

NOREF Policy Brief

Regional Implications of the conflict in Syria: a view from Israel

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Executive summary

Syria is geo-strategically, historically and politically the most central of Middle East countries, hence the over-riding importance of the conflict there. Yet any discussion of the regional implications of that conflict is necessarily highly speculative. Its points of departure are the instances of regional intervention and “overflow” from the situation already taking place. Turkey, with its open support for the armed Syrian opposition, is the leading candidate to establish “safe zones” or even “humanitarian corridors” that could conceivably lead to war. Ankara’s growing rivalry with Iran is increasingly being acted out in Syria and is interacting with tensions between Sunni Muslims and Alawites/Shias not only in Syria, but in Lebanon and Iraq as well.

Saudi Arabia and Israel are also huge stakeholders in the outcome in Syria. They increasingly identify a defeat for the Assad regime as an historic setback for Iran’s designs throughout the region, and therefore to their advantage. Israel could interact with the conflict in a number of significant ways, short of outright armed intervention.

These are all identifiable contingencies that the region and the West must somehow plan to engage. The unexpected and unpredictable are by their very nature even more dangerous. The Alawite/Baathist regime’s inability to compromise over its hegemony virtually assures the failure of the ceasefire mediated by United Nations (UN) envoy Kofi Annan.

The revolutionary chaos in Syria, as elsewhere in the Arab Middle East, is essentially unpredictable – precisely because it is a revolutionary situation in which the principals themselves frequently do not know what tomorrow will bring. Accordingly, it could impact on the region in a number of ways, depending on two different sets of very broad circumstances that we can only address speculatively.

Firstly, will the Alawite/Baathist regime headed by Bashar Assad prevail or be driven from power? And secondly, will there be outside security intervention beyond the limited scale we are aware of thus far: Turkey's sheltering of armed opposition elements; the infiltration of arms and jihadists from Sunni parts of Iraq and from Lebanon on behalf of the opposition; the apparent presence of Iranian security personnel advising the Syrian regime; support for this regime from the Shia-dominated government in Iraq; an abortive Arab League monitoring mission; and the arrival of a nascent UN monitoring contingent.

International intervention

One convenient focus of analysis is the increasing talk of regional and/or Western armed intervention. On February 12th the Arab League, which withdrew its own failed observer mission from Syria, formally requested that a UN peacekeeping force be sent to Syria. In mid-April a tentative UN-mediated ceasefire was declared. It has been accepted by both the Assad government and the organised opposition – the former apparently because it perceives itself as able to outlast and defeat the anti-government forces, the latter in order to regroup and rearm.

What might international military intervention look like? It will certainly not be like NATO's intervention in Libya. There, no neighbouring country or regional power threatened to counter the intervention, and NATO could in fact drive Muammar Qaddafi from power while claiming, under the UN, to be merely protecting civilians. Syria is a far more central and strategically located Arab state. Russia, which argues that the UN mandate for Libya was honoured in the breach, has finally agreed to limited international

intervention in Syria, but is actively supporting the Assad regime at the diplomatic level and delivering arms to it.

Nor does a "peacekeeping" force appear to be feasible, unless the Assad regime and the revolutionary opposition agree not only to a truce and to an international presence, but to a democratic reform plan as well. A peacekeeping force is by definition intended to police a ceasefire or an otherwise tense situation, but not to fight. The failure of the Arab League monitoring mission does not bode well for such a peacekeeping effort. The new UN contingent will seek to monitor a ceasefire, but not to enforce a governmental reform plan, which does not exist.

Indeed, under present circumstances no international non-military intervention, including that by the former UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, can succeed. The Alawite regime in Damascus is fighting for its life and clearly believes that any serious concessions in favour of political reform or power sharing could spell disaster for its interests, and even death and persecution for Syria's two million Alawites. Hence it is difficult to perceive how the Annan plan can move from a ceasefire, however partial and fragile, to serious negotiations regarding agreed democratic reforms.

Armed intervention

Looking at the possibility of armed intervention on behalf of the opposition, we note that the latter is fractured and divisive, rendering the co-ordination of support difficult. Over the past month the regime has successfully thwarted opposition attempts to create geographic enclaves capable of hosting an intervention or anchoring a humanitarian corridor in Homs and Idlib. The regional candidates for intervention are Turkey and possibly Jordan, both of which border on Syria; the international candidates are the U.S. or NATO. Saudi Arabia – which has adopted proactive involvement in steering (Yemen), preventing (Jordan) and suppressing (Bahrain) the region's revolutions to its own presumed strategic advantage – could also conceivably supply forces. Thus far, all concerned have rejected the option of armed

intervention. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, however, are spearheading a move to funnel financial aid to the opposition, which presumably can use it to purchase arms.

But because there is no clear military “front” in Syria (as there was in Libya), there is no obvious strategic location where it would seem possible to land an expeditionary force from the air or sea. Thus, the most obvious option is to create “safe zones” inside Syria bordering Turkey or Jordan, where refugees could flee and revolutionary forces could regroup, much as they do today on Turkish territory bordering Syria. Of Syria’s other neighbours, Lebanon and Iraq, with their strong Shia populations that tend to support the Alawites (an offshoot of Shia Islam), are not candidates for organised state intervention on behalf of the Syrian opposition. Both, however, have of late become major conduits for the smuggling of arms to Sunni anti-regime forces in Syria.

Another invasive move might be attacks from the air on military and other strategic sites inside Syria. This would require extensive air cover to neutralise the Syrian Air Force and air defences, which would fight back. Then too, Syrian military communications could be jammed by neighbours or from the air. Israel allegedly did precisely this when it destroyed Syria’s North Korean-built nuclear reactor in 2007.

An ostensibly less provocative invasive move could theoretically be large-scale humanitarian aid, particularly if the situation in besieged towns and cities becomes acute or the entire consumer economy breaks down. But how would this take place? Unless the regime’s armed forces have collapsed, they are likely to oppose such an initiative by force. France and Turkey have reportedly proposed creating “humanitarian aid corridors” linking up from the Turkish border with Syria to besieged Syrian cities. Under present circumstances, such an initiative would quickly turn into a bloody military invasion. The Syrian armed forces’ major offensive in Homs (near Lebanon) and Idlib (near Turkey) in recent weeks seemed to be designed precisely to thwart the corridor option.

Regional conflict

Since from the moment any non-Syrian military force enters Syria it would likely be subject to attack by the Syrians themselves and possibly by their Shia allies, any of the options outlined above could lead to a regional Shia-Sunni war. Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese Shias would actively support Assad, while Iraqi, Turkish and Jordanian Sunnis would aid the opposition. Indeed, the conflict in Syria could “go regional” even without external state intervention and may already be heading in that direction. This could mean, *in extremis*, the fragmentation of Syria into ethnic enclaves that merge with the surrounding region and the erasing of Syria’s borders as marking the boundaries of the conflict. Syria’s majority Sunnis could link up with tribally related Iraqi Sunnis in Anbar province; Kurds with fellow Kurds in Iraq and Turkey; and Christians could flee to the Christian areas of Lebanon. As the Lebanese daily *An-Nahar* aptly put it on February 14th, Syria is moving from the status of “player” to “playground”.

While the overflow of the Syrian revolution as such to a neighbouring state is not envisioned, the consequences for general stability among Syria’s Arab neighbours and Turkey could be far-reaching. The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli has already witnessed Sunni-Alawite strife, while Sunni-Alawite enmity in Syria can only exacerbate Shia-Sunni tensions in Iraq. And tension is growing rapidly between Iran and Turkey, the two regional non-Arab giants, over influence in Syria and Iraq and among the region’s Kurds.

Another danger seen in the current situation of growing anarchy, with or without intervention, is a Syrian decision to attack Israel, using its own missiles or a Hezbollah proxy from Lebanon, in the hope of distracting regional and international attention from the domestic situation in Syria and rallying Arab public opinion to its side. President Assad, his influential cousin Rami Mahlouf and Hezbollah leaders have all threatened precisely such an attack in the event of the situation deteriorating. While the probability of such a diversionary attack is low, Israeli authorities do not entirely dismiss it.

In parallel, there are indications that Syria might deploy Syrian Kurdish irregulars who are loyal to the Assad regime to stir up trouble among Turkey's large Kurdish population as a means of deterring and distracting Turkey – the Kurdish issue brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war in the 1990s. Syria's Kurds, nearly two million strong, are not of one mind regarding whom to support in the conflict and have thus far remained largely passive.

Given this huge potential for escalation and regional chaos, it is not hard to understand why the candidates for intervention on behalf of the opposition and the beleaguered population are not enthusiastic about the idea.

The Israeli perspective

While the Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, has publicly offered humanitarian aid, Israel understands that it is not a candidate even for humanitarian intervention on the ground in Syria, simply because its motives would in every conceivable instance be interpreted by all its neighbours as malevolent, i.e. to conquer Arab territory. Hence the intervention would be counterproductive for all concerned. Israel appears to appreciate that, barring extreme provocation, its forces must not set foot on Syrian soil, precisely in order to avoid giving Assad a pretext for attacking Israel as a diversion from his troubles at home. Israel has already announced preparations for possibly absorbing Syrian refugees fleeing from the fighting to the Golan (Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are already sheltering such refugees).

Yet beyond the contingency of countering an attack from Syria or southern Lebanon, it is not difficult to conceive of "worst-case" scenarios in which Israel feels impelled to intervene more proactively. If, for example, the Assad regime is losing its grip on vital military equipment that could be captured by al-Qaeda forces or some other radical Islamist rebels or breakaway military faction and used irresponsibly – chemical warheads and missile delivery systems, for example, of which Syria has a huge stockpile – one could conceive of an Israeli decision to bomb these installations.

Turkey, too, would presumably be sensitive to this contingency and consider preventive action.

The Iran factor

Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the West all increasingly recognise that they have a stake in Assad's downfall, not merely because of the venal nature of his regime, but because its demise would seriously weaken Iran's penetration of the Levant and indirectly strike a blow at Iranian nuclear/regional power ambitions. In other words, by weakening Iran, removing the Assad regime could conceivably delay the perceived need to intervene militarily against the Iranian nuclear project. This is a powerful potential incentive for Assad's neighbours to ensure that his regime does not prevail and for the West to support them in this endeavour.

Conversely, those same neighbours could also conceive of an Iranian defeat in Syria as constituting merely phase one of a broader anti-Iran regional offensive. Israel clearly links the threats posed by Syria, Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas (the latter three openly advocate Israel's elimination as a state and sponsor terrorist attacks against it) as constituting a single "package", any part of which can and should be weakened.

On the other hand, none of Syria's immediate neighbours, with the probable exception of Turkey, relishes the prospect of a Sunni Islamist regime replacing the current Alawite pro-Iranian regime in Damascus. This dilemma – rejecting both the present Syrian regime and its likely successor (assuming that the Alawites fall and Syria holds together) – offers one more explanation for the absence of significant intervention on the ground by Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Israel.

In conclusion: the unpredictable factor

This analysis began by emphasising that the kind of revolutionary situation we are witnessing in Syria renders intelligent prediction difficult, if not downright risky. Accordingly, we must assume that, in the days and weeks ahead, it is

unpredictable events, complications and even accidents that could possibly trigger a broader international dimension. Such contingencies are virtually impossible to plan for.

At the time of writing, the Assad regime appears to have the upper hand in the conflict. But the Syrian revolution, with its extensive regional and international ramifications, is far from over.

