

The Deadlocked Syrian Crisis

The Fable of the Ants and the Elephant

Eyal Zisser

In August 1941, a few weeks after Operation Barbarossa was launched, when it appeared that Nazi Germany's victory was essentially only a matter of time, a German officer, Colonel Berndt von Kleist, wrote in his diary, "The German Army in fighting Russia is like an elephant attacking a host of ants. The elephant will kill thousands, perhaps even millions, of ants, but in the end their numbers will overcome him, and he will be eaten to the bone."¹

A Situation Assessment

The fire in Syria has been raging for over two years. A limited local peasant protest that began in the rural and peripheral areas – a class protest based on socio-economic distress – spread, struck deep roots, and became a broad popular uprising that eventually evolved into a bloody civil war. With the passage of time, the struggle in Syria assumed a sectarian character, and then a religious character, involving jihad by Islamic groups within Syria and volunteers streaming into the country from all over the Arab and Muslim world, opposing the heretical Alawite government, the ally of Shiite Iran and Hizbollah.²

A look at the map of Syria following more than two years of war between the regime and its opponents shows the following picture. First, the regime has lost control of the areas bordering Turkey and Iraq, and has partly lost control of the areas bordering Jordan and Lebanon; these areas have largely fallen to the rebels. Looking to the north, the

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border areas have been seized by Kurdish movements seeking to achieve Kurdish autonomy. Second, the regime is losing its grip on the al-Jazira area in eastern Syria, including its grain, and no less importantly, its oil and gas fields and water reservoirs. The rebels control parts of the territory, especially the area around al-Raqqa, which was the first city to fall completely into rebel hands. Third, Aleppo, Syria's economic capital and the second largest city in the country, has partly fallen to the rebels, together with the surrounding rural areas as well as the rural areas of nearby Idlib. Even the road connecting northern and southern Syria has been contested and is partly controlled by the rebels. Finally, the fight for Syria's capital city, Damascus, is raging, as the regime has not managed to dislodge the rebels from the rural areas surrounding the city. The Golan and Hauran regions are also mostly under rebel control.

As of now, however, all the erstwhile educated assessments and predictions that the fall of the Syrian regime was only a matter of time – a few days, as was the case in Tunisia, a few weeks, as in Egypt, or at most several months, as in Libya – have been rebuffed. The Syrian regime is still on its feet, alive and kicking, and even returning blow for blow. It has managed to maintain its cohesion and unity, based on its

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supporting pillars: the army, the security forces, the governmental institutions, and the Baath Party. These elements continue their support of the regime, despite the severe blows they have suffered and the wave of desertions from their ranks. More importantly, the regime still relies on and benefits from the support of important sections of Syrian society – mainly a coalition of minorities comprising the Alawites, along with Druze, Christians, and even some Sunnis from the middle and upper classes in the large cities. Some Sunnis from the rural areas and the periphery, areas that are currently in the center of the fighting, have for the most part remained loyal to the regime.

In addition, the Syrian regime is benefiting from the support of powerful forces in the regional and international arenas, headed by Russia and Iran. Bashar al-Assad has managed to survive the numerous eulogies said for him, to the point where many observers are

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The conquest of the al-Raqqa district capital in northeastern Syria (about 550 km northeast of Damascus) in early March 2013 – the first city to fall completely to the rebels – was therefore not, as many wishfully thought at the time, a watershed in the rebellion against the Syrian regime, indicating that the regime's days were numbered.⁴ In retrospect, it turned out that the conquest of al-Raqqa was a high tide from which the revolution ebbed. Indeed, the Syrian regime, reinforced by Hizbollah fighters coming to its aid, succeeded in the following months in repelling the rebel offensives around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, and has even recaptured villages and towns around these cities – cities that constitute three strategically important centers in which the battle for Syria will be decided. One such town is Qusayr, south of Homs, located on the route connecting Lebanon and Syria, which Hizbollah fighters have restored this year to Assad's control.⁵

The insurrectionists' success in reaching the outskirts of Damascus and Aleppo, concomitant with Bashar al-Assad's success in surviving the challenge posed to him, even in regaining the initiative in the fighting from time to time, are in effect two faces of the war currently underway in Syria. These two sides of the coin reflect the special character of the Syrian revolution in comparison with the other Arab uprisings. This revolution, which involves a popular uprising by broad sections of the population against the Syrian Baath regime, can be regarded as a war of the "rebel ants," with their inherent weaknesses and disadvantages but also their strong points, against the "elephant," whose great strength often becomes his own nemesis.

Many are hoping that the war in Syria will end, like previous "wars of ants," with a victory of the "rebel ants" over the "elephant." At the moment, however, the war in Syria is one of prolonged attrition and stalemate, in which it is the Syrian regime that enjoys a built-in advantage over its opponents. The "rebel ants" rely on broad-based social support among the Sunni population in the periphery and rural areas, which offer a massive reserve of determined soldiers hungry for a change, and especially for victory and vengeance against the regime. Their activity, however, is still a struggle of groups, or even armed gangs, operating in most cases in their own neighborhoods, without internal cohesion or unity; they therefore lack effective political and military leadership

capable of leading them to victory. The rebels' activity has a cumulative effect, albeit slow and gradual. Like "ants," or perhaps like a "plague of locusts," they cover every corner in Syria, while the regime's reach is too short to corner them and contain their activity. Since the rebels lack the ability to unite their forces in order to deal their enemy a decisive blow, however, they can only wait and hope that the regime will fall by itself from continuous hemorrhaging, or as a result of the cumulative effect of their bites and stings. Yet in recent months it is the rebel side that appears exhausted and in despair at its chances of overthrowing the Syrian regime, which has taken the initiative and has a good chance of emerging victorious from the conflict.

The "War of the Ants" in Syria

Like its counterparts in the other Arab countries, the Syrian revolution was a spontaneous popular outbreak anchored in a local context. Thus the insurrectionists in Syria may have derived their inspiration from the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, but the uniqueness of the revolution in Syria nevertheless was, and remains, its character of a socioeconomic protest for change by poor and hungry peasants

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This protest, which was initially expressed in mass demonstrations, mostly on Fridays and weekends, quickly changed direction, and began to assume a violent character. This was due to a large extent to the iron fist used by the regime against its opponents as a result of its decision to adopt a violent solution to the crisis by suppressing the protests through brute force, even at the cost of dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of fatalities. Following the regime's repressive measures, the mass demonstrations against it ended, and the demonstrators disappeared from the districts villages and town squares. Their place was taken by armed groups, usually from the

villagers in the areas of rebellion and protest. They mobilized to protect their villages against the chaos and anarchy prevailing in the country, or even in order to wreak vengeance on the army and security forces for the

injuries to their relatives and friends. Soldiers and officers from rural and outlying areas who deserted from the army began to join them, followed by volunteers streaming into Syria from across the border. These armed groups began to attack police stations and army and security forces military bases, and later also infrastructure targets and transportation routes located near their homes. They eventually took control of the rural and outlying areas.⁷

The popular uprising led by armed groups all over Syria, with Arab and Western backing, did not, however, succeed in overthrowing the Syrian regime. The rebels severely damaged the Damascus regime's organization, succeeded in paralyzing daily life throughout the country, and even gained control of large stretches of Syrian territory. The regime's brutal response caused a chain reaction that eventually led to a bloody war and stalemate. By May 2013 the number of fatalities exceeded 100,000; of the 4.5 million refugees forced to abandon their homes, over one million fled to other countries. The damage to the country's economic infrastructure is estimated at nearly \$100 billion – more than double Syria's annual GDP.⁸

The Syrian regime's survival is due first and foremost to the rebels' failure. The rebels in Syria and their supporters outside the country have failed to join forces and achieve political and military unity among the political entities and armed groups operating against the regime, be it at home on the battlefield or outside of Syria in hotel corridors in Arab and Western capitals. In any case, the effort to form a political or military leadership failed – there was neither a political leadership nor government in exile, nor a military command to coordinate military activity against the regime and offer a governmental alternative. The political and military institutions that have operated with Western and Arab aid and under pressure from these sources include the Syrian National Council, led by Burhan Ghalioun, followed by Abdulbaset Sieda and George Sabra; and later also the National Coalition, led by Ahmad Mouath al-Khatib and newly elected Ahmad al-Jarba, as well as the temporary government led by Ghassan Hito. There is also the Free Syrian Army, commanded by Riad al-Asaad, followed by the Supreme Military Council, commanded by Salim Idris. All of these wield only a slight influence on events inside Syria.⁹

The latter political and military elements lack both cohesion and legitimacy among the armed groups fighting inside Syria against the

regime, and in any case exert no effective control. At best, they serve as an umbrella whose purpose is to channel arms and money to the rebels, but do not provide them with effective command and operational leadership. At the same time, these groups are likely to prove important in the future as a representative body for Arab and Western countries seeking to create an alternative to the Syrian regime, and perhaps also as a body likely to play a role in picking up the pieces and filling the vacuum in Syria if and when Bashar al-Assad's regime eventually falls. As of now, however, the rebels have failed in their efforts to unite their forces and establish a unified and effective military and political or governmental bloc that would enable them to present an alternative to the Syrian regime, if only a partial one, even in the areas where they have taken control.

Second, the insurrectionists did not take advantage of the broad popular support that they enjoyed in the areas where the uprising started – the rural and outlying areas and poor neighborhoods of the large cities. They also failed in their efforts to extend these bases of support to the Syrian public at large in a way that would enable them to accumulate power as a counterweight to the regime's power, or even enable them to defeat it. Their failure in enlisting support for their cause is most conspicuous among the minorities, who account for 40 percent of the country's population. Most of these minorities, especially the Alawites, Druze, and Christians, have continued to support the regime. Even more critically, the rebels failed to recruit support among the Sunni majority living in the large cities, who have remained passive spectators in the revolution, even when it reached Aleppo and Damascus.

Third, the transition in the revolution to an armed and violent struggle, especially when combined with terrorist attacks aimed in some cases against the civilian population (such as the bombing of the al-Imam mosque in Damascus in February 2013, in which Sheikh Mohammed Said al-Buti was murdered),¹⁰ plays into the regime's hands by deterring many among the silent majority in the country from taking part in the protest against the regime, due to its violent character. It may even cause those who initially supported the protest to change sides and support the regime, which appears to be the only element still capable of restoring stability to Syria and ensuring the personal safety of its citizens.

Fourth, the radical Islamic character of a large part of the rebel forces repels many Syrians, even those who supported the Syrian revolution when it first started. In many regions in which the rebels have gained

control, they have instituted Islamic law, or at least have given daily life an Islamic hue. Moreover, they are persecuting religious minorities, especially the Christians, but also the Druze, Shiites, and Alawites. In fact, some rebel groups have no commitment or affinity to Syria or its territory. They portray themselves as advocates of a pan-Islamic agenda aimed at carving out an Islamic state in the Arab east. This also puts off many Syrians – even those who formerly were strongly opposed to the Syrian regime.¹¹

All the opposition groups currently fighting in Syria can be loosely distributed among three main camps. The first consists of radical Islamic Salafi organizations. The most prominent of these is the Front of Defense for the People of Greater Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Sham), the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, numbering about 10,000 men. Another fighting group in this category is the Syrian Islamic Front, a coalition of several armed Islamic groups, including Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of al-Sham), which operates throughout Syria; the al-Haqq Brigades (Brigades of Truth) in Hama; and Jaysh al-Tawhid (Select Army), which operates in Deir ez-Zor. Each of these groups has several thousand soldiers.¹²

All the groups in this category are usually perceived as organized and well-equipped, and much more disciplined than other armed groups operating in Syria. Estimated at several thousand, they benefit from a steady stream of volunteers from throughout the Arab and Muslim world. These groups have succeeded in gaining control of territory in the vicinity of Aleppo, Idlib, and Daraa, and they, especially the Front of Defense, also lead the suicide terrorist attacks against the regime and its supporters.

The second camp comprises groups belonging to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or those identifying themselves as moderate Islamic movements. Usually perceived as disciplined and organized groups, they have succeeded in gaining control of various areas in northern and southern Syria. These groups have combined forces in the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, which numbers thousands of soldiers and receives Saudi Arabian support. In contrast to the Front of Defense and the Syrian Islamic Front, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front regards itself as linked to the opposition institutions, headed by the National Coalition.¹³

The last camp includes groups affiliated, sometimes loosely, with the Free Syrian Army, and in effect is under its umbrella. These groups comprise primarily soldiers and officers who deserted from Assad's

army, or groups that crystallized close to their homes in rural villages and towns all over Syria. They have no significant or clear Islamic identity. All the groups belonging to the Free Syrian Army together number about or slightly more than 50,000 men.¹⁴

Each of the groups operating in Syria bears a strong local character. While these local elements at times prefer to assume an Islamic cover or other camouflage in order to obtain weapons and money, this does not necessarily indicate any affiliation or commitment or even organizational membership in the Islamic factions – neither the more extreme faction, nor that of the Muslim Brotherhood. A certain degree of coordination, usually limited, has nevertheless been achieved in a number of regions. For example, in the battle for al-Raqqa, the various groups coordinated and cooperated with each other, resulting in the fall of the city to the rebels. Joint military councils have also been set up in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Daraa, and are trying to coordinate the operations.¹⁵ These coordinating structures, however, are weak, and do not constitute an effective military command. In any case, these structures have no significance beyond the

region in which they operate. As the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, the Front of Defense is a much more organized, coordinated, and orderly group, but in the final analysis, it is no more than one piece of a much broader and larger Syrian puzzle.

Paradoxically, the rebels' weakness also constitutes a source of strength. The fact that the armed opposition consists of groups operating separately, each with its own agenda, rather than an army or an organized militia, makes it difficult for the Syrian regime to overcome them. Indeed, the regular Syrian army faces no real enemy with an order of battle, command and control sites, camps, and logistics centers, all of which would constitute military targets that could be identified and attacked. Instead, there are armed gangs that surface for a specific purpose and immediately

disappear, rapidly dissolving into the rural areas from which they came.

On the other hand, like Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah before them in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Bashar al-Assad has come to the conclusion that victory will eventually come if he remains in office

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through the crisis, or more precisely, in his palace in Damascus. His strategy aims at holding on at all costs until his enemies tire and give up: the last man standing on the battlefield will be the winner. The regime's strategy therefore focuses on the defense of Damascus and Aleppo – the backbone of Syria – with all available forces and at any price, and consequently also the areas of Homs and Hama, which lie astride the routes connecting Aleppo to Damascus, and the routes connecting these cities to the coast, the Alawite heartland and the regime's home territory, as well as the ports – Tartus, Baniyas, and Latakia, sources of aid and supplies that are essential to the regime. In addition, the regime is also trying to retain control of the border areas, above all the areas bordering Lebanon and Jordan (hence the importance of Daraa to the regime), and also, albeit to a lesser extent because of their distance from Damascus, the areas bordering Turkey and Iraq.

Conclusion

The success of the revolutions in various Arab countries led many to predict the same ending in Syria. Commentators foresaw that Bashar al-Assad would be unable to survive the uprising against his regime, with his downfall being an inevitable historical necessity and merely a question of time. Assad, however, has demonstrated personal fortitude and endurance, and his regime has managed to retain its cohesion and unity, and especially the support it receives from part of Syrian society.

The rebels' activity has had a cumulative effect, however slow and gradual it may be. Like ants, or perhaps a plague of locusts, they cover every corner in Syria, while the regime's reach is too short to restrain their actions. The regime, however, hopes that like a plague of locusts that vanishes with the same unexplained suddenness with which it appeared, the rebel ants will also vanish, or at least will become weary when they discover that their efforts were in vain and the regime is still standing. The regime also hopes that the exhausted population will stop supporting the rebels, or disavow them because of their radical character and the insecurity and terrorism that they have wrought throughout Syria. Finally, the regime hopes that the Arab and Western countries backing the rebels will discontinue their support when they come to the conclusion that the rebels are incapable of overthrowing the Syrian regime.

The first two years of the Syrian revolution generated momentum that ran entirely against the regime. In recent months, however, it appears that the rebels have encountered a glass ceiling that resists a breakthrough. This is no surprise, given the rebels' inherent weakness and failure to achieve unity, as well as the fatigue and exhaustion in their ranks and the emerging change in Syrian popular sentiment, which is again coming to regard the regime as the only guarantee of renewed stability and security in the country. As a result of all these factors, experts are increasingly coming to believe that the regime will succeed in surviving the revolution against it, that the elephant will eventually overcome the ants, and that Bashar al-Assad will then have little or no difficulty reestablishing his rule throughout the country.

As far as Israel is concerned, it is still hard to determine whether it is better for Assad to remain in power as the devil it knows, who is careful to maintain calm along the joint border. If he falls, his place is liable to be taken by radical Islamic groups that will bring terrorism and chaos to Israel's northern border. It might, however, be in Israel's best interest to regard Assad's fall from power as a development likely to deal a severe blow to the radical axis of evil comprising Assad, Hizbollah, and Iran. In any case, Israel is unable to influence the course of events in Syria; and since the emerging trend of events in the country is liable to make Assad victorious more quickly than Jerusalem expects, Israel may find itself facing a different Assad than the one it has known – a self-confident ruler more dependent on Iran and Hizbollah than in the past, and above all, free of the constraints that forced him to exercise restraint in the Lebanese and Jordanian theaters and against Israel.

Notes

- 1 See Alan Clark, *Operation Barbarossa, The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945* (Tel Aviv: IDF Publishing House, 1972), p. 49.
- 2 For general background on the Syrian revolution, see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2012); David W. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 3 For the reasons and dimensions of support for the Syrian regime, see for example Eyal Zisser, "Can Assad's Syria Survive Revolution?" *Middle East Quarterly* 20 (spring 2013): 13-21.
- 4 For example, see "Does the Fall of al-Raqqa Constitute a Turning Point in the Syrian Revolution?" Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha,

- Qatar), Policy paper, March 24, 2013, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/80f489f5-ab59-4cdd-9a6e-8a2b74b35d41>.
- 5 For the achievements of the Syrian regime in regaining control of various areas of the country during May, see *Haaretz*, May 19-20, 2013.
 - 6 For more about the socioeconomic background of the protest in Syria, see Eyal Zisser, "The Renewal of the 'Struggle for Syria': The Rise and Fall of the Baath Party," *Sharqiyya* (fall 2011): 21-29. See also *EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit), Syria – Country Report*, April 2011.
 - 7 For information about how the rebellion broke out, see the *Syria Comment* blog by Prof. Joshua Landis of Oklahoma University, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog>, and the *Syrian Revolution Digest* blog by Syrian expatriate intellectual Ammar Abdulhamid, <http://www.syrianrevolutiondigest.com>.
 - 8 For example, see the "BBC Guide to the Syrian Opposition," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218>. See also Stephen Star, "The West's Dilemma: Who Is the Official Opposition in Syria?" *The Globe and Mail*, April 10, 2013.
 - 9 See *Haaretz*, May 20, 2013. See also Keith Proctor, "Inside Syria's Siege Economy," *CNN*, May 8, 2013. For estimates of the numbers of fatalities and refugees, see *Reuters*, May 14, 2013.
 - 10 See the reports of the assassination of religious figure al-Buti in *SANA* (Syrian Arab News Agency, Damascus), February 21, 2013; and *Reuters*, March 21 and 22, 2013. See also "Islamic State Declared in Syria," *Syria Comment*, March 14, 2013.
 - 11 For example, al-Qaeda in Iraq sponsored the al-Nusra Front in Syria, which aids al-Sham, thereby exposing the affiliation of the Front operating in Syria with the parent organization to which it belongs. The leaders of the al-Nusra Front quickly disavowed the bear hug of their comrades in Iraq, but did not deny their allegiance to the al-Qaeda organization and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, See Aron Lund, "Major Salafi Faction Criticizes Jabhat – Nosra," May 4, 2013.
 - 12 See al-Hayat, "Ba al-Nusra," November 11, 25, 2012. See also Aaron Lund, "Holy Warriors, A Field Guide to Syria's Jihadi Groups," *Argument*, October 15, 2012.
 - 13 See Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt, the Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria," *Carnegie Papers* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, May 2013).
 - 14 For example, see the Free Syrian Army website, <http://syrianarmyfree.com>. See also a discussion of the question of whether the Free Syrian Army really exists on Syrian territory, in Koert Debeuf, Aron Lund, "The Free Syrian Army Does Exist," *Syria Comment*, March 23, 2013.
 - 15 See Matthew Barber, "The Raqqa Story: Rebel Structure, Planning, and Possible War Crimes," *Syria Comment*, April 3, 2013.