



Election against a background of violence in Syria

Standard Note: SNIA 6910

Last updated: 12 June 2014

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

- Bashar al-Assad has claimed an overwhelming victory in the presidential election held in June 2014.
- However, most of those living in areas controlled by rebel forces were prevented from voting.
- The election took place against a background of continuing violence as government forces took control of the strategic city of Homs.
- The government looks to have the upper hand although the takeover of Mosul by the extremist group ISIS could significantly strengthen the jihadist threat to the Assads
- Assistance to the Syrian government from Russia, Hizballah and Iran has been highly significant
- The suffering of Syrian civilians continues unabated and violence is likely to persist in the country for some time.

Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|----------|
| 1 | Presidential election | 3 |
| 2 | Armed conflict | 4 |
| 2.1 | Aleppo and Damascus | 4 |
| 2.2 | Drawn-out fighting | 5 |
| 2.3 | ISIS | 5 |
| 3 | Chemical weapons | 5 |
| 4 | Support for the Syrian government | 6 |
| 4.1 | Iran | 6 |
| 4.2 | Russia | 6 |
| 4.3 | Hizballah | 6 |
| 5 | Support for the rebels | 6 |
| 6 | Humanitarian assistance | 7 |
| 7 | Commentaries on Western policy | 8 |

1 Presidential election

The Syrian parliament announced in April 2014 that presidential elections would be held on 3 June. Middle East minister Mark Simmonds said that the election was designed to maintain the Assad 'dictatorship' and that the Syrian government should re-engage with the political process set out in the last Geneva conference:

Assad's plans for elections can only be designed to sustain his dictatorship. They will be conducted against the backdrop of non-stop regime attacks on civilians, hundreds of thousands living under regime siege in horrendous conditions, and in a climate of fear where thousands of non-violent opponents to Assad have been detained or have disappeared. Millions of Syrians who have been displaced from their homes, or who live as refugees outside Syria, will be prevented from voting. Syria's new electoral law rules out any genuine opposition to Assad.

Elections conducted on this basis fall far short of any international standard, and their outcome will have no value or credibility.

The UK strongly endorses the democratic and pluralist vision put forward by the Syrian National Coalition, and we recognise the Geneva II political process as the proper place for the Syrian parties to negotiate political and constitutional transition. The Syrian regime must re-engage with this process, rather than undermine it.¹

The election was duly held on 3 June but only in the areas of the country which the Syrian government controls. An official press release said that turnout among those citizens 'who have the right to vote' was about 74%.² Bashar al-Assad gained just under 89% of the votes cast,³ while two other candidates passed the relatively restrictive conditions for standing in the election and each gained less than 5% of the vote. Many other people who wanted to stand were disqualified. At the last presidential plebiscite, held in 2007, there was only one candidate, Bashar al-Assad, and he gained 97% support on a 94% turnout, according to official results.⁴

Western leaders dismissed the election. The EU issued a statement saying that the election lacked democratic legitimacy:

The election on 3 June cannot be considered as a genuinely democratic vote. A flawed electoral law imposed identification requirements that deprived most Syrians living in areas under opposition control of the ability to cast their vote. The law also prevented exiled opposition candidates from standing against President Assad, and blocked access to alternative sources of campaign information.⁵

US Secretary of State John Kerry said 'You can't have an election where millions of your people don't even have an ability to vote',

¹ ['Syria elections only designed to sustain Assad's dictatorship'](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press notice, 21 April 2014

² ['Supreme Constitutional Court: Number of participants in Presidential elections reached at 11.634.412 with 73.42%'](#), *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 4 June 2014

³ ['Dr. Bashar Hafez al-Assad wins post of President of Syria with sweeping majority of votes at 88.7%'](#), *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 4 June 2014

⁴ International Foundation for Electoral Systems Election guide: [Syrian Arab Republic referendum 2007](#)

⁵ ['Statement on the presidential elections in Syria'](#), European External Action Service, 4 June 2014

2 Armed conflict

The presidential election took place against a background of intense violence. The central city of Homs, one of the birthplaces of the uprising in 2011, was surrendered by the rebels at the beginning of May after a long siege by government forces. Its vital location between the two biggest cities of Damascus and Aleppo added to the symbolic importance of the re-establishment of government control over the city and as the rebel retreated from Homs, the impression was given that government forces are gaining the upper hand.

Elsewhere, the government is largely in control of towns in the south of the country. Rural areas are generally more mixed and there is still significant rebel activity there. In the north and east of the country, large areas are controlled by rebels including the Free Syrian Army, the Nusra Front, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, sometimes referred to as ISIL) and other radical Islamic groups and, in the far north, Kurdish forces. The BBC News website has a map updated to March 2014 [here](#).

Some of the recent fighting has been between different rebel groups. In particular, ISIS has clashed with Kurdish rebels in the north of the country, while ISIS fighters were expelled from Aleppo in January and February 2014 by more mainstream rebel groups. The Islamic Front, a coalition of radical Islamic groups widely thought to be backed by Saudi Arabia, has often been involved with the fighting against ISIS.

There is fighting in Deir el-Zor and in the Dera'a province, much of it between the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Thousands of civilians are reported to have fled Deir al-Zor province, where there is a struggle under way over oil resources.⁶

The Syrian government has been criticised for the alleged continued use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate shelling and barrel bombs.⁷

2.1 Aleppo and Damascus

Aleppo, Syria's largest city, remains divided between the government and the opposition and has been the scene of particularly fierce fighting. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that almost 2,000 have been killed by government aerial bombardment of Aleppo this year.⁸ The government is accused of using barrel bombs: oil drums or similar containers packed with explosives. They are highly inaccurate and cause enormous explosions, often devastating residential areas and resulting in many casualties. The rebels have taken to placing large bombs in tunnels below government buildings in Aleppo, resulting in huge destruction.⁹

Damascus remains largely under government control but rebels hold some territory in rural areas around the capital and there is still considerable violence in both parts of the city and in rural areas. According to the government, rebels fired mortars in April that landed in the grounds of the Damascus Opera House, killing two.¹⁰

⁶ 'Car Bomb Kills More Than 40 at Syrian Border Crossing', *New York Times*, 15 May 2014

⁷ HC Deb 9 Jun 2014, c25WS

⁸ 'Almost 2,000' killed by Syria barrel bombs in 2014', *BBC News Online*, 30 May 2014

⁹ *Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2139 (2014)*, United Nations Security Council, 22 May 2014

¹⁰ 'Two killed by mortar fire on Damascus opera house -state media', *Reuters*, 6 April 2014

2.2 Drawn-out fighting

Even though the government appears to be getting militarily stronger at present, it is unlikely that it will gain complete control of the country for some time. Even in areas where they are dominant, violence flares up regularly, particularly away from the main urban centres. Many towns remain besieged by government forces, causing great suffering to the civilian population. Opposition forces also laid siege to some towns. Both government and rebels are accused of cutting off water supplies in besieged towns.¹¹

2.3 ISIS

ISIS has its roots in Iraq and many of its commanders are Iraqi. It has also recruited foreign fighters, which is a cause for concern in Western security circles, where there is a fear that fighters in the Syrian conflict may pose a threat to Western nations. According to one estimate, 80% of Western fighters in Syria have joined ISIS.¹²

In June 2014, ISIS took control of Iraq's second biggest city Mosul and of Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit, furthering the group's aim to create a fundamentalist Islamic state including the Sunni areas of Iraq and parts of Syria and other areas of the Levant.

Not only was the takeover of Mosul a threat to the Iraqi government, it strengthened the threat to the Syrian government. Press reports suggested that ISIS had taken control of Iraqi weapons and armoured vehicles as well as looting hundreds of millions of dollars from Mosul banks.

3 Chemical weapons

There were suggestions that the programme to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons did not at first progress according to plan, according to a note by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.¹³ The deal agreed between Russia, Syria and the US in 2013 envisaged the final of all Syria's chemical weapons by 30 June 2014. However, since December 2013, the Syrian government has not been meeting the targets set out in the deal. By mid-April 2014, about two thirds of Syria's stockpile had been destroyed in the country or removed to other countries. Critics said that the Syrian government was acting slowly in order to keep the chemicals as a bargaining chip. The Syrian government argued that the programme has involved logistical difficulties.

The elimination programme has accelerated recently, however, and by the end of April most of the chemicals had been removed or destroyed.¹⁴ Norway and Denmark have been praised by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for their assistance with the OPCW's Syrian programme.¹⁵

In May 2014, the French government said that Syria had used chlorine gas in a series of recent attacks.¹⁶ The OPCW investigated the claim.

¹¹ [Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2139 \(2014\)](#), United Nations Security Council, 22 May 2014

¹² ['Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant'](#), *BBC News Online*, 11 June 2014

¹³ 'Elimination of Syria's chemical weapons stalls', *IJSS*, April 2014

¹⁴ ['OPCW-UN Joint Mission: Total chemical material removed and destroyed raised to 92.5%'](#), OPCW press notice, 24 April 2014

¹⁵ ['Norwegian Cargo Ship Departs with Chemicals'](#), OPCW press release, 8 June 2014

¹⁶ ['France says Syria used chlorine in 14 recent attacks'](#), *Reuters*, 13 May 2014

4 Support for the Syrian government

4.1 Iran

Iran has provided financial help, oil supplies and military advisers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to help the Damascus government. It is difficult to know how many personnel have been involved, or the amount of money, but the former head of the Syrian National Council recently said that financial and oil help amounted to \$14 billion so far.¹⁷ The Syrian National Council might perceive an interest in maximising the figure to try to encourage increased Western support.

The Revolutionary Guards commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said in April 2014 that the Assad government would have fallen had it not been for Iranian support:

Eighty-six countries around the world wanted to change the Syrian regime and said that Al-Assad had to quit; all of them failed because Iran wanted something different. All the countries were defeated at the end of the battle.¹⁸

4.2 Russia

Again, it is impossible to know how much practical Russian assistance has helped to prop up the Assad government. Russia's veto on the United Nations Security Council has been crucial in preventing concerted international action against Damascus, but Russia has also allegedly supplied new weaponry and maintained existing Russian-supplied equipment.

4.3 Hizballah

Hizballah was at first reluctant to get involved in the Syrian conflict. To side with the Assad government against the Syrian rebellion could undermine the Lebanese militia's reputation for fighting Israel, which has made it popular with radical Sunnis in the region, and make it look more like a sectarian, anti-Sunni force.

However, perhaps under pressure from Hizballah's Iranian backers, experienced and well-armed Hizballah fighters have now 'gone all-in for Syria's President Bashar al-Assad'.¹⁹ The decision by Hizballah to throw in its lot with the Assads threatens to add to the Sunni-Shia conflict both in Lebanon and in the wider region, according to the International Crisis Group, but it has also been decisive in the short term: 'Its contributions have been crucial. Its forces reversed the regime's flagging momentum and enabled it to gain the relative advantage it enjoys today.'²⁰

5 Support for the rebels

US aid of up to \$27 million and UK aid have been resumed after being suspended in December in preparation for the Geneva II talks. Both countries are sending non-lethal assistance such as protective gear and communications equipment.

In June 2014, the UK government announced that it was giving an extra £1.6 million worth of search and rescue equipment to the opposition. The gift would include cutting and rescue tools, personal protective gear including helmets and goggles, stretchers, medicines and

¹⁷ Nadim Shehadi, 'How Western inaction led to fall of Homs', Chatham House, 12 May 2014

¹⁸ 'Senior Iranian commander: Assad would have been toppled without Iran's support', *Middle East Monitor*, 14 April 2014

¹⁹ *Lebanon's Hizballah Turns Eastward to Syria*, International Crisis Group, 27 May 2014

²⁰ *Lebanon's Hizballah Turns Eastward to Syria*, International Crisis Group, 27 May 2014

medical supplies, and office and communications equipment.²¹ With the additional items, the UK programme of aid to the opposition is expected to cost about £4 million and is being funded through the Conflict Pool, jointly administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. The UK government says that gift complies with export controls and that recipients have been selected to make sure that they are not involved in 'extremist activities or human rights violations'.²²

Despite such aid, the Free Syrian Army is looking ever less relevant in the conflict. In December 2013, the head of the FSA, General Salim Idris, said that he would be prepared to join the government in fighting al-Qaeda affiliates or ISIS.²³

In a recent article for the Brookings Institution, the support of wealthy Gulf individuals was discussed.²⁴ Financial and material backing often goes through Kuwait, according to the report, and, while some backers have become disillusioned with the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict, others remain convinced of the rightness of the fight against the Alawites and Shiites in Syria. The author warned of the possibility that the sectarian strife in Syria might exacerbate sectarian discord within Gulf countries themselves.

Press reports suggest that the West is clandestinely supporting efforts by the Saudi and Qatari governments to support groups such as the Islamic Front to fight ISIS; even providing direct help, according to one source.²⁵

6 Humanitarian assistance

The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says that 9.3 million Syrians are in need of assistance in Syria, most of them (6.5 million) displaced within the country, while 2.8 million have fled to neighbouring countries. The UN Security Council unanimously passed Security Council Resolution 2139 in February calling for all sides to cease attacks on civilians, lift sieges and allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance.²⁶

The UK has committed a total of £600 million in assistance. £249 million of that is destined to organisations helping people within Syria, £292 million is going to help Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and £59 million is still in the process of being allocated. UK aid has gone towards providing food, water, education, coordination, shelter and relief items (such as cooking equipment and blankets), health and livelihoods (for example poultry and vegetable seeds).²⁷

On 4 June, the US announced that it would be providing \$290 million (£172 million) in additional assistance for the victims of the fighting in Syria, taking the total humanitarian assistance delivered by the US since the start of the crisis to over \$2 billion (£1.2 billion).²⁸

²¹ [HC Deb 9 Jun 2014, c25WS](#)

²² [HC Deb 9 Jun 2014, c25WS](#)

²³ 'Syrian rebels consider joining forces with regime troops to fight al-Qa'ida', *Independent*, 3 December 2013

²⁴ Elizabeth Dickinson, *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home*, December 2013

²⁵ 'US secretly backs rebels to fight al-Qaeda in Syria', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 2014

²⁶ 'Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2139 (2014) to ease aid delivery to Syrians, provide relief from 'chilling darkness'', UN Security Council press release, 22 February 2014

²⁷ UK Aid Syria Response fact sheet, Department for International Development, 3 June 2014

²⁸ 'United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Syrian Crisis', Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson, 4 June 2014

\$135 million of the assistance was to go to the United Nations World Food Programme to help that agency feed 4 million people inside Syria and 1.6 million refugees in neighbouring countries. Most of the rest was destined for non-governmental organisations working in and around Syria.

7 Commentaries on Western policy

Former Middle East Minister Peter Hain argued recently that Western powers should have pushed for a negotiated solution from the start instead of hoping for complete regime change:

That was always going to be the only way to get Assad – and more important his backers – to shift towards compromise.

Instead of urging their friends in the opposition to declare that they would reciprocate if Assad made good on his tentative promise, Western powers and the Arab countries – principally Saudi Arabia and Qatar – continued supplying arms to the resistance and continued to demand regime change.

Another fatal error by the West was to try to prevent Iran as well as Assad from attending a peace conference. Surely we should by now have understood from Britain's long and bitter experience of resolving the Northern Ireland conflict that setting pre-conditions always prevents attempts at negotiation from even getting off the ground?²⁹

Nadim Shehadi of Chatham House compares what he sees as Western encouragement of the rebels and subsequent failure to back them with the uprising in Iraq in 1991:

If anything, this is a situation similar to that in Iraq in 1991 when an uprising was encouraged by Washington, and then the U.S. and its allies stood by watching Saddam Hussein's helicopters crush it, killing in two months as much as Bashar al-Assad has in the last three years.³⁰

He also criticises the use of Western humanitarian aid by the Syrian government for war aims:

The balance sheet also includes billions of dollars of Western humanitarian aid that goes through the U.N. and other international organizations. The bulk of it goes to dealing with the symptoms of the war-like refugees and the rest largely goes through the regime and the regime uses it to its benefit in its surrender or starve strategy in sieges like that of Homs.

The scenario is simple: the regime cuts off water, electricity, food, fuel and access; it then proceeds to bomb the city into submission using artillery, air raids and barrel bombs. and then the UN and other international organizations who are also Western funded, help the regime and its allies to negotiate surrenders that are euphemistically called "local ceasefires" as we have seen in Homs and in other areas recently.³¹

The former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, said that the US has not done enough to support the moderate opposition:

We have consistently been behind the curve.

²⁹ ['Syria: the worst foreign policy catastrophe of modern times?'](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 28 March 2014

³⁰ Nadim Shehadi, 'How Western inaction led to fall of Homs', Chatham House, 12 May 2014

³¹ Nadim Shehadi, 'How Western inaction led to fall of Homs', Chatham House, 12 May 2014

The events on the ground are moving more rapidly than our policy has been adapting. And at the same time, Russia and Iran have been driving this by increasing and steadily increasing, increasing massively, especially the Iranians, their support to the Syrian regime.

And the result of that has been more threats to us in this ungoverned space which Assad can't retake. We need and we have long needed to help moderates in the Syrian opposition with both weapons and other nonlethal assistance. Had we done that a couple of years ago, had we ramped it up, frankly, the al-Qaida groups that have been winning adherents would have been unable to compete with the moderates, who, frankly, we have much in common with.

But the moderates have been fighting constantly with arms tied behind their backs, because they don't have the same resources that either Assad does or the al-Qaida groups in Syria do.³²

In February 2014. Alistair Burt, former Middle East minister, argued that the UK parliament's vote against action in Syria had tied future governments' hands, but that the deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons had not improved the situation in the country significantly:

I don't doubt for a moment that a Syria without its chemical weapons stockpile is better than a Syria with it, nor that the talks in Geneva represented a breakthrough of sorts. But what has really changed as a result of that deal? First, Russia moved into the driving seat. It persuaded Bashar al-Assad to accept the deal, which was a good one for both of them. Second, the Syrian leader's policy of ruthless attack, from bombing to the torture and murder of opponents, could continue unabated. Third, the false regime narrative of Assad as a bulwark against the jihadis gained strength. And the chemical weapons are still there.³³

In June, the *Independent* said that a new state was being formed by ISIS and that the West needed to begin a debate on how to counter it:

In Syria, by funnelling military aid to "moderate" rebels who, it naively imagined, would obey their paymasters' whims, the West has added to the sophisticated firepower within the reach of the fundamentalists, helping them to achieve their atavistic goals. In each case, as also in Libya, the West has intervened just enough to displace the existing government but not nearly enough to establish control. At no point did anyone in Washington or London wish to see the Holy Fascists, as they have been dubbed, marching backwards through history to the time of Saladin, but that has been the most conspicuous result of Western policies.³⁴

Patrick Cockburn highlighted the threat that extremist areas could pose to Europe:

Europeans have not yet woken up to the significance of these anarchic zones opening up on the shores of the Mediterranean in Syria and Libya. This is because the threat has been largely abstract but it is getting less so with the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels by a French jihadi who had been in Syria. US and European politicians do not want to explain why, 13 years after 9/11, when the "war on terror" was supposedly

³² ['Former U.S. ambassador says he could 'no longer defend' Obama administration's Syria policy'](#), PBS, 3 June 2014

³³ ['Six months on, the vote against Syrian intervention still casts a shadow'](#), *Guardian*, 6 February 2014

³⁴ ['The fall of more territory to jihadist groups underscores the failure of the West's actions in the Middle East'](#), *Independent*, 9 June 2014

launched, thousands of al-Qa'ida militants have been able to carve out enclaves so close to Europe.³⁵

³⁵ 'In the war on terrorism, only al-Qa'ida thrives', *Independent*, 8 June 2014