

Are They Intervening Yet? Power and Spillover in the Syrian Conflict

Written by Ciaran Gillespie

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CIARAN GILLESPIE, JUN 11 2013

In a recent piece for Chatham House on the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, Martin Chulov wrote “I fear for the region more than at any point in my eight years here. Borders are becoming increasingly irrelevant”. He professed a deep fear that sectarian rather than national identities were drawing the boundaries in a violent chasm opening across the Middle East. The point of emanation is the brutal civil war in Syria, the intensity of the violence seeming to affect all those in proximity to it. The sectarian nature of the fighting is difficult to ignore but the fact that borders are becoming irrelevant has as much to do with the nexus of powerful states and embattled regimes that are attempting to influence the outcome in Syria than the religious identity of those caught up in the fighting.

In the west, British Foreign Minister William Hague is celebrating success in his campaign to prevent the EU’s ban on weapons exports to Syria from being renewed, thus allowing for arms transfers to rebels. After EU governments failed to agree on a new embargo, French Foreign Minister Philippe Lalliot confirmed France would be able to deliver weapons before the 1st August. Both foreign ministers reaffirmed their stance that seeking a diplomatic solution through a new Geneva summit took priority over military aid (although the subsequent decision by Russia to further bolster Syrian air defences is now being held up as justification for delaying any such negotiations).

The UK and France’s push for a military solution is likely being viewed internally as a win-win scenario. They believe that the threat to provide sustained military assistance to the rebels will force Assad to see the hopelessness of his situation and come, hat in hand, to the negotiation table. If not, then the requisite lip service was duly paid to diplomacy and we continue to fight to the last drop of Syrian blood for the desired result. The fact that Britain and France seem fairly isolated among the major powers in this interpretation of the situation might indicate the hubris of the embargo decision.

The Geneva talks themselves did not appear to be a great source of hope for progress, despite sponsorship from the US and Russia. Reports indicate a recent conference for Syrian opposition leaders in Istanbul proved less than fruitful – not even proceedings for the conference could be agreed upon and secular representatives were apparently frozen out altogether. The lack of a conduit with a clear identity is causing deep unease within the Obama administration. Attempts to forge a Syrian National Council akin to Libya’s are increasingly seen as hopeless. Attitudes appear split over the extent any proxy war to unseat Assad is worthy of the risks, terrified as the administration is of headlines depicting arms transfers to Al-Qaeda affiliates. In this light, it seems that both Russia and the US might be happy to sue for some sort of peace or organised stalemate (regardless of what that looks like for Syrians), before the situation spills further out of control and threatens an already unstable regional dynamic.

And it does appear increasingly, unnervingly, unstable. An airstrike by Israel on a military installation in West Damascus in early May was a significant development in the tangled web of outside intervention. The attack was launched from outside Syrian airspace due to the sophistication of Syria’s existing anti-air defences (something to keep in mind in future discussion of any potential western imposition of a no-fly zone) and was designed to destroy a either a) shipment of Fateh 110 long range missiles destined for Hezbollah or b) a military scientific research centre, depending on whether you want to believe the Israeli or Syrian reports. The incident has driven a significant wedge between Moscow and Tel Aviv, with Vladimir Putin tracking down Benjamin Netanyahu (who was in China at the

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time) to gruffly harangue him in on the phone.

The Israeli premiere reacted just as strongly in the last week by stating that Russia's decision to further bolster Syrian air defences with S-300 missiles (and thus significantly increasing the jeopardy to any potential air intervention) as being "likely to draw us into a response, and could send the region deteriorating into war". It should be clear that almost all the arms transfers Putin is making to the Assad regime are kitting out its military for a war with a country with an air-force, not against the capabilities of the Free Syrian Army.

Only in a situation as deeply worrying as the Syria could this 'spat' between two nuclear armed states be considered as merely a sideshow component of the geopolitical quagmire. Hezbollah's entry into the war proper on behalf of the loyalists is another significant development. The rationale of leader Hassan Nasrallah might seem clear enough in purely realist military terms – if the Assad regime falls and Hezbollah's land bridge to Iran is cut off, they will not be able to access the military equipment they would need to repel further Israeli incursions into Southern Lebanon. As Nasrallah put it "If Syria falls into the hands of America, Israel and Takfiris [Sunni extremists], the resistance will be besieged and Israel will enter Lebanon and impose its will." The impact on their regional credibility of choosing to fight on behalf of the deeply resented, murderous regime of Bashir Al-Assad will not be insubstantial. Last week Palestinians in Hilweh in Sidon refugee camp apparently burnt food packages from Hezbollah in protest, saying "we don't want assistance soaked in the blood of the Syrian people". The fact US foreign policy commentators are lining up to point out the potential gains that lie in careful exploitation of the situation might indicate further potential fallout from Nasrallah's decision. While there may be a great deal of international concern over atrocities attributed to rebel fighters, regionally, Hezbollah's decision to side with Assad contradicts much of the momentum and ethos of the Arab Spring.

The other catastrophic development for Hezbollah, or more importantly for Lebanon, is that it seems the conflict will inevitably follow them home. The head of Al-Nusra front, who has pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri, has promised that 'Beirut will be put to fire' if Hezbollah does not end its campaign in Syria. The threat was made with a 24 hour window of compliance several weeks ago. While there might have been hope that it was bluster, the last few days have seen an influx of reports of sustained fighting between Hezbollah and Syrian rebels in Lebanon. The potential for new sectarian fighting in the country is palpable and the shadow of its 15-year civil war looms as darkly as it has in anytime in recent memory.

But of course Lebanon is not the only country experiencing fallout. Only for Syria's domination of news coming from the region are we not giving Iraq's civil war its due diligence. According to the UN mission there, 1045 people died in political violence last month, the largest number since June 2008. The intensity of the killing in May is largely being attributed to the storming of a Sunni protest camp by Iraqi security forces that resulted in the deaths of 44 people. There are (perhaps tenuous) parallels being drawn between Sunni protests against Nouri Al Maliki's increasingly dictatorial regime and the rebels in Syria. Whether this amounts to 'spillover' or is indicative of internal political degradation is open to interpretation. What is clear however is that both Sunni and Shiite fighters from Iraq are operating in Syria. Suspicions abound that the Iraqi government is tacitly authorising Shi'ite fighters including members of the Mehdi Army to enter the fight on behalf of the Assad regime while also providing logistical support to Iranian arms transfers. Such operations are strongly denied at the official levels. US requests to inspect Iranian shipments through Iraq have been granted and as yet uncovered 'nothing illegal'.

The sectarian characteristic of the violence tearing apart large sections of the middle-east and Pakistan might seem like a senseless bloodletting from the outside. But it is mistaken, dishonest even, to lay the blame for the human catastrophe at the door of zealots or age old hatreds. It is encouraging that most commentary seems to recognize the sectarian aspect of the conflict for what it is; power politics in sectarian garb.

Any question about whether we in the west should intervene in such a situation is rendered fairly moot. We have been and are intervening. That intervention does not take a form that immediately addresses the human cost of the conflict, and therefore may not be immediately recognisable, but we have shaped the region to such an extent that we are simply seeing the outcome of interventions a little further back on the conveyor belt. The region, for which analysts and correspondents are now fearing for more than at any time in recent history, has seen so much

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'intervention' in just the last 10 years that the effects on internal political divisions are difficult to fully appreciate – fallout resulting from the wars in Iraq and South Lebanon have contributed substantially to the current situation. The war in Syria may draw its sustenance from Iran and Saudi Arabia but they also have their foreign backers. Saudi Arabia, may have the fourth largest defence economy in the world but it has no military industry- everything they have to transfer into the war is equipment that other states sell, and the US and UK are its preferred suppliers. Turkey, another major supplier to the war, is only marginally behind Saudi Arabia in terms of arms imports.

The Sunni and Shia populations are being ground between the gears of Iran and Saudi Arabia's interjecting hegemonies locally. At the global level, a more nuanced struggle over maintenance of access and control in the region is being conducted between the US, Russia and China. It is best to remember that despite the major political fluctuations of the Arab Spring, very little has changed thus far in terms of the balance of power in the region. The fear that Assad falling to a new, western friendly regime could undermine Iran and Russia's position is motivation enough for Moscow and Tehran to fight for stalemate and a negotiated peace. And while there are many in Washington who want to pursue exactly such an outcome (with an eye to a future attack on Iran), the administration itself seems completely torn on the merits of attempting to involve itself any further in a conflict that is seen as racing out of control. The British and French are attempting to join with the hawks in Washington to push for a more decisive US 'intervention' and it remains to be seen whether they will get their wish. Keep a watch for the new 'evidence' of gas attacks and goading over the 'red line' in the coming days and weeks as an indication as to how that fight is going.

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