

第 2 節 Syria in the Next Decade: Fragility, Complexity, and Unpredictability

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The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has survived the long civil war and multiple external military interventions that have devastated Syria since 2011, but is struggling to win the peace. The regime is responding to the challenge by attempting to reproduce much the same kind of approach that it believes was successful in ensuring its survival so far. But it suffers an unprecedented level of fragility, and the challenges facing it are more complex than ever. It appears to be locked in what may be described as “post-war but no-peace,” and which could last for up to another decade, and even beyond.

This situation poses a particularly acute dilemma for neighbouring countries, whose stability and security are at risk of being continuously undermined by Syria’s no-war/no-peace conditions for years to come. In addition to regional neighbours, the wider international community also faces a challenge in trying to devise appropriate policies for achieving and consolidating an eventual peaceful transition in Syria. To take one example, officials of the European Union privately speak of a 25-year time-frame for their approach to Syria, in effect acknowledging their lack of levers to influence the outcome or ensure a diplomatic settlement. Evolving dynamics and trends in Syria are so fluid in all domains – especially in security and the economy – that predicting trajectories and outcomes has become more difficult now than at any time during the past eight years of major armed conflict. But acquiring an analytical grasp of dynamics and trends in Syria is essential.

(1) Context

The Assad regime is struggling visibly to restore government authority in areas retaken from the opposition, rebuild infrastructure and functioning markets, or reassert effective political and security control. Neither the regime nor the council of ministers or any other government agency is able to formulate meaningful policies in any domain, whether economic, social, political, or even military. Government directives change frequently and are often contradictory.

These problems are more than likely to continue over the long-term. Sanctions imposed by Western governments and their refusal to release reconstruction aid, coupled with negative economic trends throughout the Levant and the diminishing ability (or political will) of Gulf states to provide significant assistance or investment, impose severe limits on Syria’s ability to access credit or markets even if it resolves the above handicaps. Neither of the Assad regime’s main foreign allies,

Russia and Iran, can compensate for these sources of capital. Indeed, they actively seek commercial opportunities in Syria to recoup the costs of their past investment in supporting the regime. China has provided diplomatic support and is a potential source of business investment, but although its economic appetite in Syria is growing it has few actual investments and is highly unlikely to help fill the funding gap.¹

These conditions complicate regime efforts to reactivate economic activity or devise new commercial ventures intended to increase state revenue, provide capital for either reconstruction or investment, and stabilize local communities. This failure impedes its ability to replace the influence of foreign actors that provide funding or goods, or to compensate the families of loyalist war dead and reintegrate militiamen. It is unable to displace Russia, Iran, or Turkey – whether in relation to the economy or to their support for various armed actors on the ground. This results in the persistence of hybrid forms of governance over revenue generation and over security agencies and the armed forces, including some affiliated to the government itself. If these trends persist, they will leave the regime increasingly vulnerable internally. And yet its continued resort to favouring of crony businessmen as a principal means of resuming economic activity and generating income presents real risks of generating even more internal dissent, even among loyalist constituencies.

(2) Security reconstruction

Despite the severe constraints on the regime's ability to rebuild state capacity and core competences, it is determined to reassert uncontested security control within the country. For this purpose it is falling back on familiar practices, despite serious doubts about their past efficacy and no less serious impediments to reproducing them. The regime apparently seeks to restore its pre-2011 security control system, but this is no longer viable for a variety of reasons. These include the loss of experienced security cadres and the dispersal of control over loyalist armed forces, which has resulted in a visible inability to assert government authority over areas and populations over which it has regained physical control. Making this weakness worse is the regime's inability to defuse security threats by offering material trade-offs (economic and financial), addressing the sources of loyalist dissent, or rehabilitating itself politically.

The fact that the regime, Russia, and Iran are moreover pursuing separate, and at times contradictory, efforts to consolidate their control over government security agencies and armed forces further delays the rehabilitation of regime power and increases the costs to it. Paradoxically, the regime seeks to assert its security authority to the exclusion of all other political and military actors, whether Syrian or foreign, and yet refuses stubbornly to undertake meaningful reforms, however modest, in either the political or economic domains as a means of easing its multiple

security dilemmas.

(a) Resuming repression

In regime-controlled areas, loyalist security and military agencies are using the strict application of conscription against young men and former opposition fighters as a form of punishment and control. But the degree of the regime's territorial and administrative control varies from area to area. It ranges from direct coercion and intimidation in the Damascus region, for example, to a general lack of control in the Daraa area, where the regime is simply one of numerous actors that share control of what the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) called "an assemblage of 'zones of influence' ... a 'security archipelago'."² Indeed, assassinations and attacks on regime forces in the southern region have been occurring daily for over a year, and by January 2020 the future of government control there was in question, raising the possibility of challenges to its authority in other areas, including the large semi-rural belt around Damascus.³

In the northwest and northeast of Syria, the regime grudgingly co-exists with the US-protected and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the National Liberation Army (NLA) that is trained and protected by Turkey. Ironically, this may work in the regime's favour, as it simply does not have the manpower (nor the funds) to expand into more territory and stabilize it. But its attempts to recapture parts of Idlib province suggest that asserting formal sovereign control is a priority nonetheless, even if taking over more territory poses other kinds of risks. In a sense, this order of priorities suggests that the regime relies overwhelmingly on securitizing and militarizing all its problems as a means of maintaining its ability to retain the support of loyalist constituencies.

(b) Rebuilding the security and defence sectors

During the main period of the war, the Assad regime was compelled to delegate operational command to multiple lower-level and loyalist non-state actors. As part of the same process it also ceded extensive authority to Russia and Iran (and the Lebanese organization, Hezbollah) not only to recruit and operate loyalist militias, but also to acquire influence within the official security and military institutions. After years of fragmentation and heavy losses, the regime now seems to be pursuing a new policy aimed at tying the reins of control firmly in the hands of Assad himself.⁴ This can be seen from the replacement or retirement of numerous senior officers, who are being replaced with unknown figures likely to owe their loyalty to the president.

The process may progress slowly so long as the regime still needs the military support of its allies. Indeed, it may not succeed at all in the foreseeable future: opposition sources speak of a competition between these various allies to control army divisions or agencies such as Military Intelligence and

Air Force Intelligence, so the regime may gain relative but not absolute control. Starting in late 2018, Syrian opposition sources even argued that various incidents in which senior officers were rotated between commands, detained, or even killed were part of hidden struggles between Russia, Iran, and members of Assad's inner circle to gain the upper hand within the armed forces.⁵ Regime determination to assert control is moreover handicapped by its lack of funds; insiders report that this prevents them from taking over and disbanding loyalist militias established by Russia and Iran, as the government can neither pay salaries or severance compensation nor provide credit or skills training programs and small loans to assist the return of militiamen to civilian life.⁶

(c) Stand-off with the SDF and NLA

For the time being, the regime is unable to disband or eliminate these two forces, which are supported by external powers. (In fact U.S. military assistance and strategic support for the SDF has ceased since late 2019, compelling it to move into an uncomfortable tacit alliance with Russia and the Assad regime.) In theory, a grand political settlement could result in a quick resolution and dismantling of the autonomous zones of control now protected by the US, Turkey, and Russia. But multiple factors work against it. One is the strategic stand-off between the US on the one side and Iran, Russia, and Turkey on the other, which blocks political or territorial movement inside Syria. Another is the difficulty of bridging the gap between what the Kurds demand and the regime will accept, without which Turkey will not withdraw from Syria; this, in turn, ensures the survival of the NLA.

Turkey's military incursion into northeast Syria in October 2019 reveals the complexity of the obstacles remaining in the way of any kind of "clean" outcome. Despite achieving significant territorial gains and gaining some bargaining leverage, Turkey had to stop far short of its strategic objectives of removing the SDF from the entire length of the common border, leaving SDF administration largely intact.⁷ As importantly, there is precious little evidence that Turkey will succeed in establishing the safe zone promised along the Turkish-Syrian border promised by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a so-called "peace corridor" that will supposedly allow the return of around one million Syrian refugees to their country.⁸ Conversely, a regime offensive on the southern part of Idlib province, which is supposedly protected by Turkish military observation points set up under the 2018 Sochi agreement, generated around 700,000 internally displaced persons between April and December 2019 and expanded the zone of regime control.⁹

(d) Strategic competition between the allies

Last but not least, the gap between Russian and Iranian strategic interest in Syria (and regarding

Hezbollah in Lebanon) complicates the regime's efforts to reassert its exclusive authority and control. There are aspects both of complementarity and of competition, and at times outright contestation, between Russia, Iran, and the regime. This was made evident in the government campaign against opposition-held towns in northern Hama and southern Idlib provinces in mid-2019: strikingly, both Russia and Iran opposed a military offensive in order to avoid damaging their separate relationship with Turkey, in which both have invested heavily, but the regime went ahead regardless. It lacks the manpower and firepower, however, to act independently in the rest of Idlib, let alone challenge US and Turkish protected forces in the northwest and northeast. Russia has also sought assertively to curtail Iranian influence in the southern border region near Israel, to the extent of replacing the government in negotiating security agreements with local communities and former opposition fighters.

(3) Reconstruction and the economy

The Assad regime's efforts to assert its control over the entire country are impeded by major social and economic problems. One of the most important, and immediate, challenges facing the government is its lack of funding and the dismal prospects for any improvement. A study conducted for the World Bank in 2019 observed that Syria has suffered physical destruction, demographic dislocation, and economic disorganization "at a scale more common in inter-state wars than civil conflicts."¹⁰ The country's needs for capital are enormous: anything between \$300 billion and \$1 trillion. The same study assessed that, unless there is a genuine political settlement and significant external assistance, it could take Syria at least 22 years to reach its pre-conflict level of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and almost 29 years to reach its pre-conflict level of GDP per capita.¹¹

Reflecting the unavailability of capital flows and severe weakness of underlying economic fundamentals, the national currency – the Syrian Lira (Pound) – lost 68 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar in the year up to the end of 2019, after which it lost another 30 percent in the first two weeks of 2020 (before recovering slightly).¹² This dire financial picture is exceedingly unlikely to change for the better. Sanctions imposed by Western governments since 2011 remain in place and are set to endure. U.S. sanctions, in particular, will take years to be dismantled even if the political decision to do so is taken. And as the regime has sought to create new markets and income streams, for example by offering prime real estate to attract Syrian and foreign capital back to the country, new EU sanctions have blocked these efforts.

More damaging than sanctions, however, is the fear among banks of running afoul of U.S. policy, which has prompted them to refuse even legitimate business transactions undertaken by or on behalf of Syrian companies and individuals. Most Western governments moreover oppose providing Syria

with reconstruction aid in the absence of a meaningful political transition, resulting in growing shortages of numerous basic goods (such as fuel for household and industrial use, spare parts, and the like), rising prices and inflation, and the growth of black market activities inside Syria.

(a) Economic disorganization

But even if capital flows were to improve, economic disorganization poses another major challenge, not just physical destruction. Commercial families and the regional and international trade networks they built are gone, while the impacts of the loss of skilled labour are already felt throughout the private and public sectors.¹³ The social consequences are no less significant; the regime is unable to ease the huge material and human burden of the war on the Alawi community, its primary political constituency. For example, the Military Housing Establishment (Milihouse), a contracting and real estate development company owned by the Ministry of Defence, increased the price of houses it sells mostly in loyalist areas by 500 percent in mid-2019.¹⁴ Similarly, the increase of young Alawi males joining the military reflects the deepening of their dependence on public sector employment and the lack of employment alternatives.¹⁵

The regime has nonetheless stubbornly remained completely unwilling to undertake political, administrative, or economic reforms that might help reopen credit lines, revive trade and production, reactivate markets, and enhance social acceptance. Instead, it has responded with what may be called a “Bandaid approach:” it seeks to survive through a combination of humanitarian assistance, savings from under-investment in reconstruction or from not repatriating and rehabilitating refugees and internally displaced persons, income from developing the real estate market, and selling various extraction and management licenses and franchises to Russia and Iran. This constitutes the closest that the Syrian government has come to a reconstruction plan, despite its publication of a National Development Programme for Post-War Syria in 2017, which has not yet been translated into a concrete strategy, let alone into substantial activity.¹⁶

(b) Cronyism

These measures are poorly integrated, and have so far proven seriously inadequate. Indeed, they have given rise to further problems, of which the intensification of crony business behaviour is especially notable. Poverty and unemployment affect some 80 percent of the population, but the remaining 20 percent include many who actually thrived on the international sanctions regime, which allowed them to tighten their grip on parts of the economy. Crony capitalists had already become prominent before 2011, but economic cronyism has now become dominant, with new cronies constantly emerging, including former army and militia commanders.¹⁷ Having made their initial fortunes from

the war economy, some have reinvested in new ventures in the steel, tourism, freight, and real estate sectors.¹⁸ Yet crony businessmen are vulnerable too; some had their assets frozen on various charges in 2018, but at least 140 had their assets confiscated in the second half of 2019, whether in response to predatory behaviour that undermined government schemes to generate income or because the cash-strapped regime regarded them as easy targets.¹⁹

(c) Dynamics of capital scarcity

The fact that the regime will direct government agencies to target crony businessmen reveals the depth of its financial crisis. But conditions of scarcity have generated other forms of competitive and predatory behaviour, often led by official security agencies. In former opposition strongholds around Damascus such as al-Ghoutah, for example, local inhabitants have the financial means to rebuild their homes (if not their businesses), but are not able to do so. The relevant authorities issue permits, as they have an interest in the regeneration of construction and other economic activity, but each geographical area is divided into rival zones of control among security agencies that treat them as fiefdoms, and so their approval must also be sought, in return for bribes.

This pattern is reminiscent of conditions before 2011, when growing scarcity of resources and economic opportunities prompted security agents to engage in smuggling and other black market activities and in extortion, and to enter civilian markets in direct competition with legal businesses. The regime appears helpless to curb their behaviour even though it undermines regime goals. But in other instances it allows cronies to form their own private militias to protect their businesses, so as to reduce that burden on itself. These coalitions of powerful officials or political leaders, businessmen, and security agencies are unstable, but the pattern is likely to endure.

(d) Russian and Iranian investments

The government has sought to increase foreign investment and assistance as a means of partially circumventing these dynamics. Syria offers only modest business opportunities, but an “economic bloc” of the Russian elite is aggressively seizing these. Russian gas company Sroytransgaz, which is under U.S. sanctions, won a 49-year lease to run Tartous port and oil storage facility and manages the Homs General Fertilizers Company and phosphate mines, while others have received state contracts for the exploration and production of oil and gas and will undertake rehabilitation of roads, railways, and wheat granaries.²⁰

Iran, too, has signed numerous agreements relating to the economy and public infrastructure over the years, and has sought franchises to extract phosphates and manage ports and airports and to deliver housing and other projects in Syria. But despite impressive scale and ambitious targets, these

agreements often not been implemented fully, or even at all. In any case the prospective income for the Syrian government is relatively modest, as Russia and Iran are using these deals to secure repayment on their wartime assistance to Syria, which only receives a minor share of profits.²¹

Regional developments also do not bode well for Syria, which used to export significant amounts of agricultural and light industrial products to neighbouring countries and the Gulf, and to earn fees from the transit of large volumes of goods between Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf. All these markets are in turmoil or decline, local economies and state budgets are burdened with hosting (mostly) Syrian refugees, and overshadowed by escalating tensions between Iran and the U.S. and their respective allies. These conditions will impede Syrian economic recovery even further.

(4) Conclusion: The absence of politics

The Assad regime has repeatedly demonstrated its adeptness at maintaining itself through the construction of informal networks through which it controls formal institutions and manipulates a wide array of social and economic actors. This is what has enabled it to survive the opposition challenge and the ensuing civil war and multiple external military interventions that the war generated. But its unwillingness to engage in meaningful political dialogue with any counterpart, including its allies, let alone its adversaries, has denied it the ability to reduce the costs of regime maintenance while generating greater domestic resources.

Given this background, periodic government decrees raising public sector salaries will only fuel inflation, erode the national currency further, and undermine local production.²² Similarly, initiatives to restructure state-owned enterprises in the manufacturing, energy, banking, trading, tourism and construction sectors among many others will either fail as they have in the past, or transfer even more state assets into the hands of crony businessmen. The limitations on human and financial capital are irremediable under these conditions, and set to be chronic.

The regime can survive for the foreseeable future, during which its main political concern is to manage relations with the Alawi community – partly through its careful allocation of command appointments in the security agencies and armed forces to members of the various main clans – while undermining security and social peace in areas that remain outside its physical control. The price for these skewed priorities and deliberate avoidance of politics (and meaningful diplomacy) will be endemic violence in the peripheries of the country, an economy characterized to a high degree by black market and informal activities, and continued international isolation and pariah status (at least for Western governments that control Syria's access to principal sources of credit and trade).

— Notes —

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