Syria: The Civil War with No Winner

Shlomo Brom, Benedetta Berti, and Mark A. Heller

The popular uprising that broke out in Syria in March 2011 evolved into a civil war with no end in sight. Neither the forces of Bashar al-Assad nor the various rebel factions are capable of defeating the other. Each side enjoys advantages while suffering from disadvantages that reflect the unique sectarian composition of Syrian society. Each is affected by the extent of external aid it has received, as well as by the structure of the regime that has been institutionalized over the years. Against this background, an already protracted struggle continues, giving rise to an unstable standoff.

This article describes and analyzes the principal characteristics of the civil war, and the challenges that it poses both to Syria's neighbors and to international actors. The essay will examine the direct consequences of the war for Israel, as well possible ensuing developments and ramifications.

The "Arab Spring": The Syrian Case

The social and political upheaval in the Middle East in the framework of the "Arab Spring" has assumed different forms, subject to each country's particular features. The wave that swept through the region began in Tunisia and Egypt – two countries with relatively homogeneous societies. The military does not sport a sectarian character in either of these two countries, and even if it pursues its own interests, it functions (more or less) as a national army representing the entire society. Furthermore, in both of these countries, when it became clear to the military leadership that the popular uprising was aimed against the extended ruling family, it chose to withdraw its support from the government leaders – Ben Ali

in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt – in order to avoid a confrontation with broad sectors of society and to maintain its organizational interests.

The nature of Syrian society is completely different. Syrian society is sectarian and divided along religious and community lines. Seventy percent of the population consists of Sunni Arabs; this large Sunni majority is complemented by sizable minority groups, among them Alawite Arabs, Christian Arabs, and Kurds, as well as a small Druze minority. The regime molded by Hafez al-Assad, father of current President Bashar al-Assad, was based on a coalition of the Alawite minority (the sectarian home of the Assad family); Christians; Druze; and the Sunni urban middle class. The regime made it easy for its coalition partners to continue playing a key role in Syrian economic life, and was careful to fill key positions in the military and security forces with Alawites and representatives of the other groups in this coalition.

As in the other countries in the Arab world that experienced upheaval directed against the regime – each with its own special features – there was a close connection between the harsh socioeconomic situation in Syria and the rebellion. A large portion of the population lives in villages and makes its living in agriculture. The uprising was preceded by several consecutive years of drought, which had a severe effect on the rainwater-based agriculture. The inevitable result was an increase in unemployment and poverty, as well as large scale migration from the villages to the city. An annual average of 3.62 percent of the population was estimated to have moved from the villages to the city during those years.[1]

To a large extent this background explains the direction and development of the rebellion against the regime in Syria, in contrast to the rebellions in Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, protest erupted in the periphery and targeted the center areas. In Egypt, on the other hand, the rebellion broke out in the center – in Cairo and the large cities. As in Syria, the event that set off the uprising in Tunisia occurred in a remote village, but in Tunisia the core of the rebellion rapidly shifted to the capital city of Tunis. It is therefore no surprise that even in the third year of the rebellion in Syria, the Damascus regime still retains its grip on much of the center of the country, while basing itself on the traditional coalition formed by Hafez al-Assad.

The coalition has weathered the sectarian nature of the civil war without dissolving. Even parts of the Sunni middle class located in the cities have continued to support the regime. The army and the security services have also remained loyal to the regime, even though there have been some cases of desertion. This unity of ranks is somewhat surprising, since the Syrian army is based on conscription, meaning that most of the soldiers, in proportion to the population at large, are Sunnis. This achievement by the army is due to the care taken by the regime to form the important army units along religious and sectarian lines, thereby ensuring their loyalty.

The characteristics of the rebellion and the standoff between the various parties have changed over time. The stage of mass civil demonstrations ended relatively quickly, in part because the regime's brutal suppression of the non-violent protest ignited the violent rebellion that followed. The rebels' agenda changed accordingly. The popular protest, shaped by slogans corresponding to the spirit of the "Arab Spring" – democracy, freedom, and human rights – was succeeded by a sectarian civil war of Sunnis against minority groups in the country. For their part, the Kurds adopted their own agenda, which focused on achieving autonomy. To some extent, this development was also the result of a deliberate policy by the regime, which emphasized the sectarian character of the rebellion in order to strengthen the minorities' loyalty to the regime. In any case, the result of this dynamic was a contrast between the nature of the uprising in Syria versus the uprisings that erupted elsewhere. While in other Arab Spring events the struggle focused on the effort of a small clique to maintain its rule against popular opposition, the struggle in Syria pitted entire sectors represented by the regime against the rebelling Sunni majority that threatened to dispossess them. It is a life or death struggle for both sides, and this nature of the confrontation to a large extent explains the determination and cruelty shown in it.

Western intelligence and media erred in their assessment of the Syrian regime's ability to survive. In the first stage of the rebellion, the prevailing assumptions were that the regime's days were numbered. The events of the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia and Egypt suggested that dictatorial Arab regimes were incapable of dealing with the masses once they overcame the barrier of fear. In 2011, then-Ministry of Defense Ehud Barak also predicted that

Assad would fall within a short time.[2] When the entire Syrian defense leadership was wiped out in a suicide attack on July 18, 2012, it appeared that the regime was doomed.[3] This conclusion was proved wrong. Rather ironically, the error was comparable to the dismissal of General Tantawi and the Egyptian defense leadership by President Morsi, which made room at the top for generals who were younger and more dynamic than the old leadership; these new generals eventually toppled the Muslim Brotherhood regime. The elimination of the Syrian veteran defense leadership also put young and more effective generals in their stead, and only strengthened the regime's capabilities.

In analyzing ongoing violent struggles of this type, there is often a tendency to ignore the enormous importance of the ability of the parties to learn and adapt. When the violent rebellion began, the regime was taken by surprise, and its ability to cope with the rebellion was limited. It had an enormous material advantage – a large and well-equipped army – but while at the conceptual level the regime relied on the army's loyalty and capability to ensure its survival, the army was not trained to deal with a broad-based popular rebellion. Rather, it had been trained to fight the IDF in warfare between two regular armies. The regime therefore had to train its forces for a developing and widening confrontation in the very course of the fighting. This training took place in two ways: the loyal units actively involved in the fighting were trained for the required campaign, while at the same time an Alawite militia was established to fight against the rebels alongside the army with its own fighting methods. Iran and Hizbollah provided the Syrian regime with invaluable advice, training, and specialized equipment in both these areas (and in certain places Hizbollah also took an active part in the combat).

The prolonged warfare has also to a large extent influenced the development of the rebel forces. The attempts to unite them under a unified political and military leadership failed; they remained divided between different groups representing various ideological, sectarian, and personal interests. The Free Syrian Army, which represents the secular and liberal elements, is based largely on deserters from the Syrian army. The Islamic Salafi extreme factions include elements close to al-Qaeda, and there are also more moderate Islamic factions. The longer the civil war continued,

the stronger the extreme Islamic groups have become. These groups' effectiveness is a function of high motivation and combat experience; they include experienced foreign volunteers who came to Syria from other jihadist theaters such as Iraq, and are endowed with superior financing and equipment supplied by their supporters in the Persian Gulf states. The heightened strength of these groups also makes them increasingly attractive to volunteers from Syria itself, who are joining their forces.

The division in the ranks of the opposition prevents it from combining forces, which could possibly tip the balance in its favor. In the second half of 2013, a violent struggle even developed, mainly in northern Syria, between the jihadist groups and the Free Syrian Army. This rivalry does not help the rebels combat the regime. On the other hand, this division has certain advantages. The local groups are very familiar with the terrain in their area, and are more flexible than the regime's forces. The rebels are capable of fighting in any region in the country, while the regime must move forces from one place to another, depending on developments in the field. The regime is able to win almost any battle when it concentrates its forces, but its ability to retain its advantage is limited, due to its subsequent need to concentrate its forces in a different battle theater. Furthermore, the division makes the rebel forces more resilient. Even if one rebel group is defeated, it will not end the rebellion.

These features of the two principal sides, combined with the political, financial, and logistical support given them by regional and global players, have created a standoff with surges and recessions by each side, with no decision on the horizon. The regime has managed to keep its control of the center, particularly the road connecting Damascus and Homs with the coastal region, while the rebels hold large areas in the outlying areas. A violent struggle for the important city of Aleppo is underway, with each side controlling part of it. It appears that only a change in the nature and power of the external military involvement can shift the balance of forces between the two fighting sides and create the conditions for victory. When Hizbollah increased its involvement in the combat in a battle in June 2013 for the city of al-Qusayr, near Homs, the regime's forces pushed the rebels out of the city. Hizbollah is estimated to have sent more than a thousand fighters to Syria – a significant portion of its effective combat echelon –

and it was Hizbollah's involvement in the battle of al-Qusayr that likely tipped the balance there, preserved the regime's lines of communications with Lebanon and the Alawite region in northwest Syria, and blunted the widespread sense that regime's ultimate defeat was foreordained.[4] It seemed then that a turning point was reached and the army would proceed to further victories ending in the defeat of the rebellion, but events took a different course. The losses suffered by Hizbollah in this battle and the political pressure it sustained in Lebanon for fighting on the side of Assad's forces caused the Hizbollah leadership to reduce its involvement in the fighting.

The regime's use of chemical weapons, which peaked in the attack on the outskirts of Damascus on August 21, 2013 that caused the deaths of hundreds of civilians, led the American administration to threaten Syria with punitive operations by the US and its allies. Despite doubts about the credibility of the American threat, the Syrian regime and its ally, Russia, were not willing to risk US action, whereby an initially limited attack could develop into a real threat to the regime. As a preventative measure and at Russia's initiative, the Syrian regime and Russia proposed that Syria dismantle its chemical arsenal and join the Chemical Weapons Convention. The US, followed by the UN Security Council, endorsed this initiative. Russia and the US agreed on a rapid chemical weapons disarmament process that would take nine months and conclude in mid-2014. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) began intensive activity on Syrian territory to implement the agreement. The Syrian regime, which demonstrated its willingness to implement the agreement in full, is cooperating with the OPCW inspectors.

Nonetheless, concern exists that the regime will conceal part of its chemical weapons capability, because dismantling its chemical weapons stores deprives it of an important element in its war for survival. At the same time, Damascus's acceptance of the conditions has enabled the regime to become a legitimate partner in an international agreement, and has given regional and global players an interest in the regime's survival, at least until the agreement is fully implemented, for the sake of preventing the chemical arsenal from falling into irresponsible hands. Paradoxically, the chemical weapons, which the regime believed would guarantee its

survival, have become a threat to it, while their destruction has become an insurance policy, at least temporarily.

External Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

"In war," Napoleon is reputed to have said, "the moral to the material is as three to one." While Napoleon's string of impressive victories cemented his reputation as a great general, his ultimate fate should raise some doubts about the universal validity of some of his most quotable maxims, and certainly the adage cited here obscures as much as it enlightens. After all, the material dimensions of power may be judged with some confidence, but moral and other intangible factors are much harder to assess – which is evident in the difficulties observers confront in trying to analyze the course and possible outcome of the Syrian civil war.

Even the material balance is difficult to assess. One the one hand, given the increasingly sectarian nature of the war and the overwhelming Sunni makeup of the country, the opposition has a clear advantage over the Alawi-dominated regime in terms of its pool of recruits. Subject to their ability to mobilize their potential manpower base, rebel forces should therefore be able to field the big battalions that – in another dictum attributed to Napoleon – are said to be favored by God. Nevertheless, the opposition's material advantage is not unequivocal, since the regime's arsenal is far superior, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Nor are the moral or intangible relations of forces any clearer. While the opposition, especially the Islamist elements, may have a coherent ideological impulse, the regime has more to lose politically and enjoys the operational advantage of unity of command. More to the point, after more than two years of brutal conflict, both sides are driven by the conviction that defeat would bring terrible and unrelenting retribution.

In other words, there is very little in the pseudo-equation of Napoleon to illuminate the course of the conflict. What can be said with some certainty is that outside intervention – which in places like Bahrain and Libya favored only one party and thereby helped produce relatively swift and decisive outcomes – has also been evident in Syria. But while in Syria, too, the overall balance of third party involvement has generally tended to favor one side – in this case, the regime – the intervention did not have

the same effect on the evolution of the conflict. The support given to the regime blunted the momentum gained by the opposition in the early days of the uprising, and barring some dramatic reversal of American behavior, ensures, if not ultimate victory for the regime, then at least its ability to continue to fight in the foreseeable future.

The regime's material support has come primarily from two of Syria's traditional partners in the so-called "axis of resistance," Iran and Hizbollah. Hamas, the fourth member of this alignment, abandoned its identification with the regime because the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict made it virtually impossible for Hamas to justify a pro-Assad orientation to its own Sunni constituency, and because the Muslim Brotherhood, following its triumph in Egypt, appeared to offer a more congenial patron. Indeed, though Hamas had benefited from an alignment with the axis of resistance before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, it never contributed much to it apart from a thin veneer of pan-Islamic solidarity. In the first anti-Assad protests in 2011, Hamas was not considered a significant element and did not even merit mention among the "No to Iran, No to Hizbollah" banners carried by demonstrators. Consequently, Hamas's defection made very little difference to the moral or material balance of power. Syrian rebels instinctively understood that in contrast to the instrumental calculation that underlay the connection between Hamas and the regime, Iran and Hizbollah were linked to the regime by factors more profound, namely, ideology and Shiite identity. The commitment of Iran and Hizbollah was evident in the assistance they provided in the ongoing battles – weapons, funding, tactical advice, command-and-control support, and in the case of Hizbollah, direct participation in combat.

Moreover, the axis of resistance was not without extra-regional allies. Of these, the most important was Russia, which continued to transfer armaments to Syria (though not all that the regime requested). More importantly, Russia (and China) consistently defended the regime in international forums and blocked any possible initiatives in the Security Council that might have resulted in the kind of resolution that, loosely interpreted, authorized Western military action in Libya and resulted in the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi. That stance is a reflection of longstanding Russian (and Chinese) hypersensitivity to Western

intervention in support of anti-regime uprisings anywhere. Numerous interpretations have been offered for Russia's behavior, most of them associated with Russia's presumed aspiration to superpower status equal to that of the United States or the West as a whole. At least as persuasive, however, is the Russian conviction that the only real alternative to the authoritarian rulers threatened by uprisings in the Arab world is radical Islamism, whose triumph would have potentially dangerous repercussions in the Russian Caucasus and other Muslim-populated regions elsewhere in Russia or in post-Soviet Central Asian states (as well as in Xinjiang province in northwest China). Thus, for whatever reasons, Russia has given the Syrian regime an international safety net, an asset of considerable moral and political value.[5]

Arrayed against the regime's support network has been a far less coherent alliance of rebel sympathizers, including Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sunnis in Lebanon and Iraq, and – during the Muslim Brotherhood's tenure in office – Egypt. The anti-Assad coalition also included the Great Kuwait Campaign, a group of Salafi clerics and opposition politicians in Kuwait that reportedly contributed millions of dollars to Islamist elements inside Syria.[6] There were even reports that Sudan, which maintains close ties with Iran, was selling Sudanese and Chinese-made arms to Qatar for onward shipment to Syrian rebels.[7] Like the Syrian opposition itself, these actors (with the exception of Sudan) were united in their hostility to Assad, both on sectarian grounds and because of his alignment with Iran, but they were divided in terms of their post-Assad objectives, their methods and means of operation, and the targets of their largesse. Thus, while they provided financial support – for various militias as well as for humanitarian assistance and refugee relief – and some weaponry, their efforts were poorly coordinated, and though they enabled the rebels to continue fighting, they ultimately influenced the balance inside Syria much less than did the regime's patrons. Most noticeable was the relative absence of "boots on the ground." Apart from reports of the presence of foreign jihadis, especially Iraqi Sunnis operating under the banner of al-Qaeda, there was little direct engagement to balance the physical intervention of Hizbollah.

Even more striking was the absence of any significant American or other Western involvement. The United States and its European partners recognized the Syrian National Council, repeatedly denounced the regime's excesses, demanded that Assad ultimately be replaced as part of any political settlement, and organized opposition support groups like the Friends of Syria. As the civilian casualty count in Syria rose, Western countries also imposed some economic sanctions and declared their willingness to provide non-lethal equipment such as communications gear and medical supplies to the rebels – especially the Free Syrian Army. However, the Obama administration showed no inclination to transfer the kinds of weaponry that might significantly alter the local balance, much less become directly involved itself. And without American leadership, other Western states were unwilling or unable (or both) to match their belligerent rhetoric with belligerent action.

American hesitancy had many sources. The most important was probably a generalized apprehension about being enmeshed in another Middle Eastern quagmire just as the country was extricating itself from protracted involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. To the argument that all that was required was some sort of circumscribed standoff mission such as limited air strikes and/or imposition of a no-fly zone to rectify some of the operational imbalances favoring the regime, the most compelling counterargument was the risk of a slippery slope, that is, that some counteraction by the regime or its supporters (e.g., Iranian attacks on American partners in the Gulf) could easily draw the United States further in than it originally intended to go. Second, the total commitment of the Iran-Hizbollah-Russia alignment to the regime was not matched by equally unequivocal Western enthusiasm for the opposition. As the consequences of the overthrow of authoritarian rulers in other parts of the region began to unfold, initial optimism in the West about the prospects for liberal democracy gave way to growing disenchantment, to the point where many in the West came to share Russia's (and Husni Mubarak's) prognosis of what was likely to follow the ouster of autocratic rulers. In Syria, radical Islamists showed the greatest dedication and military skill in the fight against Assad but also the least devotion to the values upon which Western hostility to Assad was grounded, and their growing prominence

in the opposition camp raised doubts about whether Assad's overthrow would not just prolong the internecine conflict or make a bad situation even worse. So despite recurrent demands by some political figures in the United States, especially Senator John McCain, for a more muscular role, American public opinion was decidedly opposed to any real intervention in the Syrian civil war.

Consequently, until late 2013, the overall balance of foreign involvement in Syria worked in favor of the regime and enabled it to forestall and even overcome whatever initial advantages the opposition may have had. After the Western threat of punitive action against the regime for using chemical weapons failed to materialize and an understanding was reached by the US and Russia on the destruction of the chemical arsenal in Syria, active Western involvement became even less likely than before, and it appears that this balance is unlikely to change. On the other hand, it is possible that a context for punishing the Syrian regime could still be created, and that the American administration could find itself in a situation that would force it to carry out its threat. Even then, however, if a limited punitive strike is launched, it is doubtful whether it would cause any significant change in the balance of forces between the rebels and the regime.

Beyond Syria: The Spillover of the Syrian Civil War

The civil war raging in Syria has had a widespread impact not only due to the extensive involvement of regional actors in the domestic conflict, but also because of the direct effect of the hostilities on security and stability in the neighboring states.

First and foremost, the war has exacted a staggering humanitarian cost, in Syria as well as in the immediate neighborhood. By June 2013 the conflict had claimed more than 100,000 casualties within Syria itself, with more than 5,000 people killed on average every month since July 2012.[8] In its July 2013 estimate, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights asserted that at least 36,000 of the casualties have been civilians, with as many as 8,000 of them children.[9] In addition, in a country of roughly 22 million people, the war has resulted in more than 4 million internally displaced persons as well as approximately 7 million people in need of humanitarian aid to survive.[10]

The humanitarian cost of the conflict has been foisted on Syria's neighbors, led by Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, which have been confronted with a steady influx of refugees. By late summer 2013 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that roughly 1.9 million people had fled Syria, with 38 percent of the refugee population comprising children under the age of 12.[11] In 2013, with the war escalating in brutality and showing no sign of approaching a resolution, the average daily stream of refugees was estimated around 6,000 people, a rate not seen since the Rwandan genocide in the early 1990s.[12] A smaller portion of the refugee population has found temporary shelter in North Africa, Egypt, and northern Iraq, where UN estimates speak of, respectively, approximately 14,000, 106,000, and 150,000 people registered or awaiting registration.[13] In these cases the number of refugees is too low to have any direct impact on the host country. The situation is different, however, when looking at the three principal host countries, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, where the majority of the refugee population is concentrated.

Turkey, which as of late 2013 hosted roughly half a million refugees, has been the best equipped country, politically and economically, to meet the Syrian crisis and open its borders to refugees. At the beginning of the civil war, Turkey applied an open border policy, granting refugees temporary sanctuary and distinguishing itself for running twenty camps in ten provinces, camps that have been defined as "the best refugee camps ever seen."[14] Nonetheless, the situation is far from idyllic, and with no end of the war in sight, Turkey has evinced signs of financial weariness and reduced the number of new refugees accepted on its soil, resulting in a growing number of internally displaced persons waiting on the Syrian side of the border.[15]

In addition to the refugee question, which has aroused social tensions in the districts on the border between Syria and Turkey, Turkey has had to cope with a security dilemma following the spread of the fighting to its territory, and the growing ensuing political tension.[16] From time to time there have been cross border shootings, and stray shells have landed in Turkish territory. Turkey's involvement in the conflict on the side of the rebels has caused at least two terror attacks, one in February 2013 and one in May 2013, organized by groups that support the Syrian regime.

The political opposition in Turkey has criticized the ruling Justice and Development Party on the Syrian issue, saying that Turkey is too involved in providing direct aid to the rebels. These criticisms have intensified since the May 2013 car bomb attack in southern Turkey, in which 43 people were killed. Public opinion in Turkey also objects to Turkey being dragged into direct involvement in the Syrian crisis: a survey conducted in June 2013 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States showed that 72 percent of those questioned expressed opposition to direct involvement in Syria, up from 57 percent in 2012.[17] Beyond this, the crumbling of central authority in Syria and the proliferation of armed groups in general and jihadist groups in particular are liable to cause further instability, which creates security problems along the 900 kilometers of the Turkish-Syrian border.

Not surprisingly, the conflict in Syria may also have a longer term impact on Turkey's difficult relations with its Kurdish minority, especially in light of the Kurdish de facto autonomous area emerging in northern Syria. Whereas Turkey has found a satisfactory modus vivendi with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, it is too early to tell whether that model can successfully be replicated with a Syrian Kurdistan, especially given that one of the main Kurdish groups in Syria, the Democratic Union Party, is itself the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is engaged in a prolonged fight with Turkey.

Another country under pressure due to the ongoing Syrian civil war is Jordan, currently home to roughly half a million refugees. Approximately two-thirds of the refugees reside in urban areas, while roughly one third are hosted in camps, the largest of which is the Zaatari camp, believed to accommodate some 130,000 Syrians.[18] But whereas the influx of refugees in Jordan is comparable in size to the number in Turkey, the impact is entirely different. A small country of roughly 6.5 million people that is poor in resources, lacks an adequate water supply, and is already mired in an economic crisis, Jordan has struggled to cope with the Syrian refugee population.[19] The result has been a palpable strain on the country's economy and infrastructure, with shortages in food and the health sector, inadequate and/or unaffordable housing, overcrowded camps, and personal insecurity for the Syrians seeking shelter across the Jordanian border. The

dire economic situation is exacerbated by the fact that the civil war has put an end to the trade with Syria,[20] while the additional volatility in the region has also hindered Jordan's already frail economy.

In addition, with fighters from the anti-Assad opposition − and specifically from the Free Syrian Army − moving in and out of Jordan and sojourning in camps, the country finds itself increasingly dragged into the Syrian civil war.[21] This is not just because of the repeated episodes of stray bullets or mortars landing in Jordan,[22] but also because some of the insecurity and instability has spilled over from Syria into Jordan. The rising number of foreign fighters pouring into Syria to support anti-Assad jihadist groups threatens Jordan, which harbors a long term fear of radical elements attempting to infiltrate and perpetrate terrorist activities. It is therefore not surprising that despite the widespread generosity displayed by Jordan to the Syrian refugee population, some level of resentment has been brewing among ordinary Jordanians.[23] This is especially the case as economic readjustment has led to cuts in subsidies and a rise in prices of commodities and gas.[24]

However, the country that has been most substantially affected by the Syrian civil war is without a doubt Lebanon, which was already home to some 500,000 Syrian residents and now hosts an additional 700,000 refugees, dispersed over 1,000 different municipalities.[25] The influx of refugees into Lebanon has increased steadily; UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos related that between January and July 2013, there was a staggering 200 percent increase in the number of refugees,[26] well in line with the estimate that the total number of registered Syrian refugees will reach one million by the end of the year (and to this number UNHCR adds an estimated 80,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria).[27] The humanitarian situation is precarious, with insufficient affordable housing and with shortages in all basic services, from access to clean water and sanitation to health care.[28] The relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens have also been complex, characterized by both solidarity but also tension, and at times discrimination.[29]

In addition to the humanitarian impact, Lebanon has been directly affected by the conflict in other ways, which in turn are related to both the historical ties between Lebanon and Syria as well as the specific

political and sectarian makeup of the country. First, Lebanon has been repeatedly dragged into the war, with frequent cross-border shootings, and with clashes between the Syrian army and rebel forces on Lebanese soil, especially in the Bekaa Valley.[30] Second, historically the Lebanese and Syrian economies have been tied together, meaning that both the rampant internal economic crisis and the sanctions imposed on Syria have weighed heavily on the Lebanese economy. Third and most important, the civil war has profoundly destabilized Lebanon and exacerbated its preexisting political and sectarian relations, drastically worsening the cleavage between the country's Sunni and Shiite communities, in a conflict that is as highly sectarian and – perhaps even more so – political. The rift between the pro-Assad forces, led by the Shiite parties Hizbollah and Amal and backed, among others, by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, and the historically anti-Assad March 14 coalition, led by the Sunni Future Movement, is particularly deep. The result is Lebanon's political paralysis: since the fall of the government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati in April 2013, Lebanon has been in a state of political limbo, with Acting Prime Minister Tammam Salam unable to break the political impasse and form a new cabinet, and with the parliament forced to postpone the next round of parliamentary elections.[31]

The political clashes have at times also escalated into full-fledged armed confrontations. In Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, and in the Bekaa Valley, disagreements between pro- and anti-Assad supporters from the Alawite, Shiite, and Sunni communities have repeatedly arisen and taken a violent form.[32] The situation has escalated since Hizbollah's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, which in turn has further enhanced the sectarian undertones of the pro- and anti-Assad divide, while also inflaming Salafist groups in Lebanon and their anti-Hizbollah rhetoric. The attacks in May and July 2013 against the Hizbollah stronghold in south Beirut, the Dahiye quarter, seem to confirm this trend, as do the growing number of both Sunni and Shiite Lebanese crossing the border and fighting in Syria.

Were the Syrian regime to collapse, this would have an even bigger effect on Lebanon, likely giving new power and credibility to the political forces behind the March 14 coalition. Hizbollah would be equally affected and would probably lose political capital, power, and popularity once its

Damascus partner is gone, even though it will likely remain the country's dominant military force. In any case, there would be a reshuffling of the Lebanese political cards, together with a likely break of the current impasse and with the creation of new political alliances.

Possible Scenarios and Implications for Israel

The longer the civil war continues, the weaker Syria's ability to conduct a conventional war against Israel will be, which was not very advanced in the first place. On the other hand, the central government has lost control of large areas of the country, and chaos prevails close to the Golan Heights border. Rebel groups, some of whom are Salafi jihadists with an extremist anti-Israel ideology, operate in these areas. It is therefore possible that they will turn their weapons against Israel, or take action against Israel in order to propel it to become involved in the civil war.

The growing use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime is evidence of the lowered threshold for use of these weapons; this could also possibly affect its readiness to use these weapons against Israel, although this threat would be removed if Syria in fact dismantles its chemical arsenal. At the same time, the chaotic situation in Syria has increased the likelihood that advanced weapons could fall into the hands of extreme groups constituting a threat to Israel – Hizbollah or jihadist groups in the ranks of the opposition. If these groups obtain chemical or biological weapons, there could be extremely serious consequences.

While possible that the two sides in Syria could eventually become war weary enough to engage in a dialogue that would lead to an evolutionary change in the country, this is highly unlikely in the coming year: the conflict has become increasingly sectarian and jihadist, and neither side is likely to talk with the other unless it has the upper hand, giving its opponents no choice but to surrender. It will therefore be hard to overcome the obstacles toward a worthwhile international conference along the lines of Geneva II, with the participation of representatives of the regime and the various opposition groups. Even if such a conference takes place, it is unlikely to achieve a solution that is acceptable to all the parties. Nor does it appear at this time that the chemical weapons agreement will generate momentum toward understandings between the US and Russia, which would provide a

basis for serious negotiations between the regime and the opposition forces in Syria.

Rather, there is more solid ground for assuming that the civil war will continue, and that there are few prospects of external intervention tipping the balance in one direction or the other. As a result, one of four other possible scenarios will take place, whose relative likelihood is impossible to assess:

a. A "Somalia scenario": the civil war continues without any clear conclusion, and brings Syria to the chaotic status of a failed state.
b. A "Sykes-Picot end": Syria breaks up into several mini-states: an Alawite state on the road stretching from Damascus to the coastal region; a Sunni state in the north, south, and east of the country; and a Kurdish state in northeastern Syria.
c. The regime is victorious following a war of attrition lasting several years. The probability of the realization of this scenario has increased as a result of Hizbollah's intervention and the infighting among the rebels.
d. The rebels are victorious following a war of attrition lasting several years.

Each of these four scenarios has consequences for Israel, not all of which are necessarily threatening and negative. Fulfillment of the Somalia scenario will exacerbate the threats against Israel, especially from uncontrolled groups. On the one hand, Syria as a country will almost entirely lose the ability to conduct war against Israel. On the other hand, the threats from sub-state players will grow, and the likelihood that advanced weapons could fall into their hands will increase. The Sykes-Picot scenario, however, would create a comfortable situation for Israel. While each mini-state would have a central government to which Israel could direct its policy, these countries would be weak and unable to threaten Israel. It is even possible that Israel could have a good relationship with some of them.

Even if the regime is victorious after years of fighting, Syria will remain weak for a long time, and no direct threat against Israel would emerge. Furthermore, this scenario would reduce the likelihood of weapons falling into the hands of uncontrolled groups that regard Israel as an enemy. The restoration of a centralized regime in Syria should therefore be good for Israel. This scenario, however, could have negative consequences for

Israel on a regional scale, because the regime's victory will be perceived as a victory of the Iran-led axis of resistance. The Syrian regime would be even more dependent on Iran and Hizbollah than in the years prior to the civil war. Conversely, a victory by the rebels would create a weak Syrian state under Sunni control, which would not constitute a military or political threat to Israel. Moreover, this scenario would probably weaken the axis of resistance, because the new Syrian regime would be hostile to Iran and Hizbollah, due to their support for the Assad regime. It is possible, however, that Syria would allow anti-Israel terrorist groups to operate from its territory, especially if the new regime is Islamist and includes Salafi elements.

Until now, the Israeli government has adopted a policy of refraining from intervention in events in Syria. This is sound policy, because while Israel has a great deal of power to influence events in Syria, it has no way of controlling the results of any intervention. In a situation in which most of the scenarios have some negative consequences for Israel, non-intervention, including restraint in rhetoric, is therefore best, in order to avoid the appearance of Israeli intervention.

On top of the threats already posed by the situation in Syria, Israel must prepare for additional threats liable to develop under the future scenarios. Measures to address the growing threat to day-to-day security have required strengthening the defense line in the Golan Heights. The possibility that advanced weapons could fall into the hands of factions hostile to Israel also requires preparation and alertness. Israel has set clear red lines for the Syrian regime concerning the transfer of advanced weapons to Hizbollah. A number of air attacks, which were conducted in Syria and attributed to Israel, were likely in response to the breach of these red lines. It is necessary, however, to continue developing lines of action for the possibility that advanced weapons, including chemical weapons, could fall into the hands of Sunni rebel groups with an extreme anti-Israel ideology. Israel must be prepared for limited and temporary military involvement within Syria in response to the development of such situations. The US and other Western parties are also worried about these scenarios, and a dialogue on these matters with these parties is necessary. Efforts should also be made to formulate plans for joint action.

At the same time, the various scenarios also create opportunities for Israel. Syria's military weakness enables Israel to regard the prospect of a full scale war with Syria as extremely remote, at least in the coming years. Israel can use its resources to carry out necessary reforms in the IDF, taking national budget considerations into account. Israel can also exploit the situation to build a bridge and a basis for dialogue with some of the new players in the Syrian theater, including among the rebels, for example with the Kurds in Syria, who have no significant hostility to Israel.

Furthermore, the situation in Syria creates a basis for closer cooperation between Israel and Middle East countries, including Turkey (with all the difficulties in restoring normal relations with the Erdogan government), other countries bordering Syria, and the Persian Gulf countries. Israel can help Jordan cope with the weighty consequences of the Syrian civil war, thereby adding another aspect to its strategic relationship with Jordan.

Notes

1 The figures are from the *CIA World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html.

2 Amos Harel, "Barak Predicts: The Assad Regime Will Fall in the Coming Weeks," *Haaretz*, December 11, 2011, http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1588695.

3 For example, see the story on an Israeli news website predicting that the rebels would soon liberate Damascus, following the successful terrorist attack: "Evidence of Another Slaughter in Syria; 'Operation Liberate Damascus' has Begun," *Walla*, July 18, 2012, http://news.walla.co.il/?w=//2550804.

4 Following a bombing in the Shiite-populated Dahiye quarter of Beirut, presumably by anti-Assad Sunnis intent on punishing Hizbollah for its role in Syria, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened that if necessary he would double the number of fighters in Syria. See Ali Hashem, "Nasrallah Threatens to Double Hezbollah Forces in Syria," *al-Monitor*, August 16, 2013.

5 For more on the motives behind Russian policy, see Zvi Magen, "What Underlies Russia's Ongoing Support for Assad?" *INSS Insight* No. 363, August 13, 2012.

6 Daniel R. DePetris, "Kuwait's Hidden Hand in Syria," *National Interest*, July 16, 2013, http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/kuwaits-hidden-hand-syria-8729/.

7 C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Shipments Seen from Sudan to Syria Rebels," *New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

8 Megan Price, Jeff Klingner, Anas Qtiesh, and Patrick Ball, "Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic," United

Nations Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 13, 2013, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAG-Updated-SY-report.pdf.

9 Alan Cowell, "War Deaths in Syria Said to Top 100,000," *New York Times,* June 26, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/27/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0.

10 *Humanitarian Bulletin Syria*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), Issue 30, July 16-29, 2013, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Humanitarian%20Bulletin%20-%20Issue%20No.%2030.pdf.

11 51.4 percent of the refugee population is under the age of 18. See http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

12 *Humanitarian Bulletin Syria*, No. 5.

13 See *Humanitarian Bulletin Syria*, No. 6 and http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103 (registered/awaiting registration numbers are of course necessarily an approximation, as they do not include unregistered refugees.)

14 "Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey," International Crisis Group, Europe Report N°225, April 30, 2013, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/225-blurring-the-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-for-turkey; see also: "UNHCR Turkey Syrian Refugee Daily Sitrep, 31 July 2013," http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224.

15 Kemal Kirisci, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Limits of an Open Door Policy," Brookings, June 27, 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/06/27-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-kirisci.

16 "43 Dead in Turkey Car Bombings near Syria," *Daily Star,* May 23, 2013, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-11/216733-explosions-shake-turkish-town-on-syria-border-official.ashx#ixzz2bMxw6100; http://news.sky.com/story/1089640/nine-turkish-citizens-held-over-car-bombs.

17 "Survey: U.S., European, and Turkish Publics Oppose Intervention in Syrian Conflict, Favor Democracy over Stability in MENA Region," German Marshall Fund of the United States*,* September 6, 2013, http://trends.gmfus.org/survey-u-s-european-and-turkish-publics-oppose-intervention-in-syrian-conflict-favor-democracy-over-stability-in-mena-region.

18 Jeff Crisp, Greg Garras, Jenny McAvoy, Ed Schenkenberg, Paul Spiegel, and Frances Voon, "From Slow Boil to Breaking Point: A Real-time Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the Syrian Refugee Emergency," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service*,* July 2013, p. 9.

19 Heba Aly, "Analysis: Hard Choices: When the Syria Aid Response Runs Out of Money," *IRIN,* June 11, 2013, http://www.irinnews.org/report/98210/analysis-hard-choices-when-the-syria-aid-response-runs-out-of-money.
20 Rana F. Sweis, "Resentment Grows against Syrian Refugees in Jordan," *New York Times,* May 9, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/world/middleeast/09iht-m09-jordan-syria.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=1&.
21 Elizabeth Ferris, "The Syrian Humanitarian Crisis: Five Uncomfortable Questions for the International Community," Brookings, July 8, 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/07/08-syria-humanitarian-crisis.
22 "Stray Mortar Shells Hit Houses in Border Towns," *Jordan Times,* May 14, 2013, http://jordantimes.com/stray-mortar-shells-hit-houses-in-border-towns.
23 Sweis, "Resentment Grows against Syrian Refugees in Jordan."
24 Crisp et al., "From Slow Boil to Breaking Point," p. 11.
25 http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122; Crisp et al., "From Slow Boil to Breaking Point," p. 12.
26 "UN Official Urges Support as Lebanon Struggles to Cope with 'Huge Burden' of Syrian Refugees," UN News Center, July 2, 2013, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45328&Cr=syria&Cr1=lebanon#.UgNYnG3s6Ch.
27 "Syria Regional Response Plan (January to December 2013)," UN High Commissioner for Refugees, June 7, 2013, p. 26.
28 "Syria Regional Response Plan (January to December 2013)," pp. 26-31.
29 See Mona Christophersen and Cathrine Thorleifsson, "Lebanese Contradictory Responses to Syrian Refugees Include Stress, Hospitality, Resentment," Brief, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), June 2013, http://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/policy_memo/20130705ifi_memo_Fafo_IFI_Policy_brief_Syrians_in_Lebanon.pdf.
30 See "Lebanese Army Deploys in Tense Bekaa Valley," *al-Jazeera,* June 13, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/201361716217151 81.html.
31 "Lebanon's Deadlocked Parliament Postpones June Election," *Reuters,* May 31, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/31/us-lebanon-parliament-election-idUSBRE94U0N420130531.
32 See Benedetta Berti "The Arab Uprisings and Lebanon: All Quiet on the Levant Front?" in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, eds. Yoel Guzansky and Mark A. Heller, Memorandum No. 113 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2012); and Benedetta Berti, "Tensions in Tripoli: The Syrian Crisis and its Impact on Lebanon," *INSS Insight* No. 336, May 20, 2012.