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Whither Syria? Recommendations for Israeli Policy

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Situation Assessment

Eighteen months have elapsed since the start of the uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, which began as a local insurrection and developed into a full scale civil war, with over 20,000 dead so far. Although the process, marked by the escalation of fighting and mass inter-ethnic killing, is beyond the point of no return, it is impossible to predict how and when the uprising in Syria will end. The Assad regime is fighting for its survival, and despite an increasing number of defections, still enjoys the support of the core of the Syrian military and the internal security agencies. For its part, the opposition is divided, hard-pressed to agree on a new leadership, influenced by the fighting between “sponsors” who lend support from the outside, and still not a real alternative to the regime. The prolonged uprising has weakened the central government, the Assad regime is losing its hold, arms and money from outside the country reach a variety of groups, and extremist elements are drawn into the chaos. If until not long ago, Bashar al-Assad was still in denial about the situation, there are increasing signs that he understands his time is limited and that he must choose an exit strategy with an honorable line of retreat, or hang on to the bitter end.

Regarding the situation, the helplessness of the international community in general, and the United States and other Western countries in particular, is particularly striking. NATO members, led by the United States, are tired of military conflicts in the Middle East and fear that an aerial operation will not be sufficient and will lead to a ground operation to protect the Syrian people and topple the Assad government. The West has not succeeded in advancing a UN Security Council resolution because of opposition from Russia and China, which continue to support Assad out of specific interests and fear of what the ramifications will be for them if he falls.

The scenarios for the end game in Syria, as delineated by Western countries, are based on the assumption that the Syrian people must determine its future with minimal international intervention while preserving the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country. In

contrast, opposition elements are writing a script about an end game on the Libyan model – cutting off the head of the lion (Assad himself); outside intervention, which will occur after a dramatic event such as the use of chemical weapons; the capture of most of Syria, including central cities, by the opposition, led by the FSA (Free Syrian Army); and isolation of the regime until it falls.

Thus far, Israel has remained on the sidelines and not intervened, planning quietly for the more dangerous scenarios. Until recently, it was convenient for Israel to accept a weakened Assad regime, which undermines the Iran-led radical axis. However, this stance changed once the concern arose about the possible transfer of chemical weapons to Hizbollah or the possible use of these weapons.

Scenarios

An assessment of the current situation suggests a variety of possible scenarios, some combined or developing gradually, with most negative for Israel. The principal scenarios are:

- a. The Assad regime falls, and the governmental system and the structure of the state disintegrate (cantonization). A civil war and an uncompromising inter-ethnic struggle develop. At the same time, there is ethnic cleansing and populations move to the ethnic groups' centers of influence.
- b. There is partial government control. The regime (Bashar himself, another leader, or a group of Alawite leaders) manages to survive, but is weakened and loses its legitimacy. It keeps tight control over the central longitudinal axis, Damascus-Homs-Aleppo and the coastal sector, and loses effective control over outlying areas. Nevertheless, Syria continues to function partially as a state.
- c. A different state system emerges within Syria. A different government comes to power based on unified opposition forces and succeeds in functioning effectively, establishing stability while creating a balance among the various ethnic groups and forces.
- d. Chaos and a lack of control ensue. The Bashar Assad regime falls, and there is no effective central government. Syria becomes a battleground for extremist forces supported by outside actors who are competing with each other – Iran vs. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Turkey vs. the Kurds, the United States vs. Russia, and so on. At the same time, extremist forces from abroad continue to be drawn to the country, and a proxy war develops.
- e. The international community launches outside intervention following some dramatic development. At first, there is a military operation that brings about the fall of the Bashar Assad government. Later, a new regime is established in a prolonged process that includes domestic reconciliation and democratic reforms.

From Israel's point of view, most of the scenarios could potentially generate new challenges and threats. In particular, there is concern about the Golan Heights becoming a frontier region, where hostile elements challenge Israel; leakage of strategic weapons and chemical weapons to Hizbollah and other extremist elements; an Iranian initiative to attack Israel by means of Hizbollah or other proxies; a serious humanitarian crisis and the spillover of refugees beyond Syria, including to the Golan Heights. In addition, Israel is worried that attention is diverted from the Iranian issue, which will allow Iran to continue with its nuclear program. However, this situation also presents a number of opportunities because of the weakening of the radical axis, including a change in the Lebanese balance of power and the potential dismantling of Hizbollah's strategic capabilities. In any event, proactive moves and initiatives by Israel, the United States, and the international community are required to advance these opportunities.

Israel's interests regarding the Syrian crisis include quiet and a stable security situation; a new Syrian regime that is responsible, stable, functional, and not hostile to Israel; Syria's removal from the Iranian camp and increased Western influence in the country; reduced negative consequences for Syria's neighbors, particularly Jordan and Lebanon, and for the region at large; prevention of leakage of strategic weapons to hostile elements likely to use them against Israel. In tandem, international attention must continue to focus on Iran and the halt of its nuclear program.

Policy Options

Israel has three main policy options:

- a. Shaping policy and taking the initiative (the proactive option), i.e., creating the conditions for a different regime to be formed in Syria that is more comfortable for Israel, through aid to opposition elements and weakening of the regime's centers of support. Hizbollah might also be addressed through political, economic, and even military levers. Humanitarian initiatives and channels for dialogue with public opinion leaders in Syria and opposition elements might also be launched.
- b. Security (the reactive option), i.e., reducing the current and future security threats, through a covert campaign to prevent the smuggling and leakage of weapons, including chemical weapons, to extremist elements; deterring the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against its citizens or transferring them to Hizbollah; reinforcing defense in the Golan Heights; and improving preparedness to confront the developing security challenges.
- c. Standing on the sidelines (the passive option), i.e., presuming that it is still too early to count on the demise of the Assad regime and that a weakened Assad regime is good for Israel compared to unknown or unfamiliar options.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the uncertainty, Israel should assume that the Assad regime in its current form will not survive. Assad's fall has positive aspects, particularly the weakening of the radical axis led by Iran, but it also incurs negative ramifications and creates new challenges for Israel. Therefore, although Israel has limited levers of influence, it must take the initiative, bridging the security option and the policy shaping option. This means primarily engaging in low signature activity to weaken support for the Assad regime and Hizbollah; preventing leakage of strategic weapons and chemical weapons to extremist elements; deterring Assad from using chemical weapons; establishing channels for dialogue with opposition elements or an alternative leadership; addressing the Syrian public through new and traditional media; and establishing centers for humanitarian aid in case the flow of refugees spills over into the Golan Heights.

Because of the changed strategic situation, Israel and Turkey's area of shared interests has expanded, particularly the desire to stabilize a central, responsible government in Syria; stop the leakage of events to neighboring countries; minimize the influence of jihadist elements; and prevent proliferation. In addition, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the main levers of influence over the opposition, and therefore, renewing strategic cooperation with Turkey should be reconsidered.

