

The End of the Syrian Revolution: Between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic Caliphate and Bashar al-Assad's Baath Regime

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Introduction

After more than three and a half years of protest and revolution that quickly escalated into a bloody civil war, the end of the upheaval in Syria is not in sight. Thus far the civilian population is paying the price, with daily fatalities in the dozens, if not the hundreds. In the summer of 2014, the total number of people killed rose to over 200,000; of the 4-6 million refugees who fled their homes to escape the battles, over 2 million have left Syria.¹

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad chose the beginning of the fourth year of war to launch his reelection campaign for another seven-year term. In the elections themselves, held on June 3, 2014, he “won” the support of 88.7 percent of the vote.² Bashar found reason to celebrate, but it is difficult to avoid getting the impression that the cries of victory from Damascus were caused not necessarily by his ballot box performance, but by his achievements on the killing fields of Syria. Over a year ago, in the spring of 2013, Bashar's situation seemed hopeless. Since then, however, the threat to his rule has receded, at least for now; he has ensured his survival, certainly in the Presidential Palace, in the areas around the capital of Damascus and the main axis from Damascus to the Syrian coast, and in the cities of Hama and Homs in the center of the country.

As in the past, the chaos and rifts among the rebels are playing into the regime's hand, as is the trend towards religious extremism orchestrated by radical Islamic groups that have taken the leading role in the Syrian

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revolution. In addition, Bashar finds determined allies in Iran and Hizbollah, backed by Russia, which are fighting heavily to tip the scales in his favor. Nevertheless, no end to the war is yet in sight. Despite the momentum provided by the regime's victories on the battlefield, Bashar is hard pressed to advance from the stronghold he has established for himself in the Syrian heartland. For their part, the rebels are showing determination and devotion to their cause, with no signs of fatigue among their ranks. They continue to exact a toll from the Syrian regime, which is forced to rely increasingly on its shrinking base of support, mostly among the Alawite community.

This situation was further complicated in the summer of 2014 by the breakout of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the deserts of Syria and Iraq, and its achievements in the battles against the Iraqi army, the Syrian army, the Kurds, and against rival Syrian rebel groups. The rise of ISIS is capable of changing the balance of forces in Syria. For the first time since the rebellion broke out in Syria, a military and political alternative to the Syrian regime has been created, however abhorrent it is and however it threatens to shatter whatever remains of the Syrian state.

The Syrian regime is hurting, and is in a perilous and unsteady state. At the same time, Bashar al-Assad's rule is safe for the moment; for those Syrians who still adhere to the idea of the Syrian state, his remaining in power provides a glimmer of hope that the Syrian state system will survive and serve as a keystone when the time is propitious for reforming the Syrian state. Victories by ISIS pose a renewed threat to the Syrian regime, but they have also made Bashar al-Assad the default option for Syrians and those in the international community who fear the total dissolution of the Syrian state, and the rise of the ISIS Islamic caliphate on its ruins.

Either way, Bashar's survival in power, combined with the establishment of the Islamic caliphate by ISIS, are creating a de facto division of Syria into sub-states: ISIS in the eastern Syria and western Iraq; a Baath stronghold under the Assad dynasty in central Syria around the Daraa-Damascus-Hama-Homs axis and the Alawite coast; and autonomous enclaves of rebel groups on the margins of the regime's stronghold fighting against both the Syrian regime and ISIS.

A War with No Decision

The rebels achieved dramatic successes in the first two years of the war that began in Syria in March 2011. Despite their structural weaknesses, mainly the division and strife in their ranks and the fact that they had no central

command or overall strategy, they progressed one step at a time – village by village, one town and city after another – on the way to their goal. In early 2013, they gained control of large rural areas to the east and west of Damascus, thereby surrounding the capital. They launched a campaign to gain control of the road leading to the Damascus international airport, and succeeded in shutting it down for several days. At the same time, the rebels consolidated their control of the rural areas around Homs and Hama, thereby threatening to divide Syria in two by cutting off the north of the country and the coastal region from Damascus. Their most important achievement, however, was in the spring of 2013, when they captured the city of ar-Raqqah, the first city to fall into their hands. This city is the capital of the ar-Raqqah district, the gateway to the al-Jazira region, which contains energy resources (oil and natural gas fields), water resources (the Assad dam and Lake Assad), and Syria’s granaries, all of which are a major source of Syrian wealth.³

It appears that the fall of ar-Raqqah in March 2013 sparked a major change in the regime’s strategy, which abandoned its former tactics of locally based fighting for each village and town in a doomed effort to maintain control of the entire country. The regime’s new strategy was based on several elements. First, the regime declared a de facto war of total destruction against its opponents aimed not only against the armed groups fighting on the battlefield, but also against the civilian population living in the rebel-controlled areas. It appears that the regime concluded that it would be difficult to defeat the rebellion without “dealing with” the civilian population providing cover, support, and a source of manpower for the rebels. In contrast to the past, when the regime confined itself to terrorizing the population into submission, the new practical meaning of such “treatment” was the “purification and cleansing” of entire areas of their residents.

The regime employed all its available weapons in this war of destruction, above all chemical weapons, consisting mostly of sarin gas. After being caught in the act and narrowly escaping a confrontation with the United States in late 2013 over its use of chemical weapons, the regime switched to use of chemical materials not included in the Chemical Weapons Convention, such as chlorine and gasoline bombs. The regime also made extensive use of advanced ground-to-ground missiles, such as Scud and M-600 missiles, amounting to half of Syria’s missile arsenal before the outbreak of war, as well as warplanes, helicopters, and artillery.⁴ In addition to its use of

firepower to weaken large areas and their population, the regime imposed a total blockade of these areas, sometimes in preparation for a military offensive. It cut off supplies of water and electricity, and prevented the free movement of people and goods, including the denial of food and medical aid. This policy led to the Syrian government being accused of systematic starvation of the country's population.⁵

The second strategic element comprised the efforts to maintain the regime's control of the Syrian heartland, which is essential for control of the country, instead of dispersing its forces to maintain control throughout the country, as in the past. This area centers on Damascus, ranges northward toward Aleppo, westward to the Syrian coast (where the Alawite community is concentrated), and southward to Daraa, which controls the border crossing from Syria to Jordan. A critical artery in the center of this area is the city of Homs in central Syria, which links Damascus to northern and coastal Syria. Adoption of this strategy meant that the regime was conceding, at least temporarily, its control of most of the rest of the country, most importantly the al-Jazira and Kurdish areas, the rural areas north of Aleppo and Idlib, and even the Daraa rural area south of Damascus.

Events over the past year in Syria have reflected two prominent trends, characteristic of the fighting since the war began: the power and strength demonstrated by the Syrian governmental system, and the rebels' weakness, the divisions and strife within their ranks, and their growing tendency toward extremism.

The third element is the increased reliance on foreign volunteers, mainly Hizbollah soldiers, as well as volunteers from within Syria, primarily from the Alawite community who were recruited into new militia frameworks established by the regime, such as the Popular Committees, the National Defense Force (Jaysh al-Difaa al-Watni), and the Security Forces and Popular Assistance (Kadsh, Quwat al-Amn, and al-Da'm al-Sha'bi) of the Republic Guard Division,⁶ in addition to its continued reliance on the regular Syrian army. The problem with relying on the regular Syrian army lay in the attrition affecting its units, which found themselves in a prolonged and relentless three-year struggle against the rebels, and in the fact that the regular army was based mainly on conscripts from all communities, which have shown a lack of motivation and willingness to fight since

the beginning of the civil war, especially among Sunni recruits.

No less significant was the arrival of thousands of trained and highly motivated soldiers sent by Hizbollah to fight in Syria alongside the regime.

These soldiers began to arrive in the spring of 2013, first in the area of Homs and the town of al-Qusayr, and later in other areas as well. These elite Hizbollah units, which fought for the Syrian regime as completely independent units, became more intensively involved in the fighting as the duration of their involvement turned into weeks and months.⁷

To be sure, Hizbollah sent its forces into Syria more for its own sake than to help Bashar al-Assad. Particularly after the battle for al-Qusayr began, the rebels and their allies in the radical Salafi camp in Lebanon sought to expand the war from Syria into Lebanese territory. Missiles were fired repeatedly at the Dahiya area in southern Beirut, and a series of terrorist attacks there caused dozens of fatalities. Hizbollah therefore regarded the Syrian-Lebanese border area as a breach that was liable to widen if not quickly taken care of, giving it a common interest with the Syrian regime and leading to cooperation between the two.⁸

Sending Shiite fighters to the battlefields in Syria was only one aspect of the support received by the Syrian regime from its allies. These allies, headed by Iran and Russia, increased their support for the regime in 2013 in the form of political support in the various international theaters, especially the UN Security Council, but primarily through economic and military support in the form of credit and oil and food supplies, as well as weapons and military equipment amounting to billions of dollars.⁹

The Syrian regime's war operations were based on a multi-stage plan consisting of concentrated efforts: first, in the Homs and surrounding area as a critical link between northern Syria, the coastal area inhabited primarily by Alawites, and Damascus; second, in the Damascus area, especially the regions surrounding the city; and third, on the Syrian-Lebanese border around the Qalamoun mountain range. The regime cleared these three areas of rebel forces, and controlled them almost completely. The town of al-Qusayr, located 35 kilometers southwest of Homs and 15 kilometers from the Syrian-Lebanese border, was selected as a starting point for an offensive by the forces loyal to the regime and Hizbollah. They captured the city in early May 2013, followed by the areas around Homs. A year later, in early June 2014, they captured the city itself, from which the rebels retreated under a local reconciliation agreement.

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In addition to reconciliation agreements, the regime increased its pressure in the Damascus area, especially the rural areas surrounding the city to the east and west. On October 21, 2013, as part of this campaign, the regime used chemical weapons in the rural area east of Damascus, killing 1,400 people, many of whom were women and children. Finally, in the Qalamoun mountain range, the regime began an offensive in November 2013, and by April 2014 had regained control of most of this mountain range with the capture of Ma'loula, a Christian village 45 kilometers north of Damascus, which the rebels had captured a year earlier. At the same time, groups of rebels remained active in the Qalamoun mountain range, continued their attacks on Syrian army and Hizbollah soldiers, and even extended the range of fighting to Lebanon in the area of the town of `Arsal, where they fought against the Lebanese army.

Despite the regime's success in surviving and regaining the initiative, it is far from defeating those rebelling against it. The rebels have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to survive and rain unexpected and painful, albeit unfocused, blows on the regime. They have driven the regime out of eastern Syria, reappeared in the Qalamoun mountain range and the rural areas around Damascus, consolidated their grip in the Syrian Golan Heights up to the Syrian-Israeli border, and even conducted surprise raids deep within the Syrian coastal area and toward the city of Latakia. The Syrian regime has not been able to defeat them, nor has it been able to break out from its stronghold in central Syria (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Latakia), where it has consolidated its control. Moreover, only an ever-shrinking section of the population, consisting mainly of the Alawite minority, which constitutes 12 percent of the population and perhaps even less, is willing to fight and die for it.

Events over the past year in Syria have reflected two prominent trends, characteristic of the fighting since the war began: the power and strength demonstrated by the Syrian governmental system, and the rebels' weakness, the divisions and strife within their ranks, and their growing tendency toward extremism. Reports from Syria say that hundreds of armed groups are operating on a local basis throughout the country, assuming various temporary formations, and joining and withdrawing from ad hoc umbrella groups created for the purpose of unifying the opposition to the regime.

Disunity and Islamic Extremism

It is no wonder that the Islamic groups, including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, have stood out among the rebels. They number about 50,000 soldiers, and are usually described as organized and disciplined groups, the strongest among the rebel forces. The principal groups are the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS; now called the Islamic State), led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the Support Front for the People of al-Sham (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahali ash-Sham), led by Abu Mohammed al-Julani, who resigned from ISIS in April 2013. The Islamic State has succeeded in consolidating its grip in an area of eastern Syria extending from the border with Iraq in ar-Raqqah to the outskirts of Aleppo. Jabhat al-Nusra controls Aleppo and Idlib, on the northern border with Turkey, and the area in southern Syria in the Daraa region and in the Golan Heights.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Turkey have tried, individually and sometimes together, to unite the groups affiliated with them. The most recent such attempt was the establishment of the Islamic front in November 2013 as a coalition of seven rebel groups with 50,000 soldiers. The driving force behind this front was apparently Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), under the leadership of Zahran Alloush, who is close to Saudi Arabia. Because of concern about an American veto, the al-Nusra Front was not included in the Islamic Front, but it was reported from Syria that Alloush was in regular contact with al-Nusra operatives. The Islamic front published its platform in late November, reflecting a radical Islamic philosophy. The platform stated, "The Front is an Islamic political and social body acting to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state. The Front's principles are based on Islam, which opposes democratic secularism and the idea of a civil state as a violation of religion and Islamic law."¹¹ The effort to unite these relatively moderate Islamic groups did not last more than several months, as each group continued to operate by its own. But the immediate losers from the establishment of the Islamic Front were the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the Free Syrian Army, which until then were recognized by the West as the representatives of the Syrian revolution. Around the time when the Front was founded, Alloush already announced that he did not regard himself as part of the National

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Coalition. Later, in December 2013, Islamic Front soldiers took control of the Free Syrian Army headquarters and its weapons stores near the Turkish border crossing at Bab al-Hawa. The decline of the Free Syrian Army led to the emergence of new moderate groups, such as Syria Rebel Front (Jabhat Thuwar Suriyya) and the Hazm Movement, operating mainly in northern Syria, in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces.¹²

In addition to the trend toward rifts and splits and an inability to unite and agree on a political and military leadership, the emerging trend toward radicalization is working against the rebels. This trend is particularly prominent among the Islamic groups, especially those affiliated with al-Qaeda, whose agenda has no affinity for the Syrian state as a political entity or the development of Syrian society. They have a record of persecuting members of minority groups, such as threats to kill Druze villagers in the Golan Heights if they do not convert to Islam; systematic destruction of Shiite mosques and Druze, Alawite, and Christian houses of prayer; revenge campaigns against non-Sunni soldiers and civilians; and mass executions of prisoners.¹³

The unexpected collapse of the Iraqi army in early June 2014 in northern Iraq, and the fall of the Syrian regime's strongholds and enclaves in eastern Syria in July-August 2014, the threat of a radical Islamic area stretching from the outskirts of Baghdad to the outskirts of Aleppo, and the declaration by al-Baghdadi in early July 2014 of the formation of a Muslim caliphate in this region under his leadership, followed by a declaration in early September 2014 by Abu Mohammed al-Julani of the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the territories under his control, have given the rebels a boost in their struggle against the Assad regime. ISIS's importance lies in the fact that it is the first organization fighting the regime to establish itself as a realistic alternative to Assad. ISIS has consolidated itself as a governing entity with government systems and economic, social, and legal services, however basic and primitive they may be. It has succeeded in unifying under its banner – admittedly through the use of threats and violence – a large part of the armed groups that have been operating in Syria until now. It has thereby succeeded where all the opposition groups that arose during the years since the revolution began in Syria have failed. At the same time, it has exacerbated the tensions between the various opposing groups in the rebel ranks, and more importantly, has generated renewed international legitimacy for the Assad regime.

In any case, the appearance of ISIS and Hizbollah's increasing involvement in the fighting in Syria are two sides of the same coin, and highlight a new aspect of the war in Syria. This war has gradually turned into a war between armed gangs. The gangs fighting on the regime's side (i.e., on the side of what remains of the regular Syrian army) consist mainly of groups of volunteers from the Alawite minority recruited by the regime to fight for it and Hizbollah soldiers. The rebel camp is composed of various armed groups, some of which are based on Arab and other Muslim volunteers streaming into the country from all over the Arab and Muslim world.

Furthermore, the revolution of the Syrian masses who went into the streets of rural towns and villages demanding justice and freedom has become a bloody civil war, and even worse, has been taken over by radical Islamic groups with no connection to the Syrian state and society. These groups seek an Islamic caliphate like that envisioned by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Muslim emirates like the one advocated by Mohammed al-Julani, and the Syrian masses are therefore no longer involved in the revolt. Consequently, revolutionary enthusiasm has faded, with feelings of revenge giving way to fatigue and exhaustion and, inevitably, a desire for an end to war at all costs, even renewed allegiance to the Syrian regime or, alternatively, acceptance of ISIS rule.

In view of this situation, a change in the international community's attitude to the crisis in Syria is emerging, even among the rebels' formerly most enthusiastic supporters. For example, in the summer of 2013, CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell stated on the occasion of his retirement that the civil war in Syria had become the greatest threat to the security of the US, while the Iranian nuclear question was at most a source of concern.¹⁴ Later, when the US began to assemble an international coalition against ISIS, it refused to include Assad's Syria, and even asked moderate rebels for help in a two-sided struggle against both ISIS and Bashar al-Assad, but it was clear to everyone that such a policy was useless, given the absence of a moderate alternative to ISIS among the rebels. The favorable atmosphere, even if not originating directly from Washington, enabled Assad to ignore international pressure. While he took part in the peace conferences in Geneva in June

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2012 (Geneva 1) and January 2014 (Geneva 2) under Russian pressure, he made sure that the talks would be unsuccessful. Instead, he chose election to another term as president of Syria in defiance of those within and outside of Syria calling for his replacement.¹⁵

Thus over the past year Bashar al-Assad succeeded in ensuring the survival of his rule in the central region of Syria and its heartland (the Damascus-Aleppo axis and the Alawite coast). It also appears that many people inside and outside Syria believe that his victory, or at least his survival in power, is the only remaining hope and guarantee for the preservation of the unity of Syria as a country and its existence as a sovereign state. At the same time, the rebels are still exacting a toll from the regime, and during the summer of 2014, ISIS sprang from their ranks as a leading element among the rebels. It poses an alternative to the Syrian regime in the regions where it holds sway, and where it is difficult to envision any local party whatsoever being capable of uprooting it. As a result, Syria has been effectively bisected into the east of the country, which is currently part of the ISIS caliphate, and the center and west of the country, still held by the regime but also containing rebel enclaves, from the Kurdish enclave in the north and east of the country to enclaves of opposition soldiers in western Syria, some of these being large autonomous areas beyond the regime's control. Whether Assad manages to defeat his opponents, or whether the rebels are successful, the winner or winners in the struggle are liable to discover that very little is left of Syria – a country that only a few short years ago was regarded as a paragon of stability, with a strong and invulnerable regime.

Notes

- 1 For estimates of the number of casualties in the war, see the March 18, 2013 statement by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, located in the UK. The organization's website is at <http://syriaahr.com>.
- 2 For the official announcement from Damascus about the election results, see Sana (the Syrian news agency in Damascus), June 4, 2014. Sana's website is at <http://www.sana.sy>.
- 3 For the achievements of the rebels and the course of the war in the early years, see Eyal Zisser, "The Deadlocked Syrian Crisis: The Fable of the Ants and the Elephant," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 2 (2013): 35-45.
- 4 For reports of the Syrian regime's use of chemical and other weapons, see Rick Gladstone, "Claims of Chlorine-Filled Bombs Overshadow Progress by Syria on Chemical Weapons," *New York Times*, April 22, 2014.

- 5 Fernande van Tets, "Hunger the Weapon of Choice for Syria's Assad Regime," *Independent*, October 30, 2013.
- 6 See the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi*, April 13, 2013. See also *Orient TV*, April 23, 2013.
- 7 For Hizbollah's involvement in the war in Syria, see Amos Harel, "Hizbollah is Changing the Rules of the Game on the Northern Border," *Haaretz*, April 26, 2014.
- 8 For Hizbollah's motives in the war in the Syria, see the article by Ibrahim al-Amin, editor of the *al-Akhbar* newspaper close to Hizbollah, "Hizbollah in Syria: 15 Months of Military and Defense Achievements," *al-Akhbar*, April 10, 2014.
- 9 In this context, see Ephraim Kam, "The Axis of Evil in Action: Iranian Support for Syria," *INSS Insight* No. 372, October 10, 2012; Shlomo Brom and Shimon Stein, "Hastening the End to the Civil War in Syria," *INSS Insight* No. 418, April 17, 2013.
- 10 For more about ISIS, see BBC, "Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)," June 16, 2014.
- 11 For more about the Islamic front and its platform, see the al-Jazeera television station on November 7, 23, and 26, 2013. See also *as-Safir* (Beirut), November 8 and 26, 2014, and *al-Monitor*, "The Rise of the Islamic Front is a Disaster for Syria," December 13, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.comurity/2014/05/syria-dispute>.
- 12 Reuters, November 23, 2013, and December 7, 2013.
- 13 For radicalization in the rebel ranks in Syria, see the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) article, "Radicalization in Syria," April 27, 2014, www.memri.org.il.
- 14 For Michael Morell's statement, see "CIA Official Calls Syria Top Threat to US Security," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2013.
- 15 For the Geneva 1 and Geneva 2 Conferences, see Benedetta Berti, "Between Paralysis and Fatigue: The 'Geneva 2' Negotiations on the Syrian Civil War," *INSS Insight* No. 509, January 23, 2014.