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Iraq and the unpredictable Syrian trajectory

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Iraqis celebrated the “Arab spring” that changed the regimes of Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. But they are divided about the protests and uprisings in Bahrain and Syria. On the surface, it seems that this is merely a reflection of the sectarian divide in Iraq’s society and politics, or of external influence on Iraq’s politicians, be it from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or wherever.

But there are more important factors that shape Iraq’s position on the Syrian crisis. In view of increasing popular discontent in Syria, its divided opposition, the loyalty of the bulk of the security forces, and the divided international community, the Syrian trajectory remains highly unpredictable. Here we look at a variety of possible scenarios, some with implications that present substantial risks to Iraqi national security.

The first scenario is an Assad regime without President Bashar Assad. Like what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, the regime saves itself by sacrificing the leader or leaders. This scenario is possible but not highly probable, given rising tensions between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority that dominates the regime.

In a second scenario, the regime attempts to manage the protests by force as was the case in Iran after the 2009 elections. Yet there are hardly any similarities between the two political systems, their popular support, and their security apparatuses. The regime has tried the security approach since the beginning of the protests, without success. Given the past year’s developments, one might expect the violence to become bloodier and more prolonged. Yet the international community would not tolerate such bloodshed, nor would such a regime fit into the post-Arab spring Middle East. Thus this scenario would metamorphose eventually to one of the scenarios below.

A third scenario assumes military intervention like the NATO operation in Libya. But Syria is not Libya. Syria has a population density more than 30 times greater, leverage over Hizballah in Lebanon, and far stronger military forces. Hence military intervention would require a far more advanced operation than was the case in Libya and would risk high civilian casualties. In addition, should intervention take place, Iran and its allies would undertake potentially destabilizing action inside and outside Syria reminiscent of the cycle of violence in Iraq in the wake of the United States invasion. Intervention would also be welcomed by al-Qaeda in the hope that it would in turn incite popular uprisings that would open the way for the jihadists eventually to take power.

In scenario number four, the US, NATO and other allies create humanitarian corridors and/or designate safe havens guarded by the Free Syrian Army to provide relief to the Syrian population and dissident groups. The Turkish prime minister has suggested creating buffer zones for similar purposes. The problem is that the FSA is not capable of confronting coordinated attacks by the loyal Syrian army. If NATO sends peacekeeping troops, they can either be held hostage by the Syrian army or would eventually have to engage them in battle. NATO implemented a similar plan in Bosnia in the mid-1990s, but this did not prevent the massacre of thousands of Bosnians and eventually developed into a much larger military intervention.

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The fifth scenario is arming the opposition, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have suggested. Though this may be the easiest course of action, it could cause regional spillover into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan and fracture Syria along sectarian lines. A divided Syria would become an arena for Iranian-Saudi struggle (reflecting Shiite-Sunni tensions). Syria would slide to the edge of civil war as Iraq did in 2004-2007. But with no decisive third party forces in the country as was the case in Iraq, escalation to full-scale civil war similar to Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s seems very probable. The main side-effect of such a scenario is that the majority of the rebels would become increasingly radical, allowing al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to gain a foothold in Syria. This in turn would determine the shape of post-Assad Syria.

The US, Saudi Arabia and other countries are weighing whether they can weaken Iran geopolitically by weakening Syria – via military intervention, arming the rebels, or creating secure zones. The consequences of such policies would be disastrous for Syria's neighbors and specifically for Iraq. The most significant regional jihadist presence lies across the Syrian border in Iraq. Syria supported these insurgents from 2003 to 2007. The consolidation of Iraqi government power has greatly weakened but not eliminated them. If extremists dominate the post-Assad government or if Syria becomes a failed state, then the risk of a jihadist revival in this area threatening the stability of Iraq would be very real.

That is why Iraq hopes to find a solution in which reforms lead to peaceful transformation of the regime in Syria without a security vacuum or prolonged violence. The current effort by Kofi Annan, the United Nations-Arab League envoy for the Syrian crisis, could be the basis of such a solution. It would save thousands of Syrian lives during the transformation process and save more lives of Syrians, Iraqis and others in the aftermath.

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