



INSS Insight No. 475, October 15, 2013

**A Change in the Balance of Power in Syria:
The “Bad” against the “Bad”
Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov**

The nature of the conflict in Syria has changed fundamentally since President Obama announced on August 31, 2013 that the Bashar Assad regime had used chemical weapons against civilians and consequently faces a military operation. Two weeks later, US Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced a chemical weapons disarmament program for Syria, and the UN Security Council subsequently passed a resolution to implement the move. As a result, the option of an American attack appears irrelevant in the near future.

Between President Obama’s declaration on a retaliatory and deterrent action and the abandonment of the attack option in exchange for dismantlement of Syria’s chemical weapons program, a dramatic change took place in the balance of power among the parties battling for the future of Syria. In an ironic if not absurd development, the diplomatic agreement has granted President Assad legitimacy, and made him a partner of sorts to the international community in implementing the resolution on Syria’s chemical disarmament. The long list of crimes perpetrated by Assad over two and a half years, which killed tens of thousands of innocent Syrian civilians, has ostensibly been erased.

In contrast, the opposition umbrella organization, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the Free Syrian Army have, in one fell swoop, lost their legitimacy as leaders of the opposition. Both organizations were supported by Western aid, in particular American aid, which was complemented by aid from a regional coalition of Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf states. They hoped that ultimately there would be outside intervention, led by the United States, and this would prompt the fall of the Assad regime. Following President Obama’s statements about a strike, the opposition forces organized for an offensive against Damascus under the auspices of the anticipated American strike. When the US military option was taken off the table, radical jihadi elements announced that they would act independently and not follow the orders of the

revolutionary opposition organization, located outside of Syria. At the same time, extremist Islamist groups began to gain influence, specifically, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic Alliance (the Islamic Alliance was established on September 24, 2013 and boasts the thirteen key rebel factions, including Jabhat al-Nusra, and three brigades of fighters that broke away from the Free Syrian Army).

The split among opposition forces has dealt a heavy blow to the initiative to convene the Geneva II Conference, with the declaration by Islamist groups that the opposition could be represented only by those who had sacrificed themselves for the struggle. At the same time, the largest and most important groups of rebels issued a communiqué in which they took two practical decisions. First, they announced that the Syrian National Coalition – based outside of Syria, financed by Western states, and headed by Ahmed Jarba and Interim Prime Minister Ahmed Toameh – is not legitimate, and therefore does not represent the opposition forces within Syria. The second announcement expressed support for the establishment of a *sharia*-based Islamic caliphate, and rejection of the establishment of a secular, liberal, and democratic state. In effect, these decisions constitute a final rejection of the representation and the mandate of the opposition leaders in exile.

At the same time, because of the weakness of the Free Syrian Army brigades and the improbability of American intervention, the Islamic opposition forces decided to change their strategy. Instead of concentrating their efforts on conquering additional areas controlled by the Assad regime, they decided to strengthen their control in areas where the Assad regime does not have an effective foothold, which constitute some 50 percent of Syrian territory. In fact, two fronts have been created for action by extremist Islamist elements: the Northern Alliance and the Southern Front. The multiplicity of forces with competing interests has ignited conflicts between the rebels and the Free Syrian Army, as well as conflicts among Islamic organizations over loyalty to the competing leaders and differences of opinion about how to proceed: whether to topple the Assad regime and only afterwards establish an Islamic state, or to focus on establishing an Islamic caliphate immediately while strengthening its hold on the territories already under its control, without any aspiration to maintain the unity of Syria.

Assad understands the opportunity inherent in the rift among opposition forces and the steps taken by the radical Islamic organizations. Therefore, he is encouraging these divisions among the opposition forces and is highlighting the dominance of extremist Islamic elements. The paradox is that he is taking advantage of the jihadi forces and encouraging them to fight the Free Syrian Army in places in which he cannot fight by himself. In addition, Assad is attempting to convince the world that Syria is under attack

by foreign jihadists who vie for control of Syria, a threat that only the Syrian army can halt.

Most Syrians are firmly opposed to a takeover by radical Islamic groups, and fear that these organizations will become entrenched, and from groups of fighters become local rulers. However, since these groups are responsible for providing humanitarian aid and food and because the public fears for its life, most Syrians are choosing to remain silent and not to resist them.

The dramatic change in the situation is also affecting the mood of the Syrian public, as reflected in the social media. Among all users, the expectations of imminent victory have been replaced by despair, disappointment, anger, and serious criticism of the United States. Online, the US policy on Syria has been described as aiming to “speak loudly while wearing a fig leaf.” Comments such as “Putin brought Obama to his knees”; “there is no place for the weak in the Middle East”; and “a Russian checkmatet” are common. Other bloggers have written that “the United States is intervening, meddling, making rules, building enforcement mechanisms, taking on the role of global judge, determining the sentence, and at the moment of truth, not taking responsibility for carrying out the verdict.” Social media users have thus concluded that the United States does not intend to help eliminate the al-Qaeda infrastructures in Syria, and that Assad has obtained an insurance policy; some even claim that Russia and the United States have agreed that he will remain in power until 2016.

Implications

The question is whether President Obama and his advisers have fully examined the implications of rejecting a strike and endorsing a political settlement under Russian auspices to dismantle Syria’s military chemical capabilities. In practice, this has caused a fundamental and dramatic change in the nature of the conflict in Syria – the collapse of the framework uniting the opposition; the acceleration of the process of Syria’s disintegration into areas controlled by Assad’s forces, al-Qaeda groups, and radical Islamic organizations; and the establishment of Islamic territories based on *sharia* rule in some 50 percent of Syrian territory.

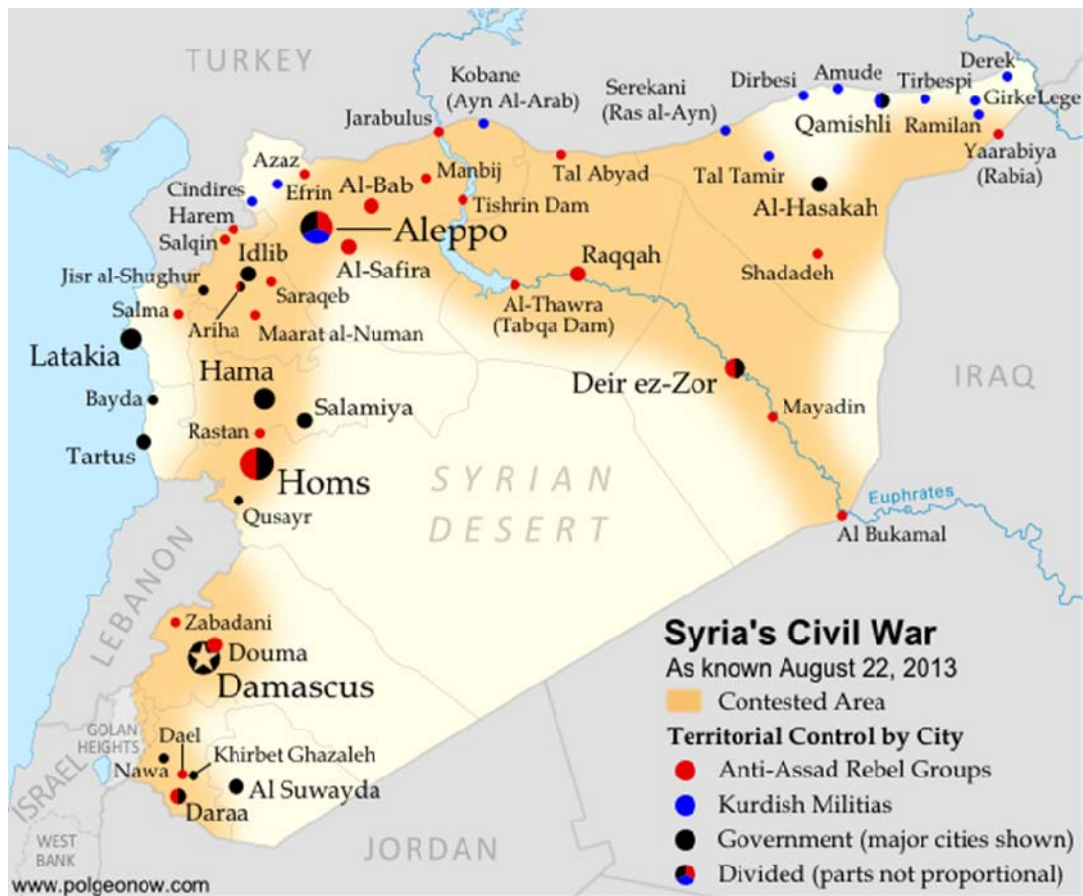
While those close to Obama consider the President’s policy of dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons capabilities by means of diplomacy a success, actors in the Middle East interpret it as American weakness and an inability to use the military option. Once again, the United States is seen as a superpower that abandons its allies when they are facing their toughest challenges – this time, the National Coalition and the Free Syrian

Army – and this is cause for much concern among US allies in the region: Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Israel.

Most of those who have stirred the Syrian pot and encouraged the struggle of the “bad” against the “bad” have received what they feared most: an inability to oust the Assad regime and end the civil war; the strengthening of jihadi-Islamist elements; and the disintegration of Syria.

As for chemical weapons disarmament, the Assad regime will seek to create the appearance that it is helping implement the process, because this is a lever for its legitimacy in the world. However, there is a risk that in practice Assad will attempt to conceal his capabilities and maintain a deterrent image for the future. At the same time, the inspectors and those who dismantle the weapons can be expected to encounter difficulties, given the lack of effective physical central control over the areas. Therefore, Israel, in coordination with the United States, must formulate a contingency plan for a scenario in which the effort to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons fails or these weapons fall into the hands of radical Islamists and Hizbollah.

Israel must prepare for the challenges and the consequences of the disintegration of Syria and the entrenchment of radical Islamic groups on Israel’s northern border. These trends will highlight the absence of a clear and responsible authority to prevent both weapons smuggling and the establishment of terrorist infrastructures. As a result, there will likely be difficulties in implementing stabilizing rules of the game. Provocations along the Golan Heights border stand to increase, and it is even possible that there will be fighting and high trajectory fire at the home front. In addition, Israel and the West must prepare for the spillover of instability and violence to Syria’s neighbors. This may manifest itself as an internal protest due to anger in the neighboring countries at being forced to take in hundreds of thousands of refugees, or because of the spillover of the actual events into these countries.



<http://www.polgeonow.com/2013/08/syria-civil-war-map-august-2013-11.html>

CC BY-SA