



The Future of Syria and the Regional Arms Race

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Abstract

The Syrian conflict remains one of the most troubling foreign policy issues facing the international community since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011. While the number of civilian casualties and displaced persons escalates, a renewed diplomatic effort seems to be losing steam, thus projecting a grim outlook onto the future of the country. This paper addresses some of the open questions in the Syrian crisis, namely the weaknesses of the opposition groups, the funding and arming of the opposition, the differences between the so-called moderate and extremist forces within it and the humanitarian aid provided to the Syrian refugees, focusing on the active engagement of the Arab Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Conflicts between the strategies pursued by these two players could further weaken the Syrian opposition. Against this backdrop, a more or less covert arms race is already taking place, which now risks spreading out both in geographical scope and intensity over the Summer.

Keywords: *Syria / Syrian conflict / Opposition / Refugees / Saudi Arabia / Qatar / Arms embargo*

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by Silvia Colombo*

Introduction

While the world watches in dismay the devastating destruction that is being inflicted upon the Syrian population, all parties involved in the 27-month long conflict are concomitantly preparing for an escalation of war and for peace negotiations. By keeping an eye on the moves of their enemies (and allies), domestic actors inside Syria, namely the Syrian regime and the various opposition groups, as well as external players, including the United States, Russia, European Union member states and the Gulf countries, are adjusting their priorities and taking decisions that will influence one another's positions on the Syrian chess-board. The fact that all players seem to be both working for a politically negotiated exit from the conflict and a new round of escalation of violence tells a great deal about the grim outlook of Syria's short-term future.

The uncertainty and disillusionment about the possibility of halting a conflict that has already spilled beyond Syria's borders, morphing into a regional and international power struggle, have increased steadfastly in recent weeks. The announcement of a peace conference aimed at finding a negotiated solution to the conflict made by the United States Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on May 7, 2013 seemed to mark a significant departure from the uncompromising stances upheld until recently by international actors involved in the Syrian conflict towards convergence on direct negotiation between the warring parties with no preconditions or predetermined outcomes. This rare moment of hope soon dissipated with a new paralysis of the diplomatic track and the increasingly entrenched positions espoused by the Syrian government and the opposition groups, in addition to their respective external backers. The failure of the negotiation track is increasingly portrayed as likely, despite the players' repeated rhetorical commitment to a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Such a failure would open the way to a further escalation on both sides, accelerating the spillover of the conflict to the whole Middle East. A more or less covert arms race is already taking place in the region, which now risks spreading both in geographical scope and intensity over the summer.

1. The pitfalls of the diplomatic track

The Geneva II Conference is tentatively and unconvincingly scheduled for July 2013 and, while it is unclear whether it will actually take place, it may prove to be the last attempt at a negotiated solution to the Syrian civil war that has already claimed at least 93,000 lives, according to recent estimates disclosed by the UN High Commissioner for

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Human Rights,¹ and that has led to the displacement of over 1.4 million people in the region² and more than 4 million people internally. In addition to the doubts surrounding the date of the meeting, which according to diplomatic sources had originally been planned to start on June 15 or 16, one day before Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Barack Obama are expected to meet at the G-8 summit in Ireland on June 17, what appears to be more troubling is the lack of agreement on the principles that should guide the negotiation.

The aim of the conference is to move beyond the six-point peace plan for Syria adopted in February 2012 by then UN-Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan and upheld in the final declaration adopted by the Geneva I Conference in late June 2012. The prospect of reaching a preliminary agreement on the guidelines for the Geneva II Conference is tied to the possibility of crafting an inclusive negotiation process. This is, indeed, another critical obstacle to a successful diplomatic process that could put an end to the conflict. In this respect, Iran's seat at the table is one of the most contentious issues, opposed - interestingly - less by the United States than some EU member states, in particular France, which considers Tehran to be part of the problem and thus not eligible to partake in finding a solution. Laurent Fabius, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, declared in a press briefing given after the ministerial meeting of the Friends of Syria group in Amman on May 22 that "Iran, in view of her behaviour and the extremely hostile position she is adopting vis-à-vis the Syrian people, has no place in such a conference".³ This contrasts with the more nuanced position taken by the United States, which seems to have reached an agreement with the Russians in favour of Iran's participation in the negotiations. Doubts still exist about the underlying rationale of the U.S position that, by accepting the current Syrian government as part of the solution to the conflict, seems to have shifted closer to the inflexible Russian stance.⁴ The decision to exclude Iran from the Syrian negotiations is not only short-sighted, due to the risk of further alienating the Iranian leadership at a critical juncture in light of the upcoming June 14 elections, but also fraught with further problems. What is crystal clear is that whether absent or present, Iran will in any case influence the outcome of the conference, as well as the broader Syrian conflict. To refuse to accept Iran as a meaningful player in the Syrian game whose positions need to be taken into account when seeking a solution to the conflict is to risk exacerbating regional tensions that see Iran and the Arab Gulf countries confronting each other over Syria. Indeed and by the same token, one could also argue that the Arab Gulf countries are "part of the problem" as much as they can be "part of the solution".

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Updated UN study indicates at least 93,000 people killed in Syria conflict*, Geneva, 13 June 2013, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13447&LangID=E>.

² This is the number of registered Syrian refugees, according to UNHCR data as at June 6, 2013. See UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Regional Overview*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

³ French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Syria - Press briefing given by M. Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs, after the ministerial meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People - excerpts*, Amman, 22 May 2013, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2013-05-24.html>.

⁴ Raghida Dergham, "Western Powers Appease the Iranian Regime", in *Al-Hayat*, 26 May 2013, <http://www.gulfintimedia.com/index.php?id=650065>.

2. The complex role of the Arab Gulf in the Syrian crisis: arms-providers and charity-style donors

Over the past year, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have emerged as the deep pockets of the Syrian opposition and the reservoirs of privately-collected money, weapons and equipment that have been flowing into Syria via its neighbours, particularly Jordan and Turkey. Most of the shipments have occurred since November 2012, after the presidential election in the United States, and as the Turkish and Arab governments became jittery over the rebels' slow progress in fighting Al-Assad's well-equipped military. The decision to arm the Syrian opposition was not easy and was taken after the hopes of an internal Syrian solution had been dashed and the repeated calls for substantive reforms by the regime had failed to deliver. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states had even promised unspecified economic and financial assistance to the regime in return for such reforms. Indeed, senior members of the Gulf ruling families and high-level officials from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia travelled to Damascus and conveyed this message clearly throughout 2011 and 2012. Shortly after the bloody events in Dara'a in March 2011 that triggered the Syrian uprising, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia personally spoke three times with President Al-Assad, advising him of the need for real reform as a way out of the crisis. On April 2011, a letter was reportedly sent by the Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to President Al-Assad voicing Qatar's support for Syria amid attempts at destabilisation.⁵

With the prospects for an internal Syrian solution fading fast, the GCC changed tack in the fall of 2011 and, with a view to increasing the pressure on the Al-Assad regime, opted for a regional effort modelled on the arguably successful, regionally-sponsored road map that had settled the Yemeni crisis around the same period. The GCC plan, which called on the Syrian government to introduce the reforms requested by the opposition groups and negotiate with them to resolve the crisis, soon became an Arab League initiative, thereby gaining wider support and legitimacy. However, with the failure of the efforts made by the Arab League, including the observer mission that was terminated at the end of January 2012 in light of its failure to oversee a deal to protect civilians in the country, the GCC countries took their diplomatic initiative to the UN Security Council (UNSC) in the hope that the international community would assume its legal and moral responsibility to halt the ongoing destruction and the daily massacre of civilians in the country. Faced with the stalemate within the UNSC caused by the joint Russian-Chinese vetoes of three proposed resolutions and a number of declarations,⁶ as well as the failure of regional initiatives undertaken before then, the decision by the Gulf states in 2012 to arm the Syrian opposition seemed to represent the only

⁵ H. Sabbagh, "President al-Assad receives letter from Emir of Qatar affirming his country's support for Syrian leadership's effort to foil attempts at undermining Syria's security and stability", in *Sana*, 2 April 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/04/02/339678.htm>.

⁶ The first UNSC draft resolution condemning Syria's crackdown on anti-government protestors was vetoed by Russia and China on October 4, 2011. A Moroccan proposal for a further UNSC draft resolution calling for the Syrian President to step down was also dashed by the two allies of the Syrian regime on February 4, 2012. On July 19, 2012, Russia and China vetoed, for the third time, a UNSC draft resolution that threatened the Syrian authorities with sanctions if they did not halt the violence against the uprising. See Louis Charbonneau, "Russia blocks U.N. Security Council declaration on Syria's Qusair", in *Reuters*, 1 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/02/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE95100G20130602>.

remaining option to deter and contain the destructive power of the Syrian regime's machine.

The major involvement of the Gulf countries in the Syrian conflict has recently been acknowledged and even blessed by the United States, which has not shied away from actively vetting rebel commanders and groups in order to determine who should receive the shipped weapons as they arrived on Syrian soil.⁷ During the March 2013 visit of Secretary of State Kerry to the Gulf region, Syria topped the agenda as expected. Speaking at a joint press conference with Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheik Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani on March 5, 2013, Kerry expressed confidence that the weapons being supplied by the Gulf countries to the Syrian rebels were reaching "the right people and to the moderate Syrian Opposition Coalition".⁸

As reassuring as these words might sound, the reality on the ground tells a different story. The arm supplies coming from the Gulf have also reached, in the view of some to a disproportionate extent, the most extremist organizations that make up the diversified landscape of the Syrian opposition.⁹ Among them, the Al-Nusra Front (*Jabhat Al-Nusra*) is emerging as the best-equipped, best-financed, and most motivated force fighting the Al-Assad regime. Further evidence of the growing strength of Al-Nusra, which was labelled as a terrorist organization by the United States in December 2012, is the fact that the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syria's main armed opposition group, has suffered from a drain of fighters who have joined its ranks for ideological reasons and as a result of its better funding and more advanced weapons.¹⁰

Talk about the Gulf countries funnelling weapons to the Syrian opposition, including its most extremist elements, also tends to mask the rising and not-so-hidden disagreements between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. While the former continues to behave as the most independent and risk-averse player in the region, seemingly remaining entirely committed to the cause of the Syrian opposition, including its most extremist components, the latter has increasingly displayed signs of unease with the rise of jihadists and Muslim Brotherhood forces in Syria. In a manner that is consistent with its ingrained scepticism towards the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, which it has blatantly manifested in the case of countries such as Egypt, Riyadh fears that if Islamist groups take control in Damascus, they could eventually become hostile to the regional order that Saudi Arabia favours. Despite Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative form of government, it has thus opted to support more moderate groups that may have an Islamist flavour but are not considered extremist.

⁷ C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.", in *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>.

⁸ John Kerry, *Remarks With Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani After Their Meeting*, Doha, 5 March 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/03/205671.htm>.

⁹ Edward P. Djerejian and Andrew Bowen, *Syria at the Crossroads: U.S. Policy and Recommendations for the Way Forward*, Houston, Baker Institute for Public Policy, March 2013, <http://bakerinstitute.org/publications/BI-pub-SyriaReport-031813.pdf/view>.

¹⁰ Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra", in *The Guardian*, 8 May 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>.

As the dominant Gulf actor, the Saudi position *vis-à-vis* the Syrian opposition influences other regional players as well, such as the UAE, which is also known to be allergic to Islamists. The striking differences between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other, are ultimately linked to domestic factors in the stable but increasingly risk-alerted Gulf countries. Threats to the existing political order from political Islam are a real issue in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Riyadh has always feared that the Muslim Brotherhood could be viewed as a concrete and potentially attractive alternative to the current Saudi leadership. The UAE has had to deal with the presence of Muslim Brotherhood groups in its own political system since the 1970s, something it has increasingly tried to suppress in the context of the changes brought about by the Arab uprisings by arresting and putting on trial some 100 members of Al-Islah, an organization directly linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar, by contrast, although not controlled by an Islamist regime, has constantly supported Muslim Brotherhood groups abroad, be they Hamas or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. As important as these differences may be for domestic and regional developments in the Gulf, they are also likely to have an impact on the Syrian conflict. The trend of Saudi Arabia's increasingly cold feet towards the Islamist groups within the Syrian opposition, if sustained in the coming months, could tilt the balance in favour of the more moderate forces.

The decision of the Gulf countries to arm the rebels has not been accompanied, with the single exception of Kuwait, by their willingness to live up to the financial pledges they have made to the United Nations and other foreign aid agencies to relieve the Syrian refugee crisis. The 1.5 billion USD pledged at a high-level donor conference held in Kuwait in January 2013 is still on paper, with pledges from the oil-rich Gulf states - specifically Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar - accounting for more than half of the conference total. The Gulf states have failed to deliver on an estimated 650 million USD. Among the least forthcoming governments are some of the Syrian opposition's chief allies: as of May 1, Saudi Arabia had fulfilled only 21.6 million USD of its 78 million USD pledge, and the UAE had come through with only 18.4 million USD of its 300 million USD pledge.¹¹ Similarly, Qatar is spending billions to host the World Cup in 2022, but it has coughed up only 2.7 million USD of its 100 million USD pledge.

This does not mean that the Arab Gulf is not providing financial assistance to the Syrian refugees and displaced population. Traditional charity channels, so widely used in the Gulf region to redistribute rents among citizens, are being exploited to lavish millions on handpicked programmes and organizations that are catering for the needs of the refugees. Gulf countries have traditionally used their own bilateral routes to target aid, and have mostly operated outside UN auspices. Overall, the pledges made by the Gulf states in Kuwait in January 2013 did not represent a shift in global aid, but rather an attempt to occupy the central stage in the response to the Syrian crisis by complementing the military-related commitments already made to the rebels with token financial assistance. The only exception is Kuwait, which has become the first Gulf state to fulfil its pledge - 300 million USD - through the United Nations and its partner

¹¹ James Cusick, "Exclusive: Syrian aid in crisis as Gulf states renege on promises", in *The Independent*, 5 May 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/exclusive-syrian-aid-in-crisis-as-gulf-states-renege-on-promises-8604125.html>.

agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Organization for Migration.

3. Divisions inside and outside the opposition

A final and decisive factor weakening the hopes for a successful Geneva II process is the rift between the liberal camp and the Islamist forces within the Syrian opposition. In addition to the divisions within the already-fragmented political arm of the Syrian opposition, with the externally-sponsored Syrian National Coalition competing with other, smaller but more grassroots factions such as the National Coordination Committee of Democratic Change, the 60-member Syrian National Coalition is itself under the cross-fire of outside powers supporting or opposing the Muslim Brotherhood's dominance within the organization. The foreign powers involved are once again Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose latent competition could lead to the collapse of the Coalition. A struggle has recently taken place within the opposition body, in which Qatar has been playing the driving role through its Secretary-General Mustafa al-Sabbagh, as a result of the attempt to broaden it. After the Coalition's Brotherhood-dominated General Assembly initial refusal to accept the expansion plan, Saudi Arabia, which has backed the inclusion of more liberals in the Coalition, has now taken over Qatar's role as the rebels primary patron within the opposition group. More than a victory for Riyadh, this move is a striking example of the conflicts and diverging positions within the opposition. It also raises more concretely the spectre of a rivalry among the Gulf powers that could further weaken the Syrian opposition politically and militarily as the fall of the strategic town of Qusayr to President Bashar Al-Assad's forces on June 8, 2013 demonstrates.

The internal dealings within the Coalition and its apparent inability to play a meaningful political role in favour of the rebels' cause are matched by the failure of the European Union (EU) to come up with a clear stance on Syria. After a gruelling 13 hours of talks in Brussels on May 27, 2013, the EU agreed to disagree on Syria, another clear example of its cacophony resulting in policy paralysis.¹² While agreeing to wait until the expiration of the chances for a politically-negotiated solution to the crisis before sending any weapons to the opposition - possibly extending this deadline until August 1, 2013 - EU member states have limited themselves to not renewing the arms embargo on Syria, while maintaining the remainder of a far-reaching two-year package of sanctions against the Al-Assad regime. The chronic splits within the EU notwithstanding, it is not clear what this move is meant to achieve. The British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, declared that the EU's decision was a ground-breaking move that "sends a very strong message from Europe to the Assad regime of what we think of the continued brutality and murder and criminality of this regime".¹³ The EU's non-decision has indeed been welcomed by the spokesperson of Syria's opposition Coalition, Khaled Al-Saleh, who has called the EU decision "the moment of truth that

¹² Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on Syria*, 3241st Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 27 May 2013, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137316.pdf.

¹³ "Syria conflict: No restrictions on arming opposition forces says Hague", in *BBC News*, 28 May 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22690021>.

we've been waiting for months".¹⁴ It is doubtful, however, that the EU's ongoing sanctions, coupled with arms transfers to the opposition, could effectively achieve the goal of levelling the playing field beyond what the Gulf countries have already attempted, with the disagreements, as described above, which have emerged between them as a result. Unlike Saudi Arabia and Qatar, EU member states have to respect EU rules on arms exports, as well as cope with the constraints imposed on their budgets by the wrecked economies on the continent.

A final concern stems from the fact that one of the declared goals of the European move was to change the Al-Assad regime's perception - and that of its backers in Moscow and Tehran - that time is on its side. The EU - the decision implicitly says - is not prepared to see the rebels defeated (all of them or just the moderate forces?), and will not stand idly on the margins while the Syrian regime perpetrates massacres with the support of Russia and other staunchly-allied players. The idea of clamping down on Russian support for the Syrian regime by threatening to provide lethal military support to the opposition is, however, misplaced. Fears abound that Russia would indeed feel freer to send more weapons to the regime, including S-300 air defence missiles. The Russians are on the offensive, and confrontational rumours have already started to circulate in this regard.¹⁵ A covert arms race seems to be building up in the Middle East, and the months ahead will be critical for the fate of the Syrian conflict. The contrived and short-lived optimism that is aired by most players in this conflict masks a far grimmer reality: we might indeed soon find ourselves in a more dangerous and conflict-ridden regional context as the heat of the summer builds up.

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¹⁴ AFP, "EU ends arms embargo against Syrian rebels", in *Daily Nation*, 28 May 2013, <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/world/EU-ends-Syria-arms-embargo/-/1068/1864654/-/yy32y0/-/index.html>.

¹⁵ Anne Barnard and Neil MacFarquhar, "Assad Warns Israel, Claiming a Stockpile of Russian Weapons", in *The New York Times*, 30 May 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/31/world/middleeast/syria.html>.



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