›› POLICY BRIEF
ISSN: 1989-2667

FRIDE
A EUROPEAN THINK TANK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

Nº 167 - NOVEMBER 2013

Can the Syrian war be ended?

Barah Mikail

›› Almost three years after the beginning of the Arab spring, there are no signs of radical political change in Syria. Even though Bashar al-Assad has lost control of great parts of the country, he is still in office; the army is still following his orders; and prospects for a significant international military intervention have receded.

After the chemical attack on al-Ghouta on 21 August 2013, the United States threatened to carry out strikes against regime military targets. But a Russia-proposed agreement was reached between Washington and Moscow to put Syria's chemical weapons under international control before destroying them. While Washington found a reason not to intervene militarily in Syria, Damascus found protective support in Moscow, which wants to avoid the fall of its only Arab ally. The readiness with which the Syrian regime agreed to the Russian proposal suggests that Moscow has promised Assad further political support, as shown by the Kremlin's refusal to threaten the regime with military force during negotiations at the United Nations Security Council.

The chemical weapons deal did not contribute to bringing the regime to the negotiating table in Geneva. The Geneva-II framework offers little hope for a political breakthrough, especially since strong divisions within the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF) over the pre-conditions required for participating in this conference could threaten the future of the opposition coalition.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The conflict in Syria has reached a stalemate with Assad still in office, the opposition divided and prospects for external military intervention receding.
- Assad has many enemies but also powerful friends in the region and beyond, and holds considerable spoiler potential.
- The first objective of Geneva-II should be to achieve a ceasefire, which will require the engagement of all parties to the conflict.

For the foreseeable future, Assad looks unlikely to step down unless there is a direct and decisive foreign military intervention or a coup d'état within his regime. Bashar al-Assad's determination to remain in power and his decision to organise 'elections' – which he will win – will be critical factors in shaping the evolution of the crisis in the coming months.

ASSAD CONTINUES TO ENDURE

The al-Ghouta chemical attacks could have been a watershed event in the Syrian conflict. While the British parliament voted against military intervention in Syria, France and some Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, appeared ready to support US-led strikes. But the Russia-US deal to put Syria's chemical weapons under international control has put the possibility of military strikes on hold.

Hesitation and diplomatic wrangling following the chemical attacks showed that few international actors were really keen on engaging militarily. There were concerns about the potential spill-over of the conflict from Syria to neighbouring countries. There was also a risk that military intervention could even benefit Assad – due to both its questionable strategic effect and the general population's reticence towards Western/US-led operations in their country. However strong the opposition to Assad is, and the expressed desire of some rebel groups for the West to intervene militarily, this does not mean that most Syrians would suddenly display unconditional pro-Western attitudes following a Western intervention.

More than two years of fighting have brought to the fore the weakness of Assad's opponents. The opposition inside the country – mainly represented by the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) – is politically weak, and the opposition of the Syrian diaspora – represented by the NCSROF – is internally divided. There are also disagreements between the NCSROF and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main rebel militia. So far the FSA has failed to develop an effective military strategy and garner enough military support to achieve decisive advances. Moreover, the existence of various Islamist and/or jihadist groups, and their regular clashes with the FSA and/or Kurdish Syrian militias, threaten the cohesion of the military opposition to the regime. Complicating matters further is the fact that some FSA members refuse to take arms against jihadists because they share the same ideology.

The opposition to Assad has also failed to build a strong political alternative to his rule. Opposition groups disagree on the country's post-Assad future, including attitudes towards ethnic or religious minorities and jihadist/salafist groups, and on who should take the lead of any transitional governmental body. Furthermore, few of these groups can pretend to be popular in Syria. The combination of divisions among the various opposition groups, the Islamist rule that jihadists and/or salafists try to impose in parts of northern Syria, and the humanitarian catastrophe have reinforced the Assad regime. Many Syrians long for a return to the stability that prevailed before the Arab uprisings. This does not mean that they wish to return to Assad's authoritarian rule. But the absence of positive future prospects and the lack of a serious alternative to the current regime have disappointed many Syrians, creating a pervasive sense of fatigue with the uprisings.

ASSAD'S REGIONAL OPTIONS

In many respects the Syrian regime appears diplomatically and militarily cornered, but its connections throughout the Middle East and beyond give it diplomatic shelter and considerable spoiler potential.

Only Algeria and Iraq oppose the Arab League agreement that Assad should step down. Plus, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have contributed militarily to the FSA, and provide support to some jihadist and salafist groups. These countries could contribute much more to the strategy of the armed Syrian opposition, but Washington has so far restrained their initiatives because of fears of weapons ending up in the hands of extremist groups. The US, the

UK and France, alongside Turkey and Jordan, have also supported the FSA, enabling its advances in Syrian territory. And Turkey and Jordan have become a base for regime defectors and for providing weapons to anti-Assad fighters.

While Assad has few allies, they are, however, powerful ones. His regional diplomacy over the last decade has weaved a web of connections that could be mobilised to escalate the conflict. Russia and China provide diplomatic backing to Bashar al-Assad. The Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran and Russia contribute directly to strengthening the regime militarily. Hezbollah's decision to fight next to Assad has been crucial in allowing the Syrian regime to achieve both military and diplomatic victories. For instance, the Syrian army would probably not have won the symbolic battle of Qusair without Hezbollah's decisive experience in guerrilla warfare. To a large extent, this also helped guarantee the continuation of Russia's support. If the Syrian army had been defeated, Moscow would probably have hesitated before giving more support to a weakened regime. Iran's military support to Assad is also crucial. There has been no indication yet that Tehran will change its attitude under new President Rouhani. Similarly to Russia, Iran sees value in preserving Assad's 'anti-Western' stance in the region's balance of power, especially with no credible alternative to Assad in sight.

The West has decided not to move militarily against Assad. Now, it might have to learn to live with him

Assad also has other regional assets. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he was able to infiltrate that country and place agents in the Kurdish north, in the ranks of al-Qaeda, as well as amongst some Sunni tribes in the neighbouring western part of that country. It is not clear that he could or would activate these connections, but they enable him to anticipate hostile activities originating in Iraq. In Lebanon, in parallel to its strong links with Hezbollah, Syrian intelligence remains powerful and active in the country despite Syria's forced military withdrawal in 2005, and could contribute to more sectarian strife there. The violent episodes that have occurred in Lebanon since the beginning of the Arab spring can be read in part through the lens of the regional Syrian-Saudi rivalry. Saudi Arabia, which is a fierce opponent of the Syrian regime and the Lebanese Hezbollah, also has powerful connections in Lebanon. But the Syrian regime benefits from internal Lebanese divisions over whom to support – Assad or his opponents.

Last but not least, the Syrian regime holds one other major regional card: the Kurdish question. At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Assad secured the neutrality of the main Syrian Kurdish leaders in return for better treatment of Kurdish citizens. But Assad has failed to win the support of all Syrian Kurds. Nonetheless, Syria's Kurdish community is divided. While the majority favours emancipation from the Syrian regime, the Kurds disagree over their own internal leadership, most importantly between the Kurdish National Council (backed by Iraq's Kurdish regional government's President Massoud Barzani) and the Democratic Union Party. These infightings have prevented the formation of a Kurdish military front against the regime. The Kurdish question and the fear of a new Kurdistan following a sudden fall of Assad also condition Turkey's support to the Syrian opposition. Ankara may sound vociferous in calling for the fall of the Assad regime, but it also wants to ensure that a post-Assad Syria would not allow Syrian Kurds to develop reinforced self-rule or territorial autonomy within Syria (similar to the Kurdish area in northern Iraq).

A SPLINTERED OPPOSITION

The internal opposition remains splintered and none of the Local Coordination Committees have been able to build a convincing programme for the future of Syria. The LCCs have few links with the FSA and NCSROF. The dependency of the NCSROF on its Western and Gulf supporters, as well as disagreements among its constituent

››››››

›››››› groups, detract from its decision-making capacity and credibility. In mid-October 2013, divisions over the pre-conditions for participating in the Geneva-II talks led to a splintering of the NCSROF. The most important constituent group in the NCSROF, the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is mainly comprised of Islamists, initially refused to participate in the talks. The refusal of the SNC was followed by similar moves from various opposition movements. Now the SNC has set several pre-conditions for participating to Geneva-II, all based on Assad's necessary departure. While it is unclear whether the NCSROF has come to an end, its weakness has been exposed.

Most NCSROF members are opposed to negotiating with the Syrian regime without setting pre-conditions. For the opposition, the departure of Assad must be taken as a starting point. Meanwhile, initially the regime had agreed to attend the Geneva-II talks under the condition of no pre-conditions. Now that military strikes are off the table, Assad has placed a new condition: the disarmament of the opposition as a prerequisite for negotiations. The opposition is unlikely to accede, unless pressured by their external sponsors. If they agree to talks, it is hard to anticipate what they could obtain from Assad. But if they do not, the war of attrition will continue, and so will the bloodshed.

The main mistake of the NCSROF has been to expect decisive military support or intervention by external powers. Also, as some Western countries – starting with France – promoted the NCSROF as the sole legitimate political interlocutor, they neglected the political significance of the LCCs and other Syrian internal opponents, despite their weaknesses. As a result, a new opposition coalition was formed in October 2013. The 'Coalition of political forces and parties in Syria' is composed of 17 Syria-based opposition groups who reject the NCSROF's authority and consider that the 'Syrians from the inside' are the ones who should bring the voice of the Syrian opposition to the Geneva-II talks.

The West should take all these internal groups (not only the NCSROF and the FSA) into account before adopting a stance that could add to the complexity of the situation. NCSROF members are split along ideological lines, and this will not change soon. The FSA wants a strong leadership role during and after the transition. As for other regime opponents inside the country, such as the LCCs, they have lost faith in the West but still seek legitimacy. The result is a worsening of the situation in Syria, with a confusing coexistence of rebel troops, the emergence of al-Qaeda clones (i.e. the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Nusra front, the Army of Islam), and a regime that claims to be the only force capable of restoring stability.

In this context, Assad intends to organise presidential and legislative 'elections', which he will win. The opposition will obviously reject the results of a vote in which they will not even be invited to participate. Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis will continue, with floods of refugees adding to tensions within the country and provoking an additional and potentially destabilising burden to the rest of the region.

A NECESSARY REVIEW OF THE GENEVA-II OBJECTIVES

The West has decided not to move militarily against Assad. Now, it might have to learn to live with him. Assad's brutal repression was the starting point of the Syrian crisis. But the strategy of external support to the opposition while avoiding direct engagement in the conflict has showed its limits. The US acceptance of the Russian proposal on chemical weapons was understandable given the risks of intervening. At the same time, it has contributed to strengthening Assad and has deepened the tensions between the United States and Saudi Arabia, one of its closest regional allies.

Under these circumstances, the path towards peace may require unpalatable compromises. To end the Syrian war, the US and the EU – with Russia – may have to open a political channel to Assad, to

convince him to organise internationally-monitored elections with the participation of all political forces as a stepping stone to his eventual (peaceful) departure from power. This idea may sound far-fetched. However, it is unclear what other option is left to stop the massacre of innocent civilians and avoid a further fragmentation of the political scene in the country, including the rise of extremist groups. But opening dialogue with Assad should also have pre-conditions. There are six aspects that need to be considered for the Geneva-II talks to have any hope of creating a meaningful peace process.

First, while a full ceasefire would hardly be achieved before negotiations, pushing protagonists to respect a ceasefire would be a modest but reasonable objective. The nature of the political transition required for Syria could be left for another – but soon to follow – round of meetings.

Second, the US and Russia should pressure their allies to participate in the talks. Ceasefire/peace negotiations should therefore include representatives of the Assad regime, Syrian political opponents and armed rebels from the Free Syrian Army, and their respective regional allies and supporters (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran, among others).

Third, including salafists and jihadists in the negotiations is neither reasonable nor realistic, since they refuse to engage into any talks. But the US and its allies have enough influence to push Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar to stop their support to these groups – at least if they ask Russia in return to pressure the Syrian regime to stop its own attacks and send Hezbollah and Iranian military trainers back to Lebanon.

Fourth, regional actors in the Syrian conflict will need a large range of guarantees: Saudi Arabia needs to be reassured over the future of the Iranian nuclear programme since it believes Tehran's strength is vital to Assad; Qatar wants to ensure it is not excluded from the Syrian file to the benefit of Saudi Arabia; Turkey wants to be an important player in the process, not least to avoid the possible repercussions of an autonomy for Syrian Kurds on its own territory; Israel needs to ensure that the Syrian situation will not harm its own security. Given its greater relative influence over each of these regional actors, the US would have to play a key role in reassuring them.

Fifth, Iran, another key regional actor, will also need Russian reassurance that the withdrawal of Iranian military training officers from Syria, who are advising the Assad regime, will not contribute to the collapse of the Syrian regime. Russia could also pressure Assad to send members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq's militia back to Iraq and Hezbollah fighters back to Lebanon, by guaranteeing Assad its support during the post-ceasefire transition negotiations. Assad depends on Russia for economic and military purposes, and therefore would unlikely risk opposing Russia's demands.

And finally, beyond France and the UK's interventionist stances, the EU could help the process maintaining active contacts with the Arab League, its member states as well as Syrian opponents, so that they soften their attitude in a way that would allow the important objective of a ceasefire to be reached.

Apart from who will actually participate, the danger for the Geneva-II talks is that they will focus on the potential day that Assad falls, without trying to resolve what is really at stake today. Ending the Syrian bloodshed requires the participation of all actors, Assad included. Setting the intention of negotiating a ceasefire as the sole pre-condition for engaging into Geneva-II is the only way to guarantee both the start of a successful process for the conference and the possibility of moving beyond further bloodshed towards the day after.

Barah Mikail is senior researcher at FRIDE.

e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org