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The Syrian Crisis: Approaching Foreign Intervention

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In terms of the balance of power between the Syrian regime and the popular protest movement, the Syrian revolution has passed through three phases:

1. In the first phase, from mid-March with the outbreak of limited demonstrations to the beginning of June, the political and military initiative was still in the hands of the regime. The regime, however, did not rise to the challenge and dragged its feet with regards to the reform demands, sending the army into the streets to confront demonstrators, and thus losing the support of growing sectors of the population.
2. In the second phase, from the first assault on Hama in early June to the beginning of the month of Ramadan in early August, the regime and the protesters confronted each other head to head. The regime put its power into suppressing the popular movement, while protests spread across the country, growing larger and becoming increasingly organised.
3. In the third phase, there was no longer any doubts that the regime, despite its brutality for many months, was no longer able to contain the popular movement. Protests became regular rites that pervaded the days and nights of Ramadan, and were no longer subject to schedules and timetables.

In parallel to the decrease of the regime's fortunes internally, its fortunes on the international level were reduced as well, in the Arab world, in its relations with Turkey and in the international arena.

As the Syrian revolution passes the six-month mark, the prospect of it turning into an armed movement is becoming more probable and the isolation of the regime on the regional and international levels is growing. Syria has come closer than ever before to a major turning point: foreign intervention.

Exacerbation of the regime's dilemma: the closed cycle of violence

In the first months after the outbreak of the protests, it was not necessary for the regime to meet the demonstrations with the intense levels of violence that it later deployed. The cessation of the regime's massive crackdown on the protests has become a prerequisite for political parties, opposition figures and regional and international powers who previously believed that it might be possible to reach a peaceful and gradual transition to a free political system and a pluralistic and democratic society. Still, the regime did not back down from its policy of brutal repression despite its repeated promises to various parties that it would withdraw its troops from the cities and return them to their bases. This quickly undermined the credibility of the regime and its president. For a while, it was not even clear whether the regime realised the enormity of the challenge it was facing, or even the point and potential consequences of confronting peaceful demonstrations with armed security and military forces.

From the beginning of the popular protests, the regime was quick to justify its campaign of repression by claiming that the protests were the work of armed gangs and Salafist terrorists that were infringing upon the security of citizens and the country. In fact, the Syrian revolution began as a peaceful movement, and continued as a peaceful movement for many months. This was not because Syrians have been unable to obtain arms (which are just as readily available in Syria as they are in other Arab countries), but because Syrian activists recognised early on that it was important to prosecute a peaceful revolution. However, a noticeable and increasing, albeit slow, trend in the past few weeks is the taking up of arms against security forces.

There are two main categories of armed groups in Syria:

1. The first is composed of small groups, especially in the north of the country and on the Syrian-Lebanese border. These groups resort to the use of arms in reaction to the growing number of civilian casualties, and because of the continuing campaign of brutal repression. There is no evidence that these groups are linked to any organised political faction or organisation, or that they emerged from the womb of any particular political current or movement.
2. The second category includes the growing number of officers and soldiers who have defected from the Syrian Arab Army, and who have decided to defend the people against regime forces. Members of this category are spread throughout the country, including in the rural hinterland of Damascus.

The presence of these armed groups, and their potential spread over the coming weeks, will make it difficult for the regime to order the army back to its bases. The regime's continued reliance on the army to suppress the popular movement, however, will necessarily lead to an increase in the numbers of defectors from the army, while aggravating the communities' deepening sense of injustice and the need to fight back. The regime itself has created the infernal cycle of violence, and it will be very difficult for it to stop or be dismantled.

There is another reason that the crisis is getting worse for the regime: its retreat before the popular movement and conceding reforms in response to the protesters' demands becomes more difficult with the passage of time. In the first months of the revolution, the regime sought to launch a repressive campaign to put down the revolution, followed by limited reforms as a partial response to the popular movement without effecting fundamental change in the regime's structure. Now, with the escalation and expansion of the popular movement, any concession or retreat by the regime will pose a direct threat to the existence and continuation of the regime itself, a fact of which the regime's leadership is keenly aware. On the other hand, it is doubtful that the Syrian people will accept any reform programme that does not begin with the elimination of the ruling group.

Options for international powers: the decline of peaceful alternatives

Since the outbreak of the protest movement, the regime has behaved as if it enjoys immunity from prosecution. It launched its broad campaign of repression believing that its regional role and relations, and its critical strategic location, placed it beyond accountability. The reality, however, is that the continuation of the popular movement, the rising number of casualties, the growing Arab, Islamic and international sympathy with the Syrian people, and the inability of the regime to manage the crisis within and outside the country, have rendered the regime isolated in an unprecedented way. Unlike Iran and, to a lesser extent, Iraq at the level of state, and Hezbollah at the level of non-state actors, the Syrian regime no longer has real allies to rely on.

Both the United States and France have announced that the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has lost its legitimacy, and have called on him to step down. Although Turkey did not follow suit, it is clear that the trust between Ankara and Damascus has disappeared, and that contact between the two countries has ceased. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries have withdrawn their ambassadors, and Qatar and Egypt have stressed the need for an end to violence, and a response to popular demands, and have taken the position that there can be no military solution in Syria.

Then came the Arab initiative after an emergency Arab League meeting at the end of August. Syria responded with a lack of cooperation, ignoring the wish of the Arab League's Secretary-General to visit Damascus. Although Russia has shown its alignment with the Syrian regime since the beginning of the crisis, statements of senior Russian officials in early September, after the visit of a senior Russian envoy to Damascus, calling on the Syrian regime to stop the use of force against its own people, suggest the beginning of a shift in the Russian position. Even Iran no longer appears to be fully confident that al-Assad and his regime will be able to maintain their control of the country. Iranian diplomats have sought meetings with Syrian dissidents in Paris, according to media reports, and Iran's foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, called for the Syrian regime to respond to protesters' demands, stating that the revolutions in the Arab world, including those in Syria, have raised legitimate demands.

The crisis facing regional and international powers that are concerned about the situation, however, is not less critical than the crisis facing the Syrian regime. Until August, for example, Turkey thought it could pressure the regime to end the crackdown and institute far-reaching reforms that would respond to popular demands. States like France and the US thought their declarations to the effect that President al-Assad had lost his legitimacy would weaken the regime's hold over power and pave the way for change. The fact, however, is that the expectations of Ankara and western powers did not match the reality on the ground, not only because these countries do not have the necessary cards to pressure Syrian decision-making, but also – and more importantly – because the regime sees itself as being caught in a life-or-death battle, one in which it has no option but to win.

Turkey and western powers, as well as Arab countries concerned about Syria, now have no choice but to look for another way to deal with the Syrian crisis.

Foreign intervention approaches

The escalation of the protest movement and the orientation of some groups towards armed action mean the regime is in the process of stopping its violent crackdown, or that it is no longer able to persist even if it desires to do so. Rather, it is clear that political pressure on the regime is largely useless, regardless of how isolated the regime is at the Arab or international levels, and how harsh the penalties imposed upon it are. The only way out is through direct or indirect foreign intervention. It may be that the statements of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Syria is heading down a path similar to that of Libya, or that the Arab movement initiated by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf States and the French endeavour to pass a UN Security Council resolution condemning the use of violence against unarmed demonstrators will prove to be an introduction to such an intervention.

Factors encouraging foreign intervention:

1. Western powers view the success of their intervention in Libya as a model for intervention that would prevent the damages and risks of previous interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.
2. There are growing calls from Syrian demonstrators, and some opposition circles, who see that the only solution is the aid of foreign intervention, or international protection.
3. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are now convinced of the necessity of getting rid of the Syrian regime, not that 'its alliance with Iran and its dependence upon it have become a great threat to Arab security'.

4. Turkey, the main player with regards to Syria, is now less opposed to foreign intervention, given that it has failed to push Damascus to adopt a policy of long-term reform, on the one hand, and given that there has been growing Syrian and Arab criticism of Ankara, on the other.
5. A number of western powers see the Syrian revolution as an opportunity to change Syria's Arab and regional policies and alliances. These powers see foreign intervention as a means of taking advantage of this opportunity.

Foreign intervention, however, requires that a number of conditions are met. The most important is that an international legal cover (which requires a US-Russian deal) be secured, as well as a consensus between the parties on the means of intervention and the presence of a preliminary vision for a political alternative for Syria.

Dangers of the post-Assad era

In the event that foreign intervention materialises, it will not be solely related to giving the popular movement the upper hand vis-à-vis the regime, but will also affect Syria's military capabilities, its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its Arab and regional role. Furthermore, foreign intervention does not necessarily mean that the outcome will be a fait accompli. What foreign intervention may in fact lead to is a series of possibilities, ranging from a rapid overthrow of the regime to the outbreak of a civil or even a regional sectarian war.

To reduce the risks associated with foreign interference, in the event that it becomes inevitable, there must be an effective Arab (and Turkish) role in ensuring the maintenance of Syria's unity quick to build an effective domestic political coalition, and protect the identity of Syria, its resources and its Arab obligations.