



In brief: Syria's bloody stalemate

Standard Note: SNIA 6459

Last updated: 31 October 2012

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

The UN estimates that **more than 25,000 have died** since March 2011 (35,000, according to the opposition), that there are more than 2.5 million in urgent need of humanitarian assistance within the country and that over 340,000 Syrians have fled the conflict in Syria to find refuge in neighbouring countries. There are also thought to be over a million internally displaced. Government forces have increasingly been using air power to strike areas held by the rebels and the daily death toll is probably growing.

The rebels appeared to be making significant progress in Damascus and Aleppo in the summer, but they have been pushed back since then. But the Government does not seem able to muster sufficient force to definitively clear the big cities of opposition fighters and reassert control over the whole country; it can probably only count on the loyalty of about 50,000 mainly Alawite troops in the 3rd and 4th Divisions, Special Forces and the Republican Guard.

Refugees have fled largely to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The ability of those countries to look after hundreds of thousands of people, the number has tripled in three months, is being questioned, particularly as the winter approaches, and the UNHCR has called on the international community to provide more support for the generosity and hospitality shown by Syria's neighbours.

The regime's strategy to turn the conflict into a **sectarian** one, thereby forcing its traditional supporters among Alawites and Christians to stick to it for protection, appears to have worked to some extent. There are signs of increasing fragmentation in the opposition; partly as a result of funding from conservative individuals in the Gulf, Salafist (fundamentalist) elements in the opposition are on the rise. Some but not all of them are global *jihadis* along the lines of al-Qaeda. On the whole radical groups are still marginal, but that may change; Western calls for the opposition to unite and to combat the drift towards sectarianism are not working.

One of the great fears is that the conflict could spread to **Syria's neighbours**. Lebanon in particular is vulnerable because of the fragility of the present peace between its different religious groups. There have been exchanges of fire over the Lebanese border and fighting has broken out between Sunni and Shia Lebanese, supporting the rebellion and the Syrian Government respectively. Earlier this month, the Lebanese intelligence chief, a Sunni, was killed by a car bomb. Many Lebanese said that this was a deliberate attempt by Syrian elements to destabilise Lebanon.

Militant Iraqi Sunnis have been going to Syria to join the rebellion, and it is reported that the Iraqi Government has allowed Iran to use its air space to supply the Syrian Government with weapons. Iran has reportedly been helping Iraqi Sunnis to join the fight on the Syrian

Government's side. It is not hard to imagine the conflict blowing back into Iraq itself, where the embers of sectarian conflict are still glowing.

The threat of conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Government is also worrying. Hostility between the two sides has increased as Syrian shells have landed in Turkey and Turkey has responded with artillery attacks on pro-Assad forces.; the Turkish Chief of Staff has threatened to escalate the Turkish response if Turkey continued to take shells. Turkey does not want a war with Syria, but hostilities could spiral out of control.

The **UN Security Council** has not complied with widespread calls to show a united front on the Syrian crisis. Lakdar Brahimi, the UN's Special Envoy, called for at least a temporary ceasefire to coincide with Eid al-Adha, the three-day Islamic festival which fell at the end of October this year. The call was supported by William Hague for the UK Government, and by other permanent members of the Security Council. The ceasefire may have led to a slight initial lull (though many opposition leaders said they did not trust the Government enough to observe it at all), but it quickly broke down and the ceasefire bid was generally viewed as a failure. It was due to end on Monday 29 October and, on that day, a car bomb exploded in Damascus and heavy air strikes were reported in rebel-held areas.

The conflict has not developed dramatically since the summer, and the **outlook** remains bleak for Syrians. While the death, suffering and destruction have been horrific, the tempo of the conflict could have been a lot faster. Accurate figures are impossible to come by, but by way of comparison, Libya's National Transitional Council estimated that 25,000 had died in the civil war there, which only lasted about eight months, in a population only one third the size, meaning that the death rate in Libya was several times higher than in Syria.

There is still talk of external intervention, as Turkey has called for the creation of safe havens, but most accept that there will be **no decisive military intervention** from outside. Apart from the cost and difficulty of effective intervention, many countries are wary of destroying the Syrian armed forces for fear of the chaos that could ensue. Such intervention as there is (and this includes aid mainly channelled through the Free Syrian Army, including the payment of some salaries) remains poorly coordinated and plagued by infighting both among Syrian opposition forces and among donor countries, reportedly particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.

The Syrian civil war is not likely to end soon – one analyst said recently it could go on until 2020. Even if the permanent members of the Security Council did manage to unite around a plan for a settlement, it is not clear that they would be able to impose their will on the parties to the conflict (although they would have a better prospect than at present, when they are clearly not fully united). Some have said that **Iran**, as the Assad regime's closest ally, needs to be involved for any political settlement to have a chance. Some have suggested **Yemen**, where the President stepped aside in favour of his deputy and was offered immunity, as a model for transition. Using Syria as a proxy battleground for two struggles – one between Russia and the West and the other between Sunnis and Shias – will help ensure that the conflict drags on for some time.