

Editorial

A Year of Decision in Syria?

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In the coming year there are any number of ongoing wars and interstate tensions which the world should pay close attention to lest they erupt with dire consequences. Among the many problem spots, the conflict in Syria stands out as the most likely to pose a major challenge for the Middle East and the wider international community. The conflict in Syria has escalated in the past 21 months from peaceful protests against the government of President Bashar al-Assad into a full blown, very brutal civil war. Some 45,000 to 50,000 Syrians, along with more than 10,000 Syrian police and military personnel, are estimated to have been killed in the fighting to date. The number of refugees whom have fled from the growing violence to neighbouring countries is currently estimated to be some 400,000 people. Sadly, the conflict will not end any time soon, and the toll of death and destruction will only grow while the number of refugees will continue to rise. The Syrian conflict is a deepening tragedy and crisis which appears to be rapidly approaching some sort of tipping point -- if it has not already reached it.

The Assad regime may be starting to feel cornered, uncertain of whether it can ride out the war successfully. The Free Syrian Army has made considerable gains in the past year, and now seems to be able to hold its own against the Syrian military. Some reports indicate that the opposition groups control much of the countryside, particularly in the northern part of the country, with the regime now seeking mainly to hold, or at least keep relatively open, corridors between the major cities and select regions. The recent advances by the Free Syrian Army may denote only the emergence of a new battlefield balance, or these may indicate that the tide is starting to turn against the Assad regime. The Syrian government has on two occasions launched Scud missiles at targets within the country, and Syrian elite units reportedly were ordered to prepare some of Syria's stocks of chemical weapons, including the mixing of precursors that would make the weapons viable, and to load military vehicles used to transport them. The employment of the Scud missiles and the now-halted preparation of chemical weapons may be indications that the regime is starting to feel desperate, searching for a way to stem the current momentum of the Free Syrian Army.

Chemical weapons are difficult to use in a militarily effective manner, particularly against insurgents; rather they are a mass casualty weapon more useful for intimidating and terrorizing a population. A frantic regime nonetheless may be capable of behaviour up to and including using chemical weapons on its own people, a possibility that is very worrisome. U.S. President Barak Obama publicly warned the Assad regime that the use of chemical weapons was a 'red-line' for America, while the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made clear that any use of these weapons was beyond the pale, saying that to do so would be 'political suicide' for the regime. Yet neither President Obama nor Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made clear what would happen should the Assad regime employ its chemical weapons. The options available to the US and the international community to respond to any such use are limited. An aerial bombardment of the stockpiles would not destroy them, rather air strikes would very likely result in the release of chemical toxins with catastrophic humanitarian consequences for nearby Syrians. Arguably, the US and several other nations may have the capability to insert special operations forces that could take and hold the chemical stockpiles. Such action, however, would be difficult and dangerous, requiring a fairly substantial supporting aerial campaign as well an eventual need for reinforcements on the ground. In short, any intervention to secure Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles

might start small, but it would ultimately require a very significant military commitment on the ground to ensure success.

The international community through the United Nations and bilateral approaches has been attempting to convince the Assad regime that it should negotiate some sort of transfer of power and a termination of the fighting. Russia, which had been blocking any UN action towards the Assad regime, has now made clear that it is not opposed to a negotiated transition of government; creating a hope that perhaps a peaceful solution may be reached. There have been no indications that Assad and those around him are willing to relinquish power, however. Even if he and those closest to him suddenly decided to do so, the prospect that this would create the circumstances that would lead to a negotiated settlement of the conflict seems questionable. The Syrian rebels and civilians have suffered greatly over the past 21 months, and almost certainly will want to hold to account all those in the regime responsible. There are a great number of such individuals and groups within the regime beyond Assad who are culpable, too many for them to expect that they will be given sanctuary outside of Syria. Moreover, the minority Alawites that support and/or make-up the ruling elite will rightly or wrongly be implicated and will be vulnerable to targeted reprisals. A hard reality is that, should Assad step down or the regime collapse, the dynamics of the fighting in Syria has reached a point where open and sustained sectarian warfare appears far too plausible.

The international community to date has been unable and unwilling to act directly to address the crisis in Syria. The current trend of events in that country, however, may result in circumstances at some point in the coming 12 months which may force the world's hand. In the least, the international community will be faced with growing pressure to address the problem posed by Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons. A significant military intervention may be required to forestall pro-regime forces from employing these weapons against their own people or to prevent them from falling into the hands of jihadist elements of the Free Syrian Army that are openly hostile to the West and the US in particular. Indeed, the international community will be confronted by a major challenge should the regime effectively fall and, lacking a negotiated end, the conflict deepens into bloody sectarian fighting. There would be increasingly insistent calls to intervene to halt the swelling humanitarian disaster which

would follow. There would also be real risks for the stability in the adjacent region; the increasingly inter-communal, sectarian character of the conflict could all too easily have an adverse spillover effect for Syria's neighbours. The situation in Syria is, in short, moving in a direction that may lead to circumstances that could draw members of the international community, such as the US, actively into a conflict in which they would definitely prefer not be involved in.

In the longer term, the question is what will emerge from the current fighting? At one end of the spectrum is the possibility, particularly if sectarian fighting escalates, of a disunified Syria which is fragmented into armed confessional, ethnic and/or clan enclaves which are openly hostile towards each other. At the other end of the spectrum is the possibility that Syria will remain largely unified but with a government dominated by one or more elements intent on imposing their vision of governance or religious practice on the Syrian people. The outcome of the tragedy of Syria cannot be known with any certainty, but it is fair bet that it will not be welcomed by the international community or by much of the Syrian population. The international community at this stage appears to have no good options, only less worse options, for dealing with the risks and dangers that the Syrian conflict poses. Syria bears close watch in the coming year, as do the efforts and responses of the international community, for what happens in that country and how the world responds will reverberate for good or ill for many years to come.