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A race to the bottom in Syria

By Victor Kotsev

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The past few weeks have seen a dramatic shift in reports coming out of Syria. Whereas a month ago the government appeared to be losing the battle on all fronts, the civil war now seems to have entered a new stage - that of a race to the bottom in which victory hinges on endurance rather than strength.

Both the regime and the rebels are facing major challenges which threaten gravely their ability to function, and this explains in part the vastly divergent prognoses of different analysts. Meanwhile, as winter sets in and the death toll climbs (the latest United Nations report sets it at 60,000), civilians are paying the heaviest price.

Many observers continue to insist that the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is on its last legs. Jeffrey White of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy predicted recently that it "appears to have only a few weeks left before it collapses." [1] Others set the time frame for its demise at several months, pointing out, among other issues, the deep financial trouble it is in.

"The economy is the basis of everything," a Syrian economist in exile told Time Magazine, estimating that Assad would go broke some time between three and six months in the future (previously, Jordan's King Abdullah II offered a similar estimate). "Without services, boots, money, you cannot do anything. If the government cannot finance the army, they [soldiers] will simply go away." [2]

The rebels have advanced significantly in the last months, taking control of, according to different reports, between 40% and 75% of the country's territory. They have even captured some

of the suburbs surrounding the capital Damascus and on several occasions have been able to shut down the county's main international airports.

The regime's weakness is no illusion, but all of this amounts to only half of the story. If Assad is about to go broke, most of the rebels are already there - and have been in this state for months. This is hardly propitious to administering half of Syria - something which alone costs them, according to the same Time article, about US\$500 million a month. Moreover, it is not their worst problem.

A number of reports indicate that the government forces purposefully surrendered territories with little to no resistance. They would have done this in order to shorten their communication lines and to cut some expenses - but also in order to let the population taste a nightmare version of freedom which would conceivably lead many people to choose Assad's rule as the lesser evil. With millions homeless in the middle of winter, most of them in rebel-held areas, and food, running water and cooking oil sparse, such a scenario is not altogether out of question.

Even more importantly, recent reports indicate that the rebels themselves may actively contribute to such an outcome. In-fighting, looting and random abductions have become the order of the day in many places. Aleppo, an affluent city of merchants where insurgents from the poorer countryside have flocked, may be an extreme example, but it is by far not the only one. Two recent accounts by Guardian reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad provide graphic details.

In a story dated December 28, the reporter described a brutal rebel commander, Abu Ali, who, in his own words, faced "two enemies now - the [rival rebel] battalions and the government." Abdul-Ahad documented an attempt by several civilians whose homes had come under Abu Ali's control to salvage some of their possessions, as well as the treatment they received: "Every single house has been looted,' shouts Abu Ali. 'And the [government] army has never been to this area. It is us who looted them!'" [3]

In a separate article dated December 27, Abdul-Ahad described more generally how the unprecedented levels of chaos and in-fighting - which he considers a recent new phase in the war - had halted rebel progress in Aleppo. "The problem is us," a young fighter exclaimed during a meeting. "We have battalions sitting in liberated areas who man checkpoints and detain people ... They have become worse than the regime." [4]

The rebels face a further challenge which the former US Special Advisor for Syria Frederic Hof termed "the poison pill of sectarianism". Hof wrote:

By raising and unleashing *shabiha* auxiliaries (largely poor Alawite youth supplemented by active duty military personnel), the regime of Bashar al-Assad injected the poison pill into the national bloodstream.... Assad and his cohort are, after all, eager to tell minorities (especially Alawites and Christians) that the current regime alone stands between them and a Sunni Arab successor that might choose among options ranging from explicit sectarian rule to the application of Islamic law to expulsion and slaughter. The eagerness with which highly visible elements of the opposition have taken the regime's sectarian bait suggests two possibilities: either that the 65-year evolution toward Syrian citizenship and national unity has been entirely illusory or Syria's revolutionary leaders have given no thought to immunizing themselves and their followers

against the inevitable implementation of a crudely provocative sectarian strategy by the regime.
[5]

Not only has the opposition failed to break the unity of the Alawites and other minorities supporting the regime, but it seems that, despite the sectarian nature of the war and his savage tactics, Assad has effectively prevented the full unification of the Sunnis against him. According to different reports, up to a third of the Sunni population, particularly in the large cities, still supports him. While their precise number and motivation is very difficult to determine, a Syrian rebel who recently spoke to Asia Times Online confirmed that he and his comrades were frequently fighting against other Sunnis.

Such considerations motivated the prominent Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma, Joshua Landis, to predict that "absent some dramatic increase in external intervention, Assad could still be there in 2014". He is not alone: UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has also recently suggested that 2013 could be extremely bloody but not decisive.

Only the future will tell who is right. For now, there is no sign of the violence abating - and millions of ordinary Syrians continue to suffer inhumanely.

Notes:

1. Is the End Near in Damascus?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2012.
2. Assad's Cash Problem: Will Syria's Dwindling Reserves Bring Down the Regime?, Time, December 21, 2012.
3. 'The people of Aleppo needed someone to drag them into the revolution', Guardian, December 28, 2012.
4. Syrian rebels sidetracked by scramble for spoils of war, Guardian, December 27, 2012.
5. Syria 2013: Will The Poison Pill of Sectarianism Work?, Atlantic Council, January 3, 2013.