Rubble, Refugees, and Syria’s Periphery

By Jon B. Alterman

It is hard to say what “victory” looks like in Syria, but it has seemed for some time that Bashar al-Assad has won one. He controls all of the country’s major population centers, his Syrian adversaries are in disarray, and his regional and international antagonists are no longer contesting his rule. Eight years ago, it seemed unlikely that Assad’s bold bet on repression to defeat a broad-based opposition would work. Even four years ago, before Russia’s military engagement, his position seemed tenuous. While a battle to secure the northwest of the country still looms, the real remaining question is the terms under which his adversaries will lay down their guns.

Although Assad is gaining control, his country is in shambles. Cities and infrastructure have been destroyed, and half of all Syrians have been forced from their homes (about one in five forced outside the country). Western governments are betting that Assad’s need to rebuild the country will give them leverage shaping the kind of peace that emerges. Their confidence is misplaced. Instead, they should worry about shoring up allies bordering Syria. In a game of chicken over the future of the Levant, Assad seems willing to wait everyone out, and Syria’s millions of refugees are part of his plan.

This is not the way the Syrian civil war was supposed to end. When peaceful protesters took to the streets of Syria, many thought Assad’s days were numbered. Assad skillfully turned his battle bloody, taking up a secular mantle against warring jihadis and forcing Syrians to choose between the two sides. U.S. attempts to weaken Assad and the jihadis simultaneously to create space for more democratic governance never got much traction. A lack of will to fight in Syria, and a clear legal mandate only to fight al Qaeda and its various offshoots, both shaped and limited U.S. policy.

The abrupt U.S. announcement in December that it swiftly would withdraw troops from eastern Syria given that the Islamic State group had been decimated sealed the deal. The future of Syria would be decided largely by the antagonists still active on the ground there: Syria, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Importantly, none of those countries have the estimated $250 billion—or more—required to rebuild Syria. China arguably has the means, but it has shown little appetite for a deep engagement in Syria. European countries have sought to dangle aid as leverage, holding out

DODGING A BULLET

A soldier doll perched on the edge of a cake decorated like an Egyptian flag, but the cake was no display of patriotism. Bold capital letters on the cake read “CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR EXEMPTION.”

Military conscription has faded in much of the world, but it is on the rise across the Middle East and North Africa. Morocco became the eleventh country in the region to impose a draft in February 2019, with the first conscripts to report in the fall. Governments have mixed motives. While cheap labor is sometimes a factor—Egyptian conscripts earn just $22/month—governments are also looking to ease youth unemployment, improve job readiness, and cultivate a stronger sense of citizenship.

Yet, many states are struggling to get young men to report for duty. Last year, only 506 of the 31,000 Tunisians summoned for service showed up. Newspapers periodically report on the strategies young men employ to avoid conscription. Some stay in school for a decade, while others become intentionally obese. Some claim various birth defects, while others feign homosexuality. One young man reportedly grew his hair long and took up the study of Christian theology to win a religious exemption, while another had his father report him as kidnapped while he was home on leave.

Many potential draftees object to the miserable conditions for conscripts, and many also worry about the danger of entering war zones. Governments have jailed draft dodgers and digitized the conscription process to close loopholes. When shirking national duty is a cause for celebration and not shame, it is clear states have their work cut out for them.

NEW ANALYSIS ON ALGERIA’S PROTESTS

In a new Critical Questions from CSIS’s Middle East Program, “Why Algeria’s Protests Are Different This Time,” Haim Malka discusses the choices that lay ahead for Algeria’s powerbrokers following a month of widespread demonstrations. A coalition of military leaders, the president’s office, and powerful businessmen will need to make difficult decisions about how to respond to protestors’ demands. Read the full piece HERE.
“With the announcement reversal you’ve averted a catastrophic error, but in going about it this way—you announce the complete withdrawal and then two months later say ‘well, it’s really only partial’—you’ve given up tremendous benefit you could have derived from working that out in conjunction with other antagonists in Syria.” Jon Alterman in The Hill on the White House’s reversal on withdrawing troops from Syria, 2/23/19.

“A lot of the current surveillance technology is being pioneered in Israel and China; and it’s targeted at counterterrorism; and it may be applied to a bigger definition of counterterrorism than Americans are comfortable with.” Jon Alterman in Yahoo News on the growing market for spy technology in the Middle East, 3/1/19.

Haim Malka discussed the history and structural conditions that led to the recent protests in Algeria on Warcast, 3/15/19.

Haim Malka told ABC News that Netanyahu’s trip to Washington gives him the opportunity to “show the voters back in Israel that he still has the strong backing of the U.S. despite his own troubles back at home,” 3/25/19.

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the prospect of assistance in return for “inclusive governance.” The United States provides relief for vulnerable populations, but it slashed stabilization assistance in August 2018 (and proposes to end it), ruling out reconstruction assistance as long as Assad is in power.

And yet, refugees give Assad leverage. Jordan hosts somewhere between 600,000 and 1.3 million Syrian refugees, and Lebanon hosts more than a million. Both are countries with intimate ties to Western and Gulf governments. Another three million refugees in Turkey and a half million in Europe expand the circle of pain still further. Assad has made it difficult for many to return.

For Assad, the refugees’ displacement is a relief. He does not need to provide them with food, services, or jobs, and their absence frees up housing for allies who have lost their own. The refugees’ absence also helps ensure that those most likely to be hostile to him are kept at arm’s length, helping guarantee that currently pro-regime areas are heavily pro-regime and allowing him to focus security attention on the frontiers that he is seeking to reincorporate.

Perhaps most importantly, Assad’s government has managed to survive under current conditions and can continue to do so. The war against jihadis rallied the population behind the government, especially the minority communities that have long felt vulnerable in Syria. Fresh memories of the government’s ferocity silence any who seek to blame the regime rather than its antagonists for dire economic conditions.

Compare this situation to a country like Jordan, whose population (by some estimates) increased more than 50 percent in the last decade. The Syrian war has devastated Jordanian trade, and government revenues have plummeted. The demand for water, electricity, education, and health care has skyrocketed. Unemployment is up, and protests are expanding, not least from young men seeking jobs.

While Syrians in Lebanon have long served as low-wage workers, the current wave of refugees puts even greater pressures on the Lebanese economy than in Jordan. With something like one in four people inside Lebanon’s borders a displaced Syrian, they strain the already-fragile Lebanese system to its breaking point. Lebanon’s volatile politics are aflame over Syria, especially as fighting dies down. Even in the absence of a settlement, many Lebanese are arguing that the conflict is over and it is time for the Syrians to go home—even when there is often no home to go back to, and despite the fact that the Syrian government doesn’t want many to return. International humanitarian law bars the forced return of refugees, but that seems of little consequence in a country that feels refugees have exposed it to existential threats.

Turkey hosts the most Syrian refugees, but with a total population many times that of Lebanon and Jordan, they remain less than five percent of the population. Meanwhile, a relatively small number are in Europe, but they have roiled European politics from the Atlantic to the Urals.

Last week, a senior Gulf official told me that Assad might win the war, but he is likely to face problems of legitimacy when he fails to rebuild the country in times of peace. That may be the case. But for Western governments, the more immediate and serious challenges are likely to come from the freer political environments in Jordan and Lebanon, as governments become increasingly desperate to do more with less. As the war fades away, Western assistance will fade too, and yet large refugee problems will endure. Assad may get his assistance yet, not because any government wants to save Assad. Instead, it will be to persuade Assad to take Syria’s citizens back, in order to save Syria’s neighbors. ■ 3/25/19