

The Third Phase of Syria's Ongoing Civil War

Written by Fred H. Lawson

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FRED H. LAWSON, JUL 1 2013

Syria's civil war has entered a third phase, which is likely to be more explosive than the ones that preceded it. The initial, largely forgotten, phase consisted of a cycle of protest and retaliation between civil rights activists in Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah and Dir'a and the regime's security services.[i] Early on the mass demonstrations elicited modest proposals for political reform from the authorities, but the steadily escalating use of indiscriminate force against the protesters quickly eclipsed these initiatives and made them seem at best half-hearted and at worst deceitful. By November 2011, the contest had morphed into outright civil war, with bands of opposition fighters engaging in armed struggle against the security services, pro-regime thugs and the regular armed forces (STR) for control over urban and rural districts all across the country.[ii]

Signs of the third phase of the uprising could be discerned in the late summer of 2012. Opposition forces that advocated overtly religious platforms couched in virulently sectarian rhetoric shouldered aside the few non-sectarian guerrilla formations, and emerged as the vanguard of the anti-regime coalition on the ground.[iii] Skirmishes between such groupings and the STR increasingly resulted in, or set the stage for, targeted killings of civilians of one sectarian affiliation or the other, most often of Sunnis by the STR and of 'Alawis and other Shi'is by the Islamists. The rising incidence of collective punishment prompted both sides to express a thirst for vengeance that bordered on calls for ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, the country's sizable communities of Kurds, Christians and Druze largely kept their heads down and hoped that the violence and chaos would somehow pass them by. Most residents of Damascus lived in a similar state of willful delusion, despite the firefights raging in the suburbs and the occasional car bomb ignited by the Assistance Front for the People of Syria (Jabhat al-Nusrah li Ahl al-Sham).

Supporters of the Ba'th Party-led regime clung with some credibility to the notion that they were upholding the principle of a political order that does not discriminate on the basis of sectarian background or religious creed. Their Islamist adversaries were considered to be clients, if not actual puppets, of radical Sunni movements rooted in the purificationist doctrines of Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab, most notably the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the global al-Qa'idah network. Enlisted personnel in the STR fought not only to protect the nation from civil strife and to defend the ideals of Ba'thi socialism, but also to preserve the myth that all Syrians enjoy equal rights as citizens. Sentiments like these kept the scale of troop defections much lower than outside observers predicted.

In November 2012, a new umbrella organization of opposition movements took shape, calling itself the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The NCSROF supplanted the old Syrian National Council, which critics charged had been dominated from the outset by the Muslim Brothers. Ironically, the NCSROF immediately elected as its head a prominent representative of the Muslim Brothers, Ahmad Mu'azz al-Khatib. The SNC had been careful to choose as its successive leading figures a secularist, Paris-based academic and a Kurdish activist who was a long-time resident of social-democratic Sweden. A modest broadening of the base of the opposition's flagship organization therefore accompanied a pronounced assertion of the Muslim Brothers's grip over its agenda and decision-making process.

Nevertheless, the NCSROF (like the SNC) enjoyed few if any connections to the Free Syrian Army and the Islamist formations fighting inside Syria. Relations between the external leadership and the FSA proved to be rocky from the very beginning. SNC leaders repeatedly ordered the FSA to subordinate itself to the civilian wing of the opposition, while FSA commanders insisted that they needed complete freedom of action in order to prosecute the revolt

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successfully. When the SNC at last set up a military structure of its own, the FSA not only refused to merge with it but even took steps to undercut the new command's attempts to co-ordinate operations among the autonomous militias that owed their allegiance to the Local Co-ordinating Committees. A similar fate befell a parallel effort on the part of the NCSROF in December 2012.

Persistent rivalries among its key components paralyzed the NCSROF and energized the Islamist formations that had seized the initiative on the battlefield. Primary among these is the Assistance Front, which expresses particular hostility toward members of the 'Alawi community, and tends to refer to the United States and Israel as "enemies of Islam." But this militia is only one of several radical Islamist groups that gained strength during the winter of 2012-13.[iv] The Free Syria Brigades (Kataib Ahrar al-Sham), whose adherents call for the replacement of the secularist Ba'thi order with an Islamic system of government, constitute a major actor in the countryside northwest of Homs. Just as prominent in rural areas around Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur is the Hawks of Syria (Suqur al-Sham), which appears to be more concerned with overthrowing the current political elite than it is with eradicating 'Alawis per se. Elements of the Hawks of Syria turned out to be especially ruthless in their treatment of captured soldiers and party functionaries. Horrific videos of the executions of unarmed prisoners were released by the militia as evidence of its firm commitment to punish all defenders of the Ba'thi regime.

Other significant Islamist currents include the Banner of the Nation (Liwa al-Ummah), whose units are made up largely of foreign fighters. Libyans who acquired combat experience in the campaign that ousted Muammar al-Qaddafi play a predominant role in this formation. Chechens, Uzbeks and Britons can be found in the ranks of the rival Dawn of Islam Movement (Harakah Fajr al-Islam). The 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigade, by contrast, has attracted cadres primarily from Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. These three currents refer to the Syrian uprising as merely the opening act of a global revolt against all those who oppress Muslims.

Despite their success in the field, the radical Islamists have alienated the general Syrian public in at least two overlapping ways. First, Islamist formations started to pick fights with other opposition militias. On 9 January 2013, members of the Assistance Front ambushed and killed the commander of the FSA's al-Faruq Brigade in the town of Sarmada. The attack most probably occurred as retaliation for the September 2012 assassination of the Islamist leader Firas al-Absi, and took place in the context of reports that the Assistance Front was organizing popular protests against the FSA in northern districts that had fallen out of government control. At the same time, the Assistance Front began to challenge Aleppo's pre-eminent Islamist militia, the Unity Brigade (Liwa al-Tawhid), and put sustained pressure on autonomous bands of fighters to accept orders from the Front's local military commanders.

Second, radical Islamist formations generated public outrage by brazenly assaulting Syria's minority communities. Human Rights Watch reported in January 2013 that one unit of Islamist militants destroyed meetinghouses used by devout Shi'is to commemorate the martyrdom of al-Imam Husain, and that other units had raided and looted Christian churches across Latakia province in November 2012. Syria's Sunnis are not immune to the wrath of the radicals: *The Guardian* reported on 17 January that members of the Assistance Front had damaged a number of tombs around the northern town of A'zaz, on the grounds that the monuments were "too pretentious for Islamic traditions."

In the face of such assaults, Syria's Kurdish community mobilized to protect itself. The great majority of Kurds had adopted a strictly neutral posture during the initial months of the uprising, so early rounds of the civil war by-passed the region around al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli. At the end of 2011, however, the authorities in Damascus tolerated, and perhaps even encouraged, the rise of a radical Kurdish organization throughout the northeastern provinces. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which represents the current incarnation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), subsequently took charge of a broad zone stretching from Ras al-'Ain (Serekani) on the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border. Clashes between the armed wing of the PYD, known as the Popular Protection Units (YPG), and Islamist fighters became more frequent and intense during the early weeks of 2013. At the same time, a rival Kurdish militia, the West Kurdistan People's Defense Forces, skirmished repeatedly against Islamist units along the border with Turkey.

It was under these circumstances that the STR drove opposition fighters out of the town of al-Qusair on the Lebanese border at the beginning of June 2013. Government troops then advanced on the key opposition

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strongholds of al-Rastan and Talbisah outside Homs, and made preparations for a large-scale offensive against opposition positions around Aleppo. Islamist commanders responded by threatening greater use of suicide bombs, particularly against concentrations of 'Alawi soldiers and civilians; on 19 June a bomb exploded outside a military facility in the largely 'Alawi southern suburbs of Latakia. FSA units simultaneously attacked a pair of Shi'i villages on the outskirts of Aleppo.

In a move dripping with symbolism, the STR then turned its attention to opposition enclaves encircling the shrine of al-Sayyidah Zainab on the edge of Damascus. Government forces were joined in the operation by members of the pro-regime Abu Fadl al-Abbas militia, whose ranks include large numbers of Iraqi Shi'is. At the same time, an Islamist formation sliced through the Shi'i village of Hatla outside Dair al-Zur, killing some five dozen of its inhabitants and torching the local mosque; members of the militia then posted a video on YouTube in which they called on Sunnis to "massacre" Shi'is wherever they found them. The threat amplified Shi'i fears growing out of an attack two weeks earlier on the tomb of Hujr bin 'Adi.

Meanwhile, Islamist militias battled Kurdish formations around the city of 'Afrin, while a shaky ceasefire kept the two sides from resuming the battle for Ras al-'Ain. The conflict between the Islamist opposition and militant Kurds, particularly those affiliated with the YPG, has direct consequences for relations between the authorities in Iran and the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which like the YPG has strong links to the old PKK. Reports that PJAK had attacked a unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps along the Iran-Iraq border in early June were parried by counter-reports that the guardsman who was reported to have been killed in the clash had instead died while he was fighting the FSA inside Syria.

Trends in the Syrian uprising over the past two and a half years have much to contribute to current scholarship on civil war. In the beginning, the split between critics and defenders of the Ba'thi regime mapped very poorly onto sectarian affiliation. The opposition included substantial numbers of 'Alawis, while Sunni allies of President Bashshar al-Asad could be found at the elite and popular levels alike. Mobilization along sectarian lines occurred only much later on, at the instigation of influential preachers and other political entrepreneurs and in the wake of brutal attacks against unarmed civilians undertaken by both sides. Consequently, the numerical or spatial distribution of sectarian communities prior to the fighting is unlikely to tell us much about either the origins or the developmental trajectory of the war.

On the other hand, the course of contentious politics in present-day Syria shows that contemporary studies of revolution are on the right track when they investigate exactly how the authorities choose to respond to widespread and sustained popular protest.[v] Preliminary studies of the Syrian case have explored the peculiar social networks that enabled protesters in Dir'a to stand up to the security services,[vi] thereby paving the way for future investigations of parallel dynamics in the rugged countryside northwest of Homs. Equally useful will be detailed accounts of the activities of the Local Co-ordinating Committees and the civil rights activists of the National Co-ordinating Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change, who dared to remain inside the country while the external leadership of the opposition debated grand strategy in the conference rooms of five-star hotels in Turkey and the Gulf.

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[i] Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch Syria* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2013), 79-82.

[ii] *Ibid.*, 91-101.

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[iii] International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report No. 128, 1 August 2012.

[iv] Joseph Holliday, *Syria's Armed Opposition*, Middle East Security Report No. 3, Institute for the Study of War, Washington, D.C., March 2012; Aron Lund, *Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Forces* (Uppsala: European Foundation for Progressive Studies, 2012).

[v] Jack A. Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4(2001), 160-161.

[vi] Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers," *Mediterranean Politics* 17(July 2012).

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