against often stubborn rebel resistance. The rebels have yet to find a successful formula for responding to these kinds of operations. Relatedly, the slow pace of regime operations can probably be attributed at least as much to the limitations of regime forces as to rebel effectiveness.

Game Changers

Despite present trends, a regime victory is not certain, and a number of game changers could halt or reverse its progress. First, the rebels could achieve effective coordination between their political and military components, allowing for an integrated approach to the war and development of a national strategy for fighting it. Second, and relatedly, the rebels could establish effective command and control that would allow for integration and coordination of forces and their logistics, helping them confront the regime's operations. Third, the rebels could receive enhanced military assistance: weapons, ammunition, training, intelligence, and advice. And fourth, some form of direct foreign intervention could reduce the regime's advantages and effectiveness.

The prospect for each of these options, however, appears dim at the moment. An improvement in the rebels' capability would thus likely have to emerge largely from their own political and military resources. And probably the most important achievement for the rebels would be unity of effort, which under current circumstances would most likely be under an Islamist banner.

Conclusions

For all the reasons outlined here, assertions that "there is no military solution" to the Syrian conflict should be viewed with caution. While the regime is not certain to win the kind of victory it seeks, and may have to settle for less, the war is now moving in its favor and prospects for a reversal do not look good.

Barring a sudden collapse of the armed resistance, which for the Islamist core seems unlikely, the regime will only slowly defeat rebel forces and recover territory. But the regime is implacable and its allies are steadfast.

Regarding Geneva, the regime's approach to the war suggests that it will not negotiate seriously with the rebels. And given its increasing success on the battlefield, the continued support of its allies, and a divided and feckless opposition, there is no reason why it should.

Jeffrey White is a Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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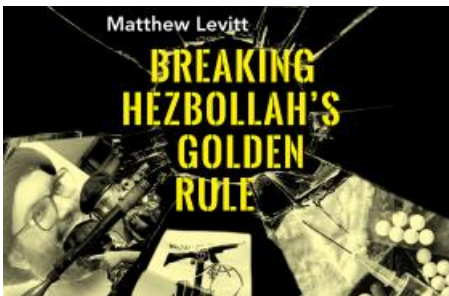
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