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Conflict in Syria: The Regional Fall-out

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The international community's inability to end the bloodshed in Syria contributes not only to a hardening of ethnic and sectarian battle lines in that war-torn country, but also to the exacerbation of fault lines in Turkey.

Commentary

The civil conflict in Syria has become a proxy war fought by global and regional powers. The potential fallout ranges from the exodus of many of its 2.1 million Christians from what they fear will be a Sunni-dominated post-Assad Syria, to the emergence of Kurdish areas in Syria as a new flashpoint in Turkey's intermittent war against Kurdish insurgents. It also risks a greater assertiveness of Turkey's Alevis, a Shiite sect akin to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Alawites that account for 20 per cent of its population.

All outside actors are being blamed for the crisis. Russia, determined to thwart perceived American regional designs and worried that its restless Muslim population may be inspired by the Syrian opposition's resilience, is seen as the bogeyman for paralyzing the United Nations with its vetoes, with China, of Security Council resolutions that would sanction the Assad regime. Iran, Assad's biggest Muslim ally, is seen being complicit in this.

While the United States, the EU, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar claim the moral high ground by backing Syrian rebels against Assad's brutal crackdown, they may well be ultimately seen as also having sharpened fault lines across a region trying to cope with his downfall.

While there are elements of correctness in the positions of the various foreign powers pushing their own agenda in Syria, for Iran the fall of Assad is a zero-sum game. Regime change in Syria would deprive it of its foremost Arab ally and complicate its support for Shiite Muslim Lebanese militia Hezbollah. Albeit late in the game, Iran last week sought to modify perceptions of its unconditional support for the Assad regime by convening a conference attended by 30 countries that in a statement called for a three-month ceasefire and "political solutions based on a national dialogue."

Like Iran, other players have to varying degrees set themselves up for blame by supporting one of the protagonists with no credible vision of building a united Syria that is more inclusive, democratic and less corrupt. In doing so, they risk contributing to a post-Assad Syria that could be wracked by ethnic and sectarian animosities with deadly revenge and retaliation campaigns.

Russia and China have effectively undermined their credibility by failing to match their support for Assad with credible efforts to mediate a solution as they had tried in vain to do in Libya. Both Russia and China nevertheless attended the conference in Tehran and endorsed its final statement.

Saudi Arabia employs its support of the rebels to further its Wahhabi rejection of Shiites, Alawites and Alevis as heretics and supporters of its Muslim nemesis, Iran, by allegedly backing attacks on Shiite shrines in Syria. Qatar represents a less harsh interpretation of Wahhabism but is no less supportive of opposition forces that, if in power, are likely to be no less bent on creating a Sunni Muslim rather than a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious Syria.

Pushing a Sunni Muslim agenda

Turkey, backed by the US, has positioned itself as the partisan champion of the Syrian National Council (SNC) that is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and consists primarily of exiles with diminishing popularity among a population that is bearing the brunt of battles raging in populated cities, towns and villages. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - flush with Gulf-funded arms, strengthened by US intelligence and communications support, and enabled with access to bases in southeastern Turkey – operates primarily as a Sunni Muslim militia.

In short, the lines for battles are being drawn not only in post-Assad Syria but also in the war-ravaged country's neighbours. Increasingly Syrian Christians, some of whom supported the opposition in the early days of the anti-government protests, feel that they are being targeted for their perceived support of Assad as the conflict becomes increasingly sectarian, and they worry whether there would be a place for them in a post-Assad Syria.

The memory of the fate of the Assyrians in southeastern Turkey who were forced to migrate to Europe in the late 1970s as a result of the government's economic negligence and Kurdish attacks, is reinforced by attacks on Christians in rebel-held areas of northern Syria. Christian refugees from those areas, many with family ties across the Turkish border, have all but given up hope of returning to their homes.

Between a rock and a hard place

Perceptions of the Turkish government favouring the Sunnis is fuelling a sense of deprivation and discrimination among Turkish Alevis who account for 50 percent of the border province of Hatay which was Syrian until 1938, when the French transferred it to Turkish sovereignty. Like the Christians they have cross border family ties and for the longest period of time saw the Assads as guarantors of their community's rights.

The escalating fighting in Syria puts Christians, Alevis and Alawites on both sides of the border between a rock and a hard place: they can choose between a discredited, corrupt pariah regime that has lost its ability to protect their rights and guarantee a semblance of pluralism, and a post-Assad regime that threatens to make Syria, with Turkish backing, a place in which they no longer are welcome.

Their concern is heightened by the impact of Saudi financial and clerical support for the rebels, whose anti-Assad campaign is increasingly being cloaked in religious terms. Salafis as well as homegrown jihadists and a relatively small number of foreigners, have joined the ranks of the rebels, albeit constituting a minority. Nonetheless, rebel fighters are reported to have attempted on several occasions to destroy the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet who is revered by Shiites.

Russia may top the list of nations Syrians will revile for either backing a regime that turned on its people but that will not allow the puppet masters in other world capitals to go scot-free. Many Sunnis and secular Syrians in a country where minorities account for almost half of the population, as well as minorities in Turkey, heap equal blame on the United States and its allies – Europe, Turkey and the Gulf states – for either failing to intervene to stop the slaughter or fuelling ethnic and religious conflict. The outcome is one that is likely to power not only anti-Russian- Chinese and anti-Iranian sentiment but also anti-Americanism, and plant the seeds for conflicts that are equally detrimental to American interests.

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