Syria

Looking Beyond the Kurdish Crisis to Long Term Instability and a Near Certain Future of Civil Violence

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There is a natural tendency for governments, news media, and analysts to focus on today’s crisis and the most familiar threat. In the case of Syria, the crisis is Turkey’s invasion of the Kurdish enclave, and the most familiar threat is the potential resurgence of ISIS – a resurgence that is already taking place to some extent in Iraq.

Like coverage of the war in Afghanistan, the riots in Iraq, and the civil wars in Libya and Yemen, the time horizon for such coverage extends for hours to a period approaching a year. There is little coverage of the longer-term prospects for instability, extremism and terrorism, and civil conflict. And, when such coverage does take place, it generally focuses on some tangible and possibly superficial outcome, such as a ceasefire or peace negotiation that may or may not achieve even a temporary end to the fighting and improved level of stability.

The grim reality, however, is that Syria is all too typical of what can only be called “failed state wars.” Tragic as the legacy of the current fighting may be for the Kurds, there is virtually no chance that Syria will emerge as a peaceful or stable state over the coming years, or that it will not be a source of tension and conflict in the region.

Like almost every other country in the Arab world – and Afghanistan and several other countries in Central and South Asia – the World Bank and Transparency International estimate that it suffers from an appalling level of bad governance and corruption. Population pressure, including a “youth bulge,” interacts with failed economic development and serious ethnic and sectarian divisions. Efforts at reform have largely failed, fighting and violent unrest continue, and no progress has been made in reducing the causes of extremism and terrorism.

Assad may be able to create a new authoritarian regime if he can absorb and suppress Syria’s Kurds, limit the resurgence of ISIS in Syria, defeat the last major enclave of Sunni rebels in Idlib, and reach some stable agreement with Turkey – none of which is as yet certain. Even if he is successful in all four cases, however, this will only buy time unless he can make radical and nearly impossible changes in the very character of his regime. To do so would risk losing the support of Russia and Iran, which Assad still desperately relies on. The far more likely case is a repetition of events in Algeria and Iraq – where repression, state terrorism and suppression of opposition could cap or limit change for years, but only at the cost of making the upheavals far worse and more violent when they came.

Assad as the World’s Worst Terrorist

One clear example of the future causes of instability and violence in Syria is the real answer to the question of whether the Kurds or ISIS have been the worst terrorist movement in the Middle East is certainly not the Kurds, but it also is not ISIS. The real answer is that it is the state terrorism perpetrated by Assad.

The START database used in the Statistical Annex to the U.S. State Department annual Country Reports on Terrorism estimates that ISIS terrorist attacks killed more than 33,300 in some 4,900 attacks worldwide – less ISIS/ISIL affiliates – between 2005 and 2015. The State Department
annexes estimate that ISIS killed 9,180 in 2016, and 4,340 in 2017, and a recent START update estimates that ISIS/ISIL killed 2,221 in 2018.

This adds up to some 48,741 dead from ISIS/ISIL terrorism worldwide, although it does not include U.S., Iraqi, SDF, or other casualties in the counterterrorism and military forces fighting ISIL. If one attempts to estimate the number of both civilians and anti-terrorism forces that ISIL/ISIS killed in Syria alone, there is no reliable source, but it seems unlikely that the total number of dead exceeded 100,000, and that estimate may be high.

In contrast, if one looks at estimates of the casualties in the Syrian civil war from March 15, 2011 to the end of 2018, casualty estimates vary from 371,222 to 570,000. The Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates 470,000 killed up to 11 February, 2016. The United Nations and Arab League Envoy to Syria estimated 400,000 casualties on 23 April, 2016. Lastly the Syrian Observatory estimated 271,222-570,000 casualties up to 15 March 2019.

The Assad forces have dominated this fighting, and does so through the systematic use of state terrorism – including the use of poison gas, systematic bombing and artillery strikes of civilians, and through ground-force military attacks. Even if one ignores the execution and “disappearance” of massive numbers of civilians, it seems reasonable to assume that the Assad regime has killed more than twice as many civilians through state terrorism during the Syria civil war between 2011 and 2018 as ISIS/ISIL killed worldwide between 2005 and 2018.

**The Legacy Effect, and Anger and Hatred Against the Regime**

It is important to note that the Syrian civil war is not over, that there is no way to determine how the Turkish invasion or the fighting in Idlib will end, and how that ongoing wave of repression, disappearances, and deaths will end. What is clear is that a return to the Assad regime’s authoritarian style of governance across Syria is domestically unsustainable. The living will still have to pay a heavy price for the Syrian civil war, and the end result is almost certain to be lasting unrest, the rebirth of extremism and terrorism, and eventually a massive new coup or civil war.

It is all too clear, however, that the number of refugees, IDPs, and people at risk will have far more impact on the quality of conflict resolution and post-conflict stability than the number of dead, as will the number of sick, permanently injured. High as the casualty rates are in cases like Syria, the dead are the dead.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) still estimated in July 2019 that nearly 11.7 million out of some 18 million Syrians still in Syria required humanitarian and protection assistance. UNOCHA also estimated that there were still 5.6 million refugees outside of Syria, and 5.9 million internally displaced.

Some 2.1 million Syria children were reported to have dropped out of school, and another 1.3 million were at risk of dropping out. In addition to losing education, jobs, farms, and businesses – as well as any capital to use for investment — 22 percent of Syria’s 1,811 health centers were partially functioning, and 32 percent were out of service (https://unocha.exposure.co/syria-a-crisis-in-its-9th-year-in-9-figures).

There is no way to know how many of the Syrian refugees fled because of opposition to the Assad regime or how many will return. There is no way to know how many of the IDPs and Syrians that have stayed in the country now quietly oppose the regime. What is clear, however, is that the vast majority of Syrians have no reason to support a de facto dictatorship led by an Alawite, that Syria’s
Kurds have very historical reasons to fear repression and discrimination by the Assad regime, and that a CIA estimate of the ethnic and sectarian splits in Syria indicates that some new levels of violence, extremism, and opposition to the regime are probable to the point of near certainty.

The CIA estimates the following level of major divisions in Syria’s population:

- **Ethnic groups**: Arab ~50%, Alawite ~15%, Kurd ~10%, Levantine ~10%, other ~15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian) Languages are Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English

- **Religions**: Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian 10% (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), Druze 3%, Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo). The Christian population may be considerably smaller as a result of Christians fleeing the country during the ongoing civil war.

The civil war that began in 2012 led to serious tensions between Alawite, Shi’ite, Sunnis, and smaller religious minorities, separated Syria’s Kurds from the rest of the Assad-controlled regions in the country, and created large Sunni extremist elements as well as one of the most violently repressive regimes in the world. The war has also created a series of economic crises in each city, major direct and disguised unemployment, critical dependence on outside aid, and the need to create new patterns of economic development – none of which the government has shown the capability to cope with in any given urban area as of late 2019.

**Failed Governance and Corruption**

Syria also lacks anything approaching a level of effective and honest government needed to reconstruct Syria. **Figure One** shows the World Bank estimates of all of its rankings of governance for Syria for the period between 1996 and 2018 – showing both the country’s percentile rank in blue and the margin of uncertainty or possible error in gray. The early years reflect a relatively successful, if ruthless, legacy of authoritarianism and forced stability that allow some economic development – although it provided limited benefits for much of the population.

The political upheavals that took place in 2011 created the bloodiest civil war in the region. It created an Assad regime-led coalition with Iran, the Hezbollah and then Russia that fought a fragmented and Sunni Arab-dominated coalition in Western and Central Iraq. It also created an ISIS “caliphate” that came to dominate northeastern Syria and Western Iraq until it was defeated by a Kurdish and Arab coalition supported by the U.S. and its allies.

Today, the Assad coalition has largely dominated in most of Syria through some of the worst examples of attacks on civilians, repression, and state terrorism in the recent history of the developing world. There also, however, is now a Kurdish-Arab protostate in part of the East, and still some elements of an increasingly Sunni extremist enclave around Idlib.

The current quality of governance ratings reflects these deep divisions, and Transparency International rated Syria 178th out of 180 countries in 2018, making it the 2nd most corrupt country in the world. At present, there is no way to estimate when or if the fighting will end and Syria will reemerge as a unified state – much less more towards some path of stable development.
Figure One: World Bank Governance Indicators for Syria

The solid blue line shows the selected country’s percentile rank on each of the six aggregate indicators. The grey-shaded region indicates the margin of error.


A Crippled Economy

Syria also faces massive economic challenges without any clear source of massive international economic aid, or any credibility in using such aid effectively. The CIA World Factbook analysis in the October 2019 edition of the World Factbook is now somewhat dated, but notes that,

Syria’s economy has deeply deteriorated amid the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, declining by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017. The government has struggled to fully address the effects of international sanctions, widespread infrastructure damage, diminished domestic consumption and production, reduced subsidies, and high inflation, which have caused dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising budget and trade deficits, a decreasing value of the Syrian pound, and falling household purchasing power. In 2017, some economic indicators began to stabilize, including the exchange rate and inflation, but economic activity remains depressed and GDP almost certainly fell.

A more recent September 2019 study by Zaki Mehchy for the RIAA at Chatham House (The Syrian Pound Signals Economic Deterioration) notes that Syrian currency is about thirteen times less valuable than before conflict, and fell by 20% between January and September 2019 alone, and that it is likely that, “the devaluation reflects a structural deterioration of the Syrian economy.” Mehchy estimates that,

“The total value of Syrian exports contracted from $12.2 billion in 2010 to less than $700 million in 2018, whereas imports declined from $19.7 billion to $4.4 billion during the same period. Thus, the coverage ratio of exports to imports dropped from 62% to 16% in this period, indicating that the government has become very dependent on external trade partners. Almost all import payments are made in foreign currencies, which increases the devaluation pressure on the Syrian pound…”

“…Between 2005 and 2010, Syria received an annual average of $1.5 billion as foreign direct investment (FDI); this amount has dropped almost to zero during the years of conflict. Russia and Iran have continued to invest in Syria, mainly in the mining sector, but the conditions of these investments have limited the inflows of foreign currency to Syria. FDI inflows were a major source of hard currency; their absence is an additional driver of currency depreciation.”

“The Syrian pound’s depreciation and its high fluctuations reflect the fragile political and economic situation in the country. The government’s improvised decisions have failed to stabilize it, causing a rise in the prices of basic goods. This has left more than 90% of Syria’s population under the poverty line. Long-term stability in exchange rates requires an inclusive and sustainable development strategy, one that would need to be based on an accountable and transparent political landscape. That seems a long way off.”

Estimates of Syria’s per capita income further highlight its problems. The World Bank estimates of per capita income based upon GNI Per Capita, using Atlas Method (Current International $US) are probably the most relevant estimates of real-world capability. In Syria’s case, they date back to 2007 – which is probably higher than today’s ratings – but they only total $1,820 per capita. This compares with $2,820 for Egypt, $4,060 for Algeria, $5,030 for Iraq, and $3,500 for Tunisia. Only Yemen, at $960 has a lower total in the MENA region.

The Syrian government – like many other conflict state governments – also has a terrible rating in terms of creating new businesses and these ratings warn that optimistic projections about future economic growth from better development of the private sector have proved to be wrong in each of the “failed” conflict states for all too many years. The World Bank “ease of doing business” rankings show that Syria only ranks 179th out of the 190 countries rated. (Afghanistan only ranks 167th, Iraq is even lower at 171st, Libya’s 186th, and Yemen is 187th).
Population Pressure, Urbanization, and the “Youth Bulge”

These economic ratings show that Syria would be under intense pressure even if it had never been caught up in civil war, and had anything approaching an honest and effective government. Both the UN and U.S. Census Bureau estimates show a massive population increase since 1950 and a relatively small decrease for this decade in spite of the number of refugees caused by the war.

Figure Two shows a UN estimate of both total population growth and a radical shift away from agriculture to urbanization. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Syria had only 3.495 million people in 1950. This had risen to 21.766 million by 2010 – a population 6.2 times higher. The CIA estimates the population in country has shrunk to 19.454 million, but it seems likely that the population could rise to 25 million by 2025 if major numbers of refugees return, and such refugees may be a major source of opposition if they remain outside the country.

The U.S. Census Bureau also estimates that this population will be very young and that the number of young men and women looking for jobs each year will have doubled since 1980. The CIA estimates the median age at a very young 24.5 years, and the dependency ratio of children and older Syrians on wage earners at 72.8% in 2015. This would be an extraordinary strain on even a well-managed and well-governed economy.

The CIA estimates of employment add a further warning. They date back to 2017, but they put the unemployment level at 50%, which ranks Syria 217th out of a total of 218 countries ranked, and gives it the second highest level of unemployment in the world.

Syria already has become a highly urbanized, market-driven economy, although the civil war has led to at least a temporary cut in the total urban population. The CIA estimates that 51.8% of its population of 19.4 million were urbanized in 2019, although the remaining levels of civil war have cut the rate of growth to 1.43%. Syria’s urban population was concentrated in the West and the capital in Damascus had some 2.32 million, Aleppo had 1.754 million, Homs or Hims had 1.295 million, and Hamah had 894,000 in 2018.

A future stabilized Syria also cannot be the kind of economy Syria had before its civil war started in 2011. The political upheavals that turned into a civil war came largely because of economic failures in meeting popular needs and demands, and Figure Two shows that Syria already is a highly urbanized economy. Estimates that talk about “recovery,” rather than massive restructuring and modernization, are little more than analytic rubbish.
Figure Two: UN Estimate of Syrian Population Growth and Urbanization: 1950-2050

Looking for Real Solutions

If Syria is ever to emerge out from its “failed state” status, it will require stabilization in terms of security for its people and serious reforms of the civil sector and the economy. However, those fundamental changes are unlikely to be made as long as the Assad regime remains in control. Regrettably, two possible outcomes are the most likely. Either the current violence does not end any time soon, or the regime will regain its control over all of Syria, and will continue to rely on repression until violence breaks out once more or Assad hands over power to another.

One does have to get through the present to reach the future, but these data on Syria apply just as much to virtually every “conflict” or “failed” state where the U.S. is now fighting. These data for Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen are laid out in detail in a separate analysis: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen: The Long-Term Challenges and Host Country Threats from “Failed State Wars” https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-iraq-syria-libya-and-yemen.

In each case, these data warn that focusing on ISIS to the exclusion of the broader forces shaping extremism, terrorism, and civil conflict is absurdly short-sighted and stupid. The U.S. may not like involvement in an unstable world, but real as the victories against ISIS have been, they will not be cemented unless they are accompanied by an equal effort to combat the issues on the civil side that began the conflict in the first place. The United States faces at least a decade of similar challenges, and trying to withdraw from an unstable world is a self-destructive exercise in futility.

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