MERIA

FRAGMENTED SYRIA: THE BALANCE OF FORCES AS OF LATE 2013

By Jonathan Spyer*

Syria today is divided de facto into three identifiable entities. These three entities are: first, the Asad regime itself, which has survived all attempts to divide it from within. The second area is the zone controlled by the rebels. In this area there is no central authority. Rather, the territory is divided up into areas controlled by a variety of militias. The third area consists of majority-Kurdish northeast Syria. This area is under the control of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian franchise of the PKK. This article will look into how this situation emerged, and examine its implications for the future of Syria.

As the Syrian civil war moves toward its fourth anniversary, there are no signs of imminent victory or defeat for either of the sides. The military situation has reached a stalemate. The result is that Syria today is divided de facto into three identifiable entities, each of which is capable of defending its existence against threats from either of the others.

These three entities are: first, the Asad regime itself, which has survived all attempts to divide it from within. The second area is the zone controlled by the rebels. In this area there is no central authority. Rather, the territory is divided up into areas controlled by a variety of militias. The third area consists of majority-Kurdish northeast Syria. This area is under the control of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian franchise of the PKK.

This article will look in more detail at how this situation of de facto fragmentation in Syria came about. It will also observe the current state of affairs within each of the entities. Finally, it will examine the possibilities for an early conclusion of the Syrian conflict and the reunification of the country, or, conversely, for continued war and the solidifying and consolidation of these separate areas into de facto "quasi-states."

HOW DID THE FRAGMENTATION OF SYRIA COME ABOUT?

The emergence of a de facto divided Syria is the result first and foremost of the Asad regime's response to its strategic predicament in the course of 2012. By the end of 2011, the uprising against the regime had transformed from a largely civilian movement into an armed insurgency, largely because of the regime's very brutal and ruthless response to civilian demonstrations against it. This response did not produce the decline of opposition, but rather the formation of armed groups intended initially to defend protests.[1] These armed groups then began to conduct their own independent actions against the regime's armed forces.[2]

The Asad regime initially tried to hold all parts of the country against the insurgency. Yet it was unable to muster the required number of reliable troops to mount a classic campaign of counterinsurgency. This soon became evident in the rebel heartlands of northern Syria, close to the border with Turkey.

Beginning in late 2011, the opposition and Free Syrian Army began to occupy ground, taking control of a number of towns and villages in the Idlib province. In January 2012, Zabadani was taken. Douma, near Damascus, fell in the same month. The rebels also took control of the greater part of Homs city, for a few months. In January 2012, some additional Damascus suburbs fell under partial opposition control.[3]

Asad hit back. The regime first attempted to launch a concerted effort to recapture these areas, in the late winter of 2011/2012. In February 2012, a counterattack was mounted. It began by retaking Douma, then moved on to Homs, and then began the pacification of Idlib--in time for the beginning of the "ceasefire" brokered by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which was due to take effect in April 2012.[4]

The regime's counterinsurgency tactics were characteristically bloody and brutal. Human Rights Watch, in a document based on field research carried out in the Idlib province described how 95 civilians died and hundreds were wounded in the period between March 22 and April 6, 2012, as Syrian armor and infantry swept methodically through the towns of Sarmin, Saraqib, Taftanaz, Hazana, and Killi.[5]

Similar actions took place throughout the country in areas affected by the uprising, including in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Deir al-Zor, Rastan, Dar'a, and Douma near Damascus. The pacifications involved the use of helicopters, artillery, and armor against civilians as well as large scale roundups, disappearances, and many deaths.

Yet it became apparent at that time that the regime did not have sufficient wherewithal to place all areas in revolt under permanent occupation. A pattern therefore emerged in which rebel fighters would leave an area before the regime military arrived. The regime's retribution would be taken out on the civilian population. Then, when the armed forces moved on as their limited numbers obliged them to do, the uprising reemerged.[6]

The failure of the counteroffensive of February and March 2012, and the predictable still birth of Annan's ceasefire, left the regime in a dilemma. Resources and lives of soldiers were being wasted on seeking to hold the entirety of the country. In the Sunni rural northwest, the regime ruled against the direct opposition of the population. In the course of July and August 2012, therefore, regime forces regrouped, effectively ceding large parts of northern and eastern Syria to their opponents, and establishing new defensive lines further south.

In July 2012, the regime also withdrew from the Kurdish northeast, with the PYD (Democratic Union Party) moving rapidly to replace it.[7] The PYD is aligned with neither the rebels nor the regime. The regime was therefore able to keep control of the cities of Hasakah and most of Qamishli inside this new Kurdish enclave, as well as of a border crossing to Turkey just outside Qamishli. Further west, the regime effectively ceded the rural parts of the Raqqa, Idlib, and Aleppo provinces to the rebellion. The regime strategy, as explained by its spokesmen, was not of course to concede the effective partition of the country. Rather, regime apologists noted that Asad maintained control of the main urban areas and main transport arteries to the cities, ceding more remote areas.[8]

It is true that with the exception of Raqqa city, no major provincial city has fallen in its entirety to the rebels. However, regime garrisons were isolated and beleaguered, often supplied by air, and mainly engaged in defending themselves--with minimal influence on life outside of their boundaries. Effectively, various elements of the rebellion became the political masters of eastern and northwest Syria in the course of 2012. Beyond the areas of regime control, rudimentary rebel attempts at building administrative structures emerged. This de facto partition was accentuated by the tactics adopted by the regime in the second half of 2012. Asad adopted a policy of aerial bombings and later, use of ballistic missiles indiscriminately against the areas that had fallen out of his control.

Since the summer of 2012, the fighting in Syria has essentially been about each side seeking to clear its own area of remaining enclaves of enemy forces and to secure lines of control most advantageous to it. Thus, three distinct entities have come into being on Syrian soil. Two of these entities--that of the regime and that of the Sunni rebels--are at war with each other. The third, the Kurdish enclave, is seeking to the best of its ability to

stay out of the fight. Next, the situation within each of these enclaves will be considered.

First is the regime area. The area under the control of Bashar Asad is nominally ruled by the same individuals and the same system that ruled the entirety of the country prior to March 2011. However, contrary to the image the regime wishes to convey, a certain fragmentation is also under way within the regime-controlled zone.

As of the writing of this article, Asad controls the western coastal area stretching across the Latakia, Hama, and Homs provinces; the city of Damascus and most of its environs; and the road links between the two. This gives him ownership of about 40 percent of the land mass of Syria.[9] However, the regime also controls all of the provincial capitals of the country with the exception of Raqqa city, which is under jihadi control, and Aleppo city, which is disputed between the sides.

Yet it would be wrong also to imagine that Asad-controlled Syria in 2013 was indistinguishable from the pre-2011 regime. Asad is not in charge of a united, centralized system. Rather, the regime-controlled area has become a center for a variety of Iran-linked forces, which together are conducting the war against the rebels.

It is deeply questionable as to whether Bashar Asad is the individual solely responsible for directing operations. Rather, given his beleaguered status and the seniority of some of the Iranian personnel known to have spent time directing operations on Syrian soil, it is likely that the Iranians are today playing a significant role in running the regime's war effort.

The regime war effort is no longer the sole preserve of the Syrian Arab Army, assisted by its paramilitary Shabiha allies. As described above, by early 2012, it was plain that these forces would not be sufficient to defeat the revolt. Asad simply did not have enough reliable troops to deploy against the rebels. The result has been a general mobilization by Iran of its own and its allies' assets on behalf of the regime. This has included the large scale deployment of Hizballah forces on Syrian soil.[10]

While Iranian assistance to Asad was evident from the very beginning of the uprising, the extent of this support sharply increased as the rebellion became more militarized, and Asad's forces more beleaguered and overstretched. According to a senior Israeli source, the commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qasim Sulaymani, has personally visited Syria on at least one occasion to take part in the guiding of the war.[11]

Following a trip by Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah to Iran in April 2013, Hizballah increased the extent and visibility of its presence in the regime-controlled areas. The Lebanese group took part in important battles to consolidate the regime controlled area in al-Qusayr and the Khalidiya district of Homs city. Hizballah forces are also present in Damascus, and according to some reports, Aleppo. Around 10,000 Hizballah fighters are reckoned to be present on Syrian soil at any given time.[12] IRGC forces themselves are present in Syria, and Iranian specialists have been present in an advisory capacity since the early days of the revolt.[13]

Iran and Hizballah have also participated in the creation of an organized paramilitary force trained to fight on behalf of the regime--the so-called National Defense Forces. This was an attempt to arrange the plethora of mainly Alawi pro-regime irregulars active in Syria into a more coherent force.[14] This force first deployed in the beginning of 2013. In addition, Iraqi Shi'i paramilitary groups, such as Ahl al-Haq and Kta'ib Hizballah, are active on Syrian soil.[15] Iraq has, of course, also played a vital role as a route for Iranian-supplied weaponry on its way to the Syrian armed forces.

In civil terms, the regime has managed to maintain basic services in the areas under its control and to enable citizens to live for the most part in normality. Its powerful intelligence services remain intact and ever present. Despite various reports predicting that Asad's currency reserves must surely be

approaching exhaustion, it appears that a credit line from Iran will prop up the regime for the foreseeable future. The decline of the value of the Syrian pound has also led to predictions of economic collapse, which have not yet materialized.

John Sfakianakis, chief investment strategist at MASIC, a Riyadh-based investment company, recently predicted to *Bloomberg News*, for example, that "[t]he currency will continue to depreciate, inflation will rise, and with sanctions in place, the country's foreign reserves will soon be wiped out."[16] But this has not yet happened. The Iranian contribution appears to be the reason.

To a degree, running a centralized, repressive wartime economy is not problematic for Asad. The regime maintained itself and justified its repressive nature for decades by claiming that it was at war (with Israel). The mechanisms for distribution and of course for rapid suppression of any dissent are still present in government controlled areas. The part of Syria controlled by the regime side is not going to become a prosperous economy under present conditions, of course. Domestic output has declined 50 percent since 2011,[17] but neither does it appear close to collapse in the immediate future.

THE REBEL-CONTROLLED AREA

Unlike the area controlled by the regime, the rebel-controlled part of the country is not united even nominally under a single governing authority. Rather, there has emerged a patchwork of fiefdoms controlled by various rebel groups and commanders. The rebel controlled area stretches from Abu Kamal on the Iraqi border up to the Turkish border in the northwest. There is an additional, smaller zone of rebel control in the south in the Dar'a province, going up to Douma and Zabadani along the border with Israel and Lebanon. In these areas, authority appears largely to be based on rebel guns and varying interpretations of Islamic Shari'a law--from very extreme Salafi doctrines to a Muslim Brotherhood type outlook.

The rebel forces remain deeply divided, with a number of different formations competing for support and control in these areas. One estimate considers that there are today 1,200 different rebel groups fighting the Asad regime. These may range from militias of a few hundred gathered around a particular local leader and neighborhood to larger formations of thousands of fighters.

A number of shifting rebel militia alliances emerged in the course of the insurgency. Until recently, the largest of these was the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, dominated by formations associated with a Muslim Brotherhood-type Sunni Islamist ideology. Constituent brigades included the Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo, Suqqour al-Sham, the Farouq Brigades in their various manifestations, and the Islam Brigade, which operates in the Damascus area.[18]

This force probably numbered around 40-50,000 fighters (though accurate numbers are very hard to reach, for obvious reasons). Its 20 constituent units were loyal to either one of these Western-supported organizations: the Supreme Military Council (SMC) or the General Staff of the Military and Revolutionary Forces. The latter is a body headed by former Syrian Army Major General Salim Idris. It is responsible for the distribution of Western and Gulf assistance to the rebels, and on this basis, secured the loyalty of most of the SILF rebel units. The intention, clearly, was to establish a unified rebel military structure subordinate to the external political leadership of the revolution, which Idris supports.

A number of smaller factions, including Afhad al-Rasul, Asifat al-Shamal, and others, also aligned with the SMC, though not the SILF.[19] Again, all these groups pledge allegiance to one or another form of Sunni Islamism, with the "Ikhwani"-type outlook strongest among them.[20] It is, however, doubtful whether those units that pledged allegiance to the SMC in order to receive support subsequently agreed to take orders from Idris and the SMC. Rather, individual commanders retain a great deal of autonomy; and it is they who held power on the ground

within their own fiefdoms, not Major-General Idris.

However, the attempt to solidify the alliance between the SILF and the SMC appears to have comprehensively failed. Instead, key Islamist forces, including former SILF members, announced on November 22, 2013, the formation of a new alliance, the Islamic Front.[21] This grouping brought together some of the most powerful rebel units from across the country, most importantly Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Tawhid. It appears to have been established because of regime gains in a number of areas of the country and the fear that rebel disunity could deliver a decisive defeat. Saudi tutelage appears to be behind the new initiative, along with declining American support for the rebels. The new grouping has now declared its opposition to the SMC, and its actions appear to be leading to a withdrawal or decline of U.S. support for the latter, which may now become increasingly irrelevant.

Another important rebel alliance is the Syrian Islamic Front, a more hardline Salafi gathering, which has around 20,000 fighters. Its main constituent group is the Ahrar al-Sham militia, whose leader also heads the SIF. This grouping is openly Salafi, calling for an Islamic state in Syria. At the same time, it is not linked with al-Qa'ida, and its focus is on Syria, rather than global jihad. Ahrar al-Sham has now joined the newly formed Islamic Front, making the future of the SIF uncertain.

A third very significant factor on the rebel landscape are the openly al-Qa'ida-linked groups Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

These are the main forces available to the insurgency. As noted above, they do not always cooperate successfully and on a number of occasions have clashed, resulting in wounded and dead on both sides. Elements of these forces exercise physical control over the great majority of the territory controlled by the Syrian rebels.

In Raqqa city, the only provincial capital so far to have fallen into rebel hands, the al-Qa'ida-linked fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria organization have consolidated their control after clashing with more moderate fighters associated with the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and the Supreme Military Council.[22] The fighters of the Afhad al-Rasoul organization have been driven out of the city by ISIS. There have been protests in Raqqa against the very repressive rule that the organization has imposed on the city, in line with its stringent interpretation of Islamic law. However, as of now, ISIS control of the city appears secure.

Still, it should not be concluded that the al-Qa'ida groups are sweeping all before them. There are powerful and capable brigades aligned with a Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamist outlook. These include, for example, the Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo and the Farouq Brigades, the latter having originated in Homs but which now has franchises from Dar'a in the south all the way to the Turkish border--where its members control a number of border crossings.

A contest between rival factions is under way. There have already been occasions on which this contest has turned bloody. The Farouq Brigades are suspected of involvement in the killing of Abu Mohamad al-Absi in September 2012. The brigades clashed with Absi, a Syrian jihadi leader, over control of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Syria and Turkey.[23] The al-Qaida linked Jabhat al-Nusra is also engaged in a long-running feud with the Farouq Brigades.

Yet the ideological differences between these groups should be placed in perspective. The Syrian rebellion emerged from the poorer, rural Sunni Arab areas of Syria. Today, the areas over which the various rebel factions rule are all of this type. The main non-Salafi fighting groups are nevertheless uniformly Islamist. In Aleppo and Azaz, the forms of governance supported by non-Salafi groups such as the Tawhid Brigade are Islamic--including Shari'a courts and a Shari'a council.[24] In Aleppo, rival Shari'a councils supported by the jihadists and the MB-oriented groups have been established. Thus, there is no significant presence of non-Islamist politics on

the ground in the rebel controlled part of Syria.

Standards of governance also differ widely depending on which group is in control. Jihadi organizations have sought to portray their rivals as corrupt. Certainly there have been instances of theft by rebels, of smuggling for profit, and of use of control of the provision of food and essential goods to make profit. The alternative, however--namely the very harsh and repressive rule of the Salafists--is also quite alien to Syrian traditions. This has led to some manifestations of popular rejection of these organizations, despite their military prowess.[25]

The chaos and confusion in the rebel-controlled areas is further exacerbated by the regime policy of indiscriminate aerial bombardment of rebel-held areas. The regime has intervened with the deliberate intention of disrupting rebel attempts to maintain vital services in rebel-controlled areas. Asad's complete air superiority has been used, for example, for the bombing of hospitals in the Aleppo city area, such as Dar al-Shifa.[26] The regime also pursued a strategy of bombing bakeries, thus preventing the orderly provision of food to the population. Ten bakeries were bombed, for example, in the Aleppo area in August 2012.[27]

As a result both of divisions among the rebels and deliberate regime policies of attacks on civilians and infrastructure, the rebel-controlled areas of Syria are currently the most chaotic and least governed space in the country. The rebels lack the all-seeing eye of the Syrian security services, which serve to ensure order and obedience on the regime side. Indeed, it is a by-product of the plethora of disunited rebel groups controlling territory on the rebel side that no movement toward establishing centralized policing or other public services has been possible. Rather, each rebel militia makes whatever provisions it can for the area under its control, often in cooperation with but sometimes in competition with the neighboring forces.

The bottom line is that the rebel-controlled areas of Syria are today dominated by warlords, who pledge allegiance to one or another variant of Sunni Islamist ideology.

THE KURDISH ENCLAVE

The third important area of control in Syria is that maintained by the Kurds in the northeast of the country. The Kurdish enclave consists of a swathe stretching from the border of Iraq across to the town of Ras al-Ayn on the Turkish border and a little beyond it. In addition to this major enclave, there are two areas of Kurdish control further west along the border with Turkey--one in the area surrounding the town of Ayn al-Arab (known as Kobani to the Kurds) and one further west around the city of Afrin.

The Kurdish enclave was able to come into existence because of the Asad regime's decision to abandon large swathes of northern Syria in the summer of 2012. Shortly following the departure of regime forces from the majority Kurdish northeast, forces loyal to the PYD (Democratic Union Party) established control in the abandoned areas. The PYD is the Syrian Kurdish franchise of the PKK organization.[28]

The PKK assisted greatly or controlled the process of the establishment of Kurdish authority in northeast Syria. Many PKK fighters and activists are themselves of Syrian origin. This derives from the fact that the Asad regime encouraged Kurds of separatist sentiment to volunteer with the PKK against Turkey (while severely repressing any Kurdish attempt at organizing and demanding their rights within Syria).

PKK activists appear to have made their way from Turkey or northern Iraq into the Kurdish-controlled area of Syria to oversee the establishment of the PYD's rule in the area.[29]

The regime forces have not entirely departed from the Kurdish areas. Asad's army still controls the city of Hasakah within this enclave. The city of Qamishli is also in large part controlled by the regime. For a period, the regime also maintained a presence in the oil town of Rumaylan.

Outside of these areas, however, the PYD has created a centralized administration. The

Kurdish security force in the area--the YPG (Peoples' Protection Units) and the "Asayish" police and security service are organized across the area of Kurdish rule, and form the basis of the PYD's control.

The PYD has also set about a broader process of "organizing" the area under its rule. This includes creating institutions for the teaching of the Kurdish language, women's and youth organizations, and media centers. All are engaged in propagating the particular, leftist version of Kurdish nationalism supported by the PYD and the PKK.

Members of other Kurdish organizations, most significantly the parties aligned with the KNC (Kurdish National Council), which identifies with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, have accused the PYD of establishing an authoritarian system in the areas under its control. The KNC is now formally aligned with the PYD in the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which is the nominal ruling authority in the Kurdish controlled areas. However, the KNC claims that it suffers from heavy-handed tactics by the PYD and that the YPG is in effect a PYD militia, rather than a joint military force representing all political elements.[30]

It is clear that the YPG has received assistance from the PKK and is loyal to its outlook, with members taking part, for example, in demonstrations calling for the release of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. PYD members, however, claim that the movement's predominance reflects wide public support for it, and that attempts by rival parties to organize have foundered not because of PYD interference but because of an absence of visible public support. The Syrian rebels, too, are deeply suspicious of the PYD and the whole project of Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria. Commanders of rebel militias in northern Syria accuse the PYD and YPG of working with the regime.[31]

The reality is that the Kurdish-controlled area is with neither side in the civil war. Rather, it is trying to walk a precarious line between the two. In essence, the message the Kurds seek to present to each of the sides is that the Kurds will work with each of them on the basis of cooperation, but that no unauthorized entry of armed forces onto Kurdish soil will be tolerated.

From the regime's point of view, such a situation has its advantages. Asad has largely abandoned northeast Syria, and if his own forces are not there, it is clear that he would prefer Kurds--with whom he maintains an uneasy relationship, combining contacts with occasional clashes--to Sunni Arab rebels who are engaged in an all-out war against him.

From the rebels' point of view, this stance looks like separatism at best, and betrayal at worst. Yet the Kurds regard the rebellion as in any case tainted by its close association with the government of Turkey, its Islamism, its Arab nationalism, and its rejection of Kurdish autonomy. The Kurdish-controlled area remains one of the most peaceful areas of the country, though clashes between Kurds and jihadi rebels which took place in late 2013 may be changing this.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

As of now, the pattern of conflict in the Syrian civil war largely consists of each side seeking to consolidate its own lines of control around the area of the country it controls. Thus, the regime side's successful offensives this year at al-Qusayr and the Khalidiya district of Homs were conducted with the intention of securing the western coastal area and the Syria-Lebanon border for Asad and his Hizballah allies, and securing control of the Damascus-Homs highway. These victories, while notable, did not constitute a major shift toward offensive operations by the regime. Asad, at the moment, does not have the ability to commence a reconquest of rebel-controlled northern and eastern Syria.

Some analysts predicted that following his gains in the west, Asad would attempt to retake the city of Aleppo in its entirety. Had this been attempted, it would indeed have represented the beginning of a general counter-offensive by the regime in the north. There were rumors that the regime and Hizballah were building up forces in two Shi'i

villages--Nubul and Zahra--in preparation for this assault.

However, the assault never came. Instead, in a graphic demonstration of the true balance of forces in the war, following the Khalidiya fighting, the regime turned its attention to trying to turn back a rebel offensive in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, which began on July 24, 2013. It was during this attempt to drive the rebels back in eastern Ghouta that the regime forces carried out the massacre using chemical weapons on over 1,000 Syrian civilians, on August 21, 2013.[32] The regime is now engaged in slowly pushing the rebels out of the Qalamun region, close to the border with Lebanon. Success in this fight (which is likely) will further consolidate the regime enclave and its link with its allies in Lebanon, while severely curtailing the rebels' own links with Sunni elements in Lebanon.

The regime's determination to hold onto Damascus reflects its self-image as the legitimate government of Syria. Should it lose the capital, Asad would be exposed as merely the leader of an Alawi enclave in the west. The regime, thus, appears ready to use any means at its disposal to prevent this.

The rebels, meanwhile, have enjoyed successes of their own in their area of control--most significantly the capture of the Minnagh Air Base near Aleppo. This base, one of the largest air bases in northern Syria, had acquired a symbolic value for the rebels. Thus its capture after a ten-month siege was considered a major achievement, though the base was of little strategic value. Still, it was noteworthy in that it removed one of the last pockets of regime control in northern Syria. It is also worthy of note that around 200 members of the Minnagh garrison managed to escape and were offered safe haven in the Kurdish-controlled enclave in Afrin.

There has been fighting between Kurds and Arab rebels too, in the second half of 2013. Once again, the form of the fighting has been an attempt to clarify lines of control. The YPG has clashed with jihadi rebels at Ras al-Ayn, on the edge of the Kurdish-controlled area. The al-Qaida-linked jihadists of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra engaged in a series of additional attacks on outlying areas of Kurdish population and control in July 2013.Their intention ultimately appeared to be to secure a contiguous corridor under their rule, stretching from the oil-rich Deir al-Zor area in eastern Syria through the Raqqa province to the border with Turkey. Demographic and geographical realities mean that such a corridor would inevitably run through an area populated by Kurds. The jihadists were keen to ensure that Kurdish forces would not be present in these isolated enclaves of Kurdish population. The jihadis were not successful, and a Kurdish counter-attack in November 2013 forced them back to west of Ras al-Ayn, leading to Kurdish hopes of uniting the main Kurdish area of control with the two isolated enclaves further west in Kobani and Afrin.

All these operations consist in essence of a "mopping up" of areas of control. The single exception to this pattern has been the advance made by the rebels in the northern Latakia province in early August 2013. Yet these gains were largely wiped out by a regime counter-offensive later in the month, leaving the lines ultimately undisturbed.

Thus the Syrian civil war has led to the effective fragmentation of Syria into three identifiable enclaves. Of these, two--the regime area and the Kurdish area--are tightly ruled by a central authority. The third, the rebel-held zone, has no central authority but is a kind of conglomerate of various Sunni Islamist forces ruling over different areas. None of these enclaves are strong enough to over-run any of the others. None of them are sufficiently weak as to be in danger of overthrow by any of the others.

What could change this situation? A determined outside intervention or the withdrawal of outside support to one of the sides could alter the current balance of power. It is hard to see what else could, at this stage. At present, the fighting enclaves in Syria seem destined to continue their fight until at last one side gains an advantage over the other and is able to impose its will, or until all sides become resigned to the impossibility of

victory and agree to the partition of the country between them.

Dr. Jonathan Spyer is a senior research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. His book, The Transforming Fire: The Rise of the Israel-Islamist Conflict, *was published in 2010.*

NOTES

[1] Adrian Blomfield, "Syrian Opposition Admits Armed Insurgents Are Operating on Fringe of Uprising Against Assad Regime," *Daily Telegraph*, August 6, 2011, http://www.telegraph.co.uk.

[2] Erika Solomon, "Syria Army Rebels Fight from the Shadows," Reuters, November 23, 2011, http://in.reuters.com.

[3] Mariam Karouny, "Gunfire, Funerals and Fear in Syria's Protest Centre," Reuters, January 23, 2012, http://www.reuters.com.

[4] Ruth Sherlock, "Syrian Forces Launch All Out Assault on Douma," *Daily Telegraph*, January 26, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk.

[5] "They Burned my Heart," *Human Rights Watch Report*, May 3, 2012, http://www.hrw.org.

[6] See Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," Institute for the Study of War, June 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org.

[7] Piotr Zalevski, "By Ceding North-eastern Syria to the Kurds, Assad Puts Turkey in a Bind," *Time*, July 27, 2012, http://world.time.com.

[8] Personal interview with pro-regime source, August 2013.

[9] Zach Pontz, "Syrian Opposition Says West Must Enable 'Syrian People to Defend Themselves,' Not Just Carry Out Airstrikes," *Algemeiner*, August 30, 2013, http://www.algemeiner.com.

[10] See this page for the most detailed and updated information on Hizballah's activities in Syria: http://jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade/.

[11] Interview with former senior Israeli minister, July 2013.

[12] "Source: More than 10,000 Hezbollah Members Fighting in Syria," *Ynetnews*, August 25, 2013, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4421844,00.html.

[13] Ian Black, "Iran Confirms It Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Action If Pushed," *Guardian*, September 16, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com.

[14] Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2013, http://online.wsj.com.

[15] See Hizballah Cavalcade website.

[16] Dana Baltaji and Donna Abu-Nasr, "Assad's Syria Chides Bread Lines As Civilians Brace for Hit," *Businessweek*, August 29, 2013, http://www.businessweek.com.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, August 27, 2013, http://www.ctc.usma.edu.

[19] Ibid.

[20] The author interviewed commanders and fighters of the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo in September 2013. The responses given confirmed that this brigade and others like it in the SILF are orientated to a Muslim Brotherhood-style Sunni Islamist politics. Direct links between the Brotherhood and these groups are of course harder to determine.

[21] "Leading Syrian Rebel Groups Form New Islamic Front," *BBC Online*, November 22, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25053525.

[22] Alison Tahmizian Meuse, "In Raqqa, Islamist Rebels Form a New Regime," *Syrian Freedom*, August 16, 2013, http://syrianfreedomls.tumblr.com.

[23] Rania Abouzeid, "In Syria, the Rebels Have Begun to Fight Among Themselves," *Time*, March 6, 2013, http://world.time.com.

[24] Interview with Yusuf al-Shawi, member of the Azaz Islamic Court and former rebel commander, Azaz, September 2013.

[25] Tareq al-Abed, "Syrian City of Raqqa Suffers Under Rebel Rule," *al-Monitor*, July 2, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com.
[26] As witnessed by the author, September 2012.
[27] "Government Attacking Breadlines," *Human Rights Watch*, August 30, 2012, http://www.hrw.org.
[28] John Caves, "Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party," *Human Rights Watch*, August, 30, 2012, http://www.hrw.org.
[29] As noted by the author in conversations with activists in the Kurdish-controlled area, March 2013.
[30] Eric Bruneau, "KDP and PYD Failed Meddling in Syrian Kurd Politics," *MESOP Newsletter*, August 30, 2013, http://www.mesop.de.
[31] Interview with Tawhid Brigade commander Hadji al-Bab, Aleppo, September 2013.
[32] "France: Syrian Regime Behind Chemical Attack," *al-Jazeera*, September 3, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com.