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From Daraa 2011 to Daraa 2019: The Survival of Assad's Regime and the Challenges to Syria's Stabilization

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On March 10, 2019, hundreds of residents of Daraa in southern Syria protested against the erection of a statue of former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. The restored statue of Assad the father, which was toppled when the rebellion that sparked the civil war began, is a symbol of the victory of the son, Bashar al-Assad, who, while bruised and battered, remains in power. And yet, current protests alongside other leadership challenges, including the fact that Assad controls only about 60 percent of Syrian territory, indicate that the situation in Syria is far from stable. Against this backdrop, and following eight years of tragic fighting, the factors leading to Assad's victory, their current validity, and their future repercussions invite examination.

On March 10, 2019, hundreds of residents of Daraa in southern Syria protested against the erection of a statue of former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. Daraa is where the civil war began, so it is little surprise that the protest occurred there, just a few days before the eighth anniversary of the war's outbreak. The restored statue of Assad the father, which was toppled when the rebellion that sparked the civil war began, is a symbol of the victory over the rebels by the son, Bashar al-Assad. The change in favor of the regime that began in late 2015 is a result of a series of circumstances and events that converged to form one, clear reality: Bashar al-Assad, while bruised and battered, remains in power. And yet, current protests alongside other leadership challenges, including the fact that Assad controls only about 60 percent of Syrian territory, indicate that the situation in Syria is far from stable. Against this backdrop, and following eight years of tragic fighting, the factors leading to Assad's victory, their current validity, and their future repercussions invite examination.

Assad's survival is a result of two primary processes that fed on each other during the war: on the one hand, the opposition's weakness and its process of Islamization, and on the other, the involvement of foreign actors in Syria, characterized by obvious asymmetry: significant and consistent support of Syria by Russia and Iran, compared with limited and sporadic support of the opposing forces by Western and Sunni nations, who chose instead to focus on fighting the Islamic State rather than the original enemy at the base of the war – the regime.

The Opposition's Weakness and Radicalization

Neither the military nor the political opposition found a way to unify, and both failed in their attempt to realize the revolution's goals and propose a suitable alternative to the Assad regime. Early in the rebellion, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was perceived as an effective military entity capable of carrying the weight of the battle on its shoulders, yet by late 2012 showed signs of being unable to organize and stabilize as a viable entity. The final straw was when financial and armament support by the United States and the Sunni Arab states ceased.

One of the main factors that weakened the FSA and others like it, and in doing so strengthened Assad's likelihood of survival, is linked with the Islamization of the rebellion. Islamist opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Jaish al-Islam, became stronger and drew many combatants from the "secular" organizations. But mostly, it was the Islamic State (ISIS) that accelerated the Islamization of the civil war. Founded in 2014, the Islamic State provided the Syrians and the entire world with a disturbing glimpse of what post-Assad Syria might look like, such that those who initially supported the regime's demise reluctantly returned to its fold.

Over the years, the Islamic dimension of the rebellion decreased significantly. On March 24, 2019, after a stubborn fight, the Islamic State lost the last piece of land under its control in the town of al-Baghuz Fawqani, east of the Euphrates. Other Islamist organizations were absorbed over time into various larger entities, often while blurring their Salafi-jihadist identity. The central remaining Islamist organization is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former satellite of al-Qaeda, which operates in the last rebel region of Idlib in the north, but now is also driven by national-territorial considerations more than by a global jihadist agenda and is primarily under Turkish influence. What remains of the FSA, as with other organizations, including Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, is the framework of the National Liberation Front (NLF), which controls Idlib, yet depends on Turkey for defense against the desire of the pro-Assad coalition to liquidate it.

Nor did salvation emerge from the exiled political opposition, which was unable to represent the rebels and suffered from internal divisions and limited support from the Syrian population. Its members were seen as detached, hedonistic, and proxies of foreign governments, mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, and were unable to unify around political efforts – those led by Russia (Sochi and Astana) and those led by the United States and the UN (Geneva) – and influence them. Since 2017, political processes that focused on the Astana and Sochi rounds reflected the growing influence of the triangle alliance – Turkey-Iran-Russia – on military events and on political processes. Since then,

the opposition stopped playing a role in negotiations and in shaping Syria's future landscape.

Contrary to the opposition's weakness and fragmentation, the regime succeeded in maintaining the unity and loyalty of military and security forces. Despite the gradual weakening of the army and defections, there were almost no senior officers or entire units that defected – which is what allowed the armed forces to maintain their military functionality and fight alongside their local and foreign partners.

Foreign Involvement

The local, regional, and global struggle that took place against the Islamic State provided foreign powers, in particular Russia and Turkey, the motivation to directly and persistently meddle in Syrian affairs in a way that benefited Assad. In addition, the struggle diverted attention, and fire, from the enemy that was the very cause of the war – the Assad regime.

The unity of the pro-Assad coalition, which was characterized by massive support for the Assad regime from Russia and Iran, was apparently the most important factor leading to his victory. This factor assumes even greater significance when examined against the partial and inconsistent support of the opposition by the United States and West European nations, as well as by the Sunni states. Since May 2013, Iran, mainly through Hezbollah, began meddling openly in the war and providing direct support to the regime and its fighters. Russia responded to an official request by the regime for support, and began military involvement in the fall of 2015. This coalition created a joint and effective "boots on the ground" operation led by Iran, under the umbrella of offensive Russian air support.

In contrast, the United States decided to not become militarily involved in the civil war and to limit itself to rebel support, which stopped when it became clear they could not unify and that part of them joined Salafi-jihadist organizations. In 2013 President Obama backed away from the red line he drew to punish Assad for massive use of chemical weapons against the population – which more than anything else symbolized the limits of the United States commitment to topple Assad's regime. The Obama administration accepted Russia's offer to dismantle Assad's chemical arsenal, and by doing so, the United States relinquished responsibility for the Syrian theater to Russia.

This policy continues today as the US, which supports the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, primarily comprised of Kurdish forces), is preparing to leave Syria after it achieved its primarily goal of defeating the Islamic State and given its unwillingness to become mired in the Syrian swamp. In comparison, the three other countries involved in

Syria want to establish a military foothold there: Russia wants to have a strategic presence in the Middle East and maintain control over Syria; Iran wants to have long term influence in the country and build offensive capabilities against Israel and maintain easy access to Hezbollah in Lebanon; Turkey is working to prevent Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, and is also committed to the Islamist rebel forces.

Implications

The 2019 political map of Syria, whereby Assad's regime has taken control over most of the country except for territories in the east and north, could solidify, with minor changes, as the future political structure of the country. It appears that the best way to stabilize Syria is by rebuilding the country (and not just its army) and by establishing an effective central government, which in the long run might limit both foreign intervention and the possibility of Salafi-jihadist forces regaining influence.

However, today the stabilization and rebuilding of Syria seems more a utopian vision rather than reality in the making, since despite Assad's survival, Syria of 2019, more than a united country, has become a country with multiple power centers that compete with each other for long term influence and control. These include Assad's "formal state-framework," foreign political actors (Russia, Israel, Iran, Turkey – which de-facto controls regions in northern Syria), and non-state actors (armed rebel forces, political opposition, Shiite militias, and Kurdish forces).

This multi-actor reality will make it difficult to establish an effective central regime, especially a legitimate one. In addition, the massive physical damage caused by the war, estimated at $200-400 billion, is joined by the challenge of the refugees, particularly the many middle and upper class families that will not return to Syria. These factors will make it difficult to find appropriate human resources to operate the reconstructed services; ethnic tensions and lack of social solidarity have only deepened over the years of war and left the Sunni majority defeated and more repressed than it was. Corruption and nepotism, which characterized Syria before the war, will be stumbling blocks in the process of reconstruction of the Syrian state.

As for Israel, this situation of multiple actors in Syria, with contradictory and even competing interests, will force it to maneuver between the various actors, given the security challenges. First and foremost, Israel has a vital interest in preventing Iran from establishing a military foothold in Syria. Thus far, Israel's containment efforts have focused on air strikes against Iranian military capabilities, in the hope that this policy can be leveraged toward a diplomatic initiative to remove foreign forces from the country. In the current situation, after eight years of fighting, there is no force, other than Russia, that can lead to effective stabilization efforts. For this reason, in Israel's view, Russian

involvement in Syria is not just a central factor in the survival of Assad's regime, but also in securing Israel's interests in this arena fraught with challenges.