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SYRIA AND IRAQ: PLANNING FOR A LONG WAR AND A LONG RECOVERY

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Summary

The re-escalation of sectarian conflict in Iraq over the last six months is closely tied to developments in the Syrian war, where Iraqi Shi'a militia are key to the Assad regime's current offensive and Sunni militants linked to al-Qaida's Iraq franchise occupy large areas close to the common border. Even if peace is agreed in Geneva next year, tackling the security and economic legacies of this growing sectarianism may take decades.

Introduction

Two developments in the Syrian war are likely to have an extended impact on the entire Middle East region. One is the increasingly close linkage now evident between the war in Syria and the evolving conflict in Iraq. They are in the process of coalescing into what may amount to a single conflict. The second development is that the severity and duration of the war means that the post-conflict economic recovery of Syria, when it finally comes, is likely to take decades unless there is massive external support. On present trends, there will remain substantial ungoverned space in the heart of the Middle East region. The combination of the two factors has serious implications for long-term stability in the region and beyond.

Context – a Long War

Radical Jihadist paramilitaries are having increasing influence in the Syrian civil war. Many are non-Syrians. Often with experience of previous armed conflicts and access to weapons and funds, they have proved particularly effective in escalating violent opposition to the Assad regime. This has coincided with a concern in Moscow that its support for the regime may lead to it being targeted by Jihadist groups. With the Sochi Winter Olympics drawing near, there are thus good reasons for Russia to play a more active role in bringing the war to an end, a positive element already demonstrated by its involvement in resolving the chemical weapons issue.

This briefing examines the risk of regional instability and long-term economic and social disruption in a post-war Syria. It does this in the current context of evidence that the opposition group most consistently supported by western states, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), may be close to collapse. The FSA is facing severe opposition from two different forces. One is the paramilitary movement operating under the broad umbrella of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose advances have considerably undermined FSA efforts to consolidate control of parts of northern Syria. The other is the recent success of the Assad regime's forces in taking control of FSA territory, especially near Aleppo, and countering their advance between Jordan and Damascus.

The regime now has a resilience that is surprising compared with the expected outcome of the war over two years ago. In the late summer of 2011, there was a common view in many western countries that the regime was close to collapse and that frequent defections by senior military and political figures would ensure regime change. That is no longer confidently

predicted, and what is now seen is a protracted war that may increasingly focus on a bitter conflict between the regime and radical Islamists.

The Syrian-Iraqi Connection

The internal conflict in Iraq has escalated since May to the point where up to 1,220 civilians are being killed each month, mainly as a result of attacks by radical Sunni paramilitaries on government and Shi'a targets. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's early November visit to Washington included requests for further arms supplies such as drones and helicopter gunships, as well as an enhanced US military presence in the country to train Iraqi forces. The Obama administration was not especially sympathetic and urged Maliki to reach out to the Sunni minority. This is not likely given the probability of his standing for re-election in April 2014, when he will be dependent on the Shi'a majority for support.

There are now indications that Shi'a militias are re-forming in Iraq in order to protect their communities and that they may work informally with Iraqi government forces. This, in turn, should be expected to enhance support within Iraqi Sunni communities for their own paramilitaries, many of who have links to the al-Qaida movement, as well as support from financial sources in western Gulf States.

On its own this is a serious matter, pointing to a risk of a re-escalating conflict in Iraq, but what should be of even greater concern is an increasing linkage between Iraqi Shi'a militias and the war in Syria. There have long been connections between Sunni paramilitaries in Iraq and elements of the radical Sunni groups operating in Syria, and there have also been strong connections between Hezbollah and the Assad regime. Both of these factors already connect the Syrian conflict to sectarian conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq. This is in addition to the more general problem of the "double proxy" (Iran/Russia/regime and Saudi/West/rebels) element to Syria's war.

A further factor is now evident – the development of organised Shi'a militias with strong Iraqi connections that are directly aiding the Assad regime. These are in addition to the role of Lebanon-based Hezbollah. The most important element is Abu Fadl al-Abbas, which is made up largely of Iraqi paramilitaries and appears to have been formed in the latter part of 2012, rapidly expanding its activities during 2013. This group has been particularly effective in the recent fighting around Aleppo, bringing welcome support to the regime. Furthermore, the young men within this group appear to show a determination which is on a par with the al-Qaida-linked groups operating against the regime in the north of the country.

The connection between Abu Fadl al-Abbas and the Iraqi government may be tenuous at best, but the Maliki government allows supplies from Iran to transit to the Assad regime. Meanwhile, violence within Iraq has continued to worsen without eliciting much attention or response from western states.

Post-War Syria

Although it may be years before stability returns to Syria, it is already clear that the long-term effects of the war will be appalling. At root are the direct human costs of over 113,000 people killed, perhaps as many as twice that number wounded. New figures published by Oxford Research Group document that at least 11,420 children under the age of 17 had been killed

by August 2013.¹ Refugees in neighbouring countries now number over 2 million, including 800,000 in Lebanon, close to one fifth of the total population of that country. There is also massive internal displacement, but there is a more deep-seated long-term impact that is capable of being measured in economic terms.

According to data from the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), private consumption in Syria dropped by nearly 19% in 2012 and is expected to fall by 47% in 2013, a decline of 62% in two years. Largely because of the shutdown of economic activity in urban areas, well over 2 million jobs have been lost so far, but there is also a serious loss of social wellbeing. This is reflected in partial or total damage to 3,000 schools, as well as some 40% of hospitals across the country being closed. This latter element is substantially increasing the risk of epidemics, and the re-appearance of polio in eastern Syria is an early marker of this trend.

The point about this is that if the war does come to an end in the next two to three years then UNRWA estimates that the transition to something approaching the pre-war economy, with a 5% per annum growth rate, will take up to 30 years. During that time, the shattered country is likely to have severe internal security problems, including multiple ungoverned spaces that can serve as centres for continuing radical opposition.

Policy Implications

These two major trends – the regionalisation of the conflict, especially through to Iraq, and the long-term social and economic impact of the war – both come at a time when concern with the war has decreased in western states just as efforts should be redoubled to move towards a settlement. An improvement in relations between the US and Iran may be a welcome sign, but this should not divert attention from efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict.

Even before the combatant parties convene in Geneva, now scheduled for 22 January 2014, it would make good sense to begin the process of planning to aid the recovery and reconstruction of a post-war Syria. At some stage the war will end. When that happens, the more that has already been done to plan for the future, the more positive that future will be.

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¹ Hamit Dadargan and Hana Salama, *Stolen Futures: The Hidden Toll of Child Casualties in Syria*, Oxford Research Group (ORG), London, published 24 November 2013.