

Syria's Meltdown Requires a U.S.-Led Response

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Brief Analysis

As Syria heads toward a meltdown spilling over its borders -- with loss of control over strategic weapons, accelerated refugee flows, spreading extremism, and Sunni-Shiite clashes -- only engaging with those doing the fighting will give Washington much influence over events.

Two years after it began as a protest movement, the Syrian uprising has long since turned into a full-blown armed insurrection, with Sunni Arab rebel battalions fighting the Alawite regime while Kurdish factions show mixed hostility to both. Given the lack of a visible political solution, the reported use of chemical agents, the increasing spillover to and from neighboring countries, and the growing belief that Syria may already be a failed state, Washington must take a leading role in decisively dealing with the disease -- namely, the Assad regime's brutal assault on its citizens -- not just the humanitarian symptoms.

SYRIA'S MELTDOWN

The news from Syria is grimmer than ever, with over 70,000 people killed and over 130,000 either missing or held prisoner. The core of the conflict remains internal: Bashar al-Assad's attempt to shoot, bomb, missile, and perhaps even gas the population into submission. Unlike the 1979-1982 uprising, however, Syria's demographics are now much more skewed against the regime: in the ten years following the February 1982 Hama massacre, Syrians largely stayed home and procreated, making them one of the twenty fastest-growing populations on earth. Those born during that period constitute the majority of the forces currently fighting the regime.

Moreover, in the absence of major Western support, Salafist and other Islamist extremists from the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and neighboring countries have come to the opposition's aid, causing more Syrians to side with their cause. As a result, the rebels have only been able to grind down the regime, not eliminate it, in a war that is increasingly eating down into the sectarian nature of Syrian society, destroying the country, and creating a haven for Sunni and Shiite terrorist groups, perhaps for years to come. No political solution is in sight, especially given U.S.

and Russian differences over what "transition" means. Even if Moscow and Washington did agree on how to pursue such a solution, Russia could not deliver the regime, nor could the United States deliver the entire opposition. In short, there seems nothing to prevent Syria's complete meltdown in the coming months.

SPILLING OUT, SPILLING IN

One of the reasons why containing the conflict may no longer be possible is because its effects are increasingly spilling over Syria's borders in both directions. The most worrisome effects include the following:

Strategic weapons transfer and loss of control. The Assad regime holds arguably the region's largest stockpile of chemical weapons, some of which it may have used this week. These and other strategic weapons (e.g., Scuds and other surface-to-surface missiles) are scattered around scores of sites, and the regime is desperate to keep them out of the hands of its adversaries. This has raised concerns that Assad may be tempted to transfer advanced weapons to his Hezbollah allies in Lebanon; in fact, Israel attacked a regime convoy near Damascus last month for reportedly attempting just such a transfer.

Given recent territorial losses, however, the regime might lose control of its stockpiles before it is able to move or destroy them. In that scenario, extremists could obtain untold numbers of chemical or other strategic weapons, whether for use against regime forces, transfer to militants in the Golan Heights, or transfer to neighboring states for use in global jihad operations.

Refugee crisis. The UN has registered over 1.1 million refugees in the countries bordering Syria, but that figure only begins to tell the story. Individual estimates from each country are much higher, and the millions of displaced persons languishing without aid inside Syria may soon cross the border if more regime forces pull back to defend Damascus. In the Houran region, for example, the average rate of refugees crossing the border is already around 3,000 per day, and the only thing keeping that number from increasing is the presence of regular and irregular regime patrols that fire on those attempting to pass.

Meanwhile, Jordanian border forces have returned fire on occasion, leading to a few deaths. If Assad's forces pull back further, aid agencies estimate that some 15,000-20,000 refugees per day could flow into the kingdom. Even at the current rate, Jordan will have some 770,000 Syrian refugees by June.

Spreading extremism. In addition to humanitarian issues, the refugees are bringing with them the various political problems currently enflaming Syrian communities, most notably the rise of extremist ideologies from the Gulf and North Africa. This could destabilize areas with large numbers of refugees, particularly northern Jordan, Turkey's Hatay and Kilis provinces, and portions of Lebanon. To endanger the region's security architecture, especially around Israel, extremist groups only need certain areas of a state to fail, not the entire country. Such areas could then be used as staging grounds for attacks against Israel, and as havens for operations inside Syria, whether before or after Assad falls.

Cross-border Sunni-Shiite fighting. In Lebanon's north Beqa region, Shiite Hezbollah militants are openly operating across the border against Syrian Sunni groups fighting the Assad regime south of al-Qusayr. This includes targeting rebel positions with rocket fire from Lebanon. Yet residents of the nearby Lebanese Sunni village of Aarsal are helping the Syrian rebels repel these Hezbollah operations, causing considerable tension at home; for example, at least two Lebanese army soldiers were recently murdered after fellow troops killed Free Syrian Army supporter Khaled Hmayed.

At stake in such clashes is control of the mixed Sunni-Shiite area lying west and south of the Syrian city of Homs, which a rump Assad statelet would need to be contiguous with Lebanon's Hezbollah-controlled Beqa Valley. The fighting has exacerbated existing tensions caused by daily Syrian regime shelling of Lebanese border areas along the Nahr al-Kibar river valley, resulting in considerable sectarian strife from Wadi Khaled westward toward the

Akkar district and Tripoli. Such activities could set off full-scale Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon and draw in each side's regional patrons.

WORKING FROM THE GROUND UP

This week's reports of possible chemical weapons use in Syria imply that direct military intervention against the Assad regime is now in the mix. Yet even that measure alone will not change the country's overall trajectory toward disintegration. The best way for the United States to avert a meltdown and, ultimately, contain the crisis is to lead a coalition to end the Assad regime from the ground up, not simply deal with the symptoms of the conflict. Assad has not "stepped aside," and a "peaceful, democratic, and secular" Syria is not going to evolve anytime soon. Syria is now more violent than Iraq, where the United States had thousand of troops and assets to help shape the outcome. Simply engaging the opposition coalition in exile and relying on Qatar or Saudi Arabia to arm the rebels via the Supreme Military Council is insufficient.

Syrians, like all people, cannot follow what they do not understand; therefore, it will take a lot more than U.S. intelligence vetting of armed groups to shape a post-Assad outcome that aligns with U.S. interests. The best way for Washington to influence the composition and mindset of the armed rebels is to directly engage with vetted units fighting on the ground. This includes encouraging their integration into either the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) or a successor organization that can boast greater representation of groups inside the country.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖

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