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Middle East and North Africa Summary

Syria: International Responses to a Growing Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of discussions that took place during a small closed-door study group convened at Chatham House in April 2013 to discuss the latest developments in Syria.

Some of the main findings of the meeting include:

- While the Gulf states share some overarching policy objectives in their support for the Syrian opposition, differences have emerged between them.
- Decisive US action on Syria remains unlikely but a number of scenarios, including the use of weapons of mass destruction, the risk of a spill-over and atrocities on an unprecedented scale could still trigger a stronger reaction.
- The humanitarian crisis in Syria is escalating rapidly and can be observed in the gradual loss of resilience by the population. Current relief efforts are unable to effectively respond to the scale of the crisis.
- The Syrian economy has shown a degree of resilience, likely due to external support, but its sustainability over the long term remains uncertain.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

SYRIA IN CONFLICT

Participants examined the current state of the Syrian conflict, including dynamics of the opposition and sentiment within regime-held areas.

Views on the opposition

Participants discussed the evolution of the Syria opposition, with differing views expressed regarding to what extent the conflict can be characterized as sectarian. Some argued that the war is progressively developing into a sectarian struggle between opposition groups driven by increasingly religious motivations and a regime that is rapidly losing its non-Alawite support base. However, other participants argued that President Al-Assad still has a significant Sunni support base, with one noting the presence of a number of Sunni refugees from the Aleppo countryside who have taken refuge in Tartous.

There was agreement over the exaggeration of jihadist influence within the military ranks of the opposition, with one participant suggesting the level of jihadist-affiliated fighters to be around 10 per cent. Yet some argued that the increased political role of the Muslim Brotherhood added a significant religious dimension to the opposition's political and military effort. Others, however, indicated that attempts to establish the extent of Islamist influence in Syria are compromised by a lack of reliable information.

Sentiments towards the regime and conflict

It was suggested that the regime's confidence – particularly over the unity of the military apparatus – has been reinvigorated over the past few months. This conviction seems to be supported by the absence of high-level defections since mid-2012. Participants agreed that the regime is determined to continue its military campaign. Several noted that on recent trips to Syria they have observed disillusionment, fatigue and increasing worry over the destiny of Syria among low-level regime officials.

Participants agreed that these feelings are shared by a growing portion of the Syrian population, including people who are in favour of democratic reform but have not actively been involved with, or supported the opposition movement. It was observed that there is 'real disenchantment' with the rebels spreading among ordinary Syrians, driven by perceptions that the rebels are looting and behaving thuggishly. One participant pointed out that most people from Damascus (both opposition supporters and regime sympathisers) do not want to see their city destroyed like Aleppo, and suggested that many

ordinary Syrian citizens might be in favour of establishing a dialogue between regime and opposition.

Nonetheless, participants agreed that negotiations are highly unlikely, with the regime continuing to feel that it does not need to negotiate.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Participants considered the options for a better coordinated international response to the Syrian crisis, discussing policy aims of the Gulf states and the role of the United States. With the exception of its humanitarian contribution, Europe was not regarded as an influential player.

The role of the Gulf states

Participants debated the motivation behind the Gulf states' involvement in the conflict, focusing particularly on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and, to a lesser extent, the United Arab Emirates.

Some argued that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are seeking to restore a Sunni-led regime to Damascus as part of a wider religious and ideological agenda in the region. According to this view, both countries have historically regarded the Assad regime as an anti-Sunni anomaly. There was some disagreement on this issue as participants pointed out that relations between Saudi Arabia and the Syrian regime have been largely collaborative over the past 30 years, suggesting that Saudi Arabia's motivations are more pragmatic. Participants agreed that there is a shared foreign policy objective on the part of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE to counter Iran's influence in the region.

One participant argued that portraying the Saudi and Qatari intervention as ideologically motivated is no more than a scare tactic employed by the Assad regime. Additionally, the Gulf states have depicted the Syrian conflict in largely sectarian and religious terms to domestic audiences rather than as a secular struggle for democracy.

Furthermore, as uncertainties over Syria's future have grown, the Gulf states have developed different strategies to pursue their sometimes incompatible policy objectives within Syria. The most notable divergence in their policies is over the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. Internal concerns about domestic opposition mean that Saudi Arabia and the UAE firmly oppose the movement. Qatar on the other hand, has proved willing to support it.

US involvement

Quoting a recent publication by the Baker Institute¹, participants considered a number of policy options for the United States. These included a more significant involvement with the Syrian National Council (SNC), assisting its promotion as an effective transitional government, greater coordination efforts with GCC states in order to secure funding for the SNC, intensified high-level diplomacy with Russia in an effort to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict, continued commitment to humanitarian efforts and, ultimately, the possibility of providing military assistance to opposition fighters through weapons supplies and training.

Participants agreed that a more decisive US response to the conflict was unlikely because of President Barack Obama's cautious foreign policy and in particular due to the fear that weapons supplied might be diverted to jihadi fighters. Moreover, the United States recognizes that arms transfers into Syria could result in a further militarization of the conflict, which a number of countries are opposed to. Finally, most international players acknowledge that Assad still holds a degree of internal support. Nonetheless, participants highlighted a number of scenarios that might lead to more resolute US action. These include a concrete danger of a spill-over, the use of weapons of mass destruction, and an instance of severe atrocities being carried out by either party – a 'Srebrenica moment'.

Some suggested that instead of assuming there will be a military victory, the United States should focus on promoting a peaceful resolution to the conflict by encouraging dialogue between the regime and its opponents. One participant argued that the international community had made a mistake by cutting off lines of communication with Assad early in the conflict, highlighting the comparison with the approach to Slobodan Milosevic during the Balkan conflict where discussions between the international community and Milosevic were ongoing until a very late stage.

Others strongly disagreed with this view, arguing that entering a dialogue with the regime would give Assad an opportunity to regain strength and manipulate public opinion. It was noted that those who decided earliest to oppose Assad (e.g. Turkey) were the same countries that had had the closest relationship with him previously – and had become convinced that negotiation would not work.

¹ The full report, *Syria at the Crossroads: U.S. Policy and the Way Forward*, can be found at <http://www.bakerinstitute.org/publications/BI-pub-SyriaReport-031813.pdf>.

Most recognized the difficulty of achieving a negotiated settlement and concluded that a ceasefire remains highly unlikely.

US-Russian relationship

Participants identified the absence of intense dialogue between the United States and Russia as a singularly detrimental feature of international involvement over Syria. Some suggested that greater mutual cooperation could foster a diplomatic solution to the crisis – the lack of dialogue was interpreted as a sign that Syria is not a top priority. Others, however, doubted the potential effectiveness of intensified bilateral engagement, questioning the extent to which the Assad regime could be influenced by Russian opinion.

AN ESCALATING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

According to several NGO representatives, the humanitarian crisis in Syria is escalating rapidly and the population is losing resilience. Unfavourable climatic conditions, including a drought in northern Syria and continuing fuel and seed shortages have impacted heavily on the country's agricultural sector, making access to food increasingly difficult. Ongoing fighting and the depletion of food reserves have resulted in high numbers of internally displaced persons – the latest estimates suggest that over two million people have been displaced internally. While some food assistance is being provided, participants pointed to the dire condition of medical facilities and support available to the conflict-affected population. The lack of health services has led many Syrians to seek medical treatment in poorly equipped clandestine facilities.

Aid agencies are struggling to secure enough funding to address all the needs of Syrians affected by the conflict. Moreover, access to cities and rural areas is limited by ongoing fighting, while regime-imposed restraints make it difficult for aid organizations to reach rebel-controlled areas. Aid agencies are required to register in order to be allowed to operate in specific areas – when such registrations are not granted by the government, their ability to operate without raising the question of impartiality is compromised. According to participants, regime intimidation (mostly through missile attacks) and the risk of kidnappings have also limited aid operations in opposition-held areas.

Meanwhile, across borders, the medical and educational demands of growing numbers of Syrian refugees are putting under intense pressure the educational and healthcare systems of host countries.

Participants agreed that greater international coordination was needed in order to counter the deteriorating humanitarian situation, emphasizing the need for a concerted effort by international donors to support the UN humanitarian appeal by channelling their funds through the institution. As the crisis deepens, participants estimated that relief efforts will be unable to effectively respond to the scale of the crisis.

So far, the UN programme has been severely underfunded. In part, this is due to structural problems. Mostly, however, there has been a lack of donor commitment. According to participants, this is due to the protracted nature of the conflict, which has led to decreasing mainstream media coverage and diminished the emotional appeal of the crisis. Meanwhile, competing priorities, above all the eurozone crisis, have further undermined the donors' commitment to humanitarian aid for Syria.

THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY

According to participants, the Syrian economy has shown a degree of resilience – in 2012, public sector salaries have largely been paid, fuel was scarce but reserves were not depleted, and public banks have maintained a relatively stable level of liquidity. Many factories have been destroyed, however many businesses also have managed to remain operational.

Participants argued that Syria's oppressive political and economic governance over the past 30 years has aided the creation of parallel shadow economies, which are now supporting the population. Meanwhile, the regime was deemed to be receiving outside support, as participants suggested that it could not have survived for so long on the limited resources it possesses.

Participants were uncertain about the sustainability of the current economic situation but suggested that intensified economic support to the opposition movement might help tip the balance in the conflict.

Overall, however, there was little sense that the end of the conflict was in sight. The combination of different local and international agendas has created a complex conflict, with little in the way of a concerted international policy effort to resolve it or even to manage the fallout in terms of violence, refugees and humanitarian need.

ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

<http://www.chathamhouse.org/mena>

ABOUT OUR SYRIA WORK

The MENA Programme has been running the [Syria Study Group](#) (SSG), an expert-level discussion series, since December 2011. MENA Programme researchers provide regular [comment and analysis](#) on Syria in the media, and are currently developing a stream of work on the Syrian conflict's economic, political and humanitarian impact across the region.

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