

Finding a Global Solution to the Syrian Crisis

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The feeling is growing stronger by the day that Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime is approaching a tipping point. Kofi Annan, the United Nations and Arab League special envoy, has abandoned his efforts to implement an internationally agreed six-point plan to end the violence. Now the international community must think seriously about how to minimize the dangers inherent in Syria's domestic turmoil.

Lack of agreement within the UN Security Council has prolonged the conflict and contributed to changing its nature. What began as a popular uprising inspired by the demands of the Arab Spring has taken on increasingly sectarian and radical tones. This reflects a loss of hope in international support, while making it more difficult to achieve a negotiated solution.

In particular, there is a growing danger of Sunni retaliation against the Alawite minority, which comprises only 12 percent of the population but controls the government, the economy and the army. The Alawites, who overcame second-class citizenship only when Assad's Baath

party came to power in 1963, now believe that their very survival is linked to that of the regime.

If the Syrian opposition does not take the Alawites' concerns seriously, the country could be wracked by years of civil war, worse than the conflict that devastated Lebanon from 1975 to 1990.

The regional consequences are already being felt. Fighting between the rebels and government forces is spreading, and the resulting refugee flows into neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon threaten to bring these countries into the conflict.

Turkey is also worried about the conflict's possible repercussions for its Kurdish population, among whom aspirations for independence are resurfacing, and for its relations with the Kurdish populations of Iraq and Syria, which are woven into a complex balance. Jordan, for its part, considers the growing numbers of Syrian rebels entering its territory a threat to national security, while the arrival of thousands of refugees in Lebanon has revived old sectarian disputes in Tripoli between Shia Alawites, most of whom support Assad, and Sunnis, who overwhelmingly sympathize with the opposition.

Chaos and confrontation could easily reach Iraq, too, where the possible fall of the Syrian regime seems to be revitalizing Sunni resistance to the predominantly Shia government in Baghdad.

The outcome of the Syrian conflict will also have a direct impact on the Middle East's alignment of power. A Sunni takeover after Assad's fall would mean a change of strategy with respect to Iran and its Lebanese Shia ally, Hezbollah, whose viability might be in danger, since a Sunni government in Syria would most likely cut off the conduit for arms flowing from Iran to Lebanon.

The disturbances in Syria have already weakened some of Iran's traditional alliances in the region. For example, Hamas has taken a position in favor of the Syrian opposition by emphasizing its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and gave its support last year to Egypt's transitional government after it permanently opened the frontier with Gaza.

Although the complex situation in Egypt suggests that its leaders will be preoccupied with domestic politics for some time, the new government will also try to redefine its relations with neighboring countries. Significantly, Egypt's recently elected president, Mohamed Morsi, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood political party, chose Saudi Arabia for his first official foreign visit, a decision laden with religious as well as political symbolism.

For Saudi Arabia — which, along with Qatar, is arming the Syrian opposition — the post-Assad period is a strategic opportunity to break the alliance between Syria and Iran, while at the same time delivering a severe blow to Hezbollah.

The weakening of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis would directly benefit Israel, which has stepped up its not-so-veiled threats to launch a unilateral military strike against Iran's nuclear installations. Likewise, Israel accuses Hezbollah, together with Iran, of recent efforts to attack Israeli objectives, including the bombing of a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria.

This new scenario will undoubtedly affect Iran's position in the ongoing international talks on its nuclear program, which are fundamental to achieving a diplomatic solution. But as long as the Syrian conflict continues, it will be difficult to make any progress with an Iran fearful of the impact that a new government in Syria might have on its regional influence. In the same way, achieving an agreement — or not — with Russia (and thus with China) to contain the Syrian crisis will also determine how much room for maneuvering the United States and the European Union will have with these two countries to address Iran's nuclear program.

To reach an agreement, it is essential that Turkey, the Gulf states and the Arab League forge a common position. This is the only way they win the backing of the various sectors of Syrian opposition, which are suspicious of the intentions behind unilateral support, and bring their positions closer to those of Syria's minorities. This would create more pressure for backing by the Security Council and set in motion a process leading to a transition policy in Syria. Reaching an agreement on a post-Assad scenario will not be easy, but no alternative is more promising for Syria and the region.

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