

For Inquiring Minds – February 17, 2012

Syria's outcome has high stakes for the entire Mideast

David Ignatius – The Washington Post – 2 Feb 2012

The central drama in Syria is now a sectarian showdown, one that has been gathering force around the region since the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Syria has precipitated a crucial test of strength between Sunnis and Shiites, and between Turkey and Iran. It has triggered existential crises for Palestinians, Kurds and the Shiite government of Iraq. For Russia and the United States, Syria means not a display of Security Council clout but a potentially devastating exhibition of weakness — one that could greatly diminish the standing of both in the region.

To sort through the larger stakes of this conflict, let's start with the Persian Gulf states — led by Qatar — that have been pushing hardest for Arab League and Security Council action against the Assad regime. The emirates say their goal is Syrian democracy — but their motives are purely sectarian. Their target is not Assad but Iran, the Persian Shiite enemy of the Arab Sunni monarchies. Iran's alliance with Syria, vital to its power in the Middle East, depends on a regime controlled by Assad's minority Alawite sect, which is an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

The Arab emirates' best ally against Iran is not the United States but the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which is openly backing the Free Syrian Army. Erdogan, too, claims to be outraged by Assad's brutality. But as a Sunni Islamist and the hugely ambitious leader of a rising power, he also perceives a strategic opportunity for Turkey to replace Iran as the preeminent outside influence in the former eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Inside Syria, Turkey is pushing the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood; in neighboring Iraq, Turkey's support for Sunni parties, and for the autonomous region of Kurdistan, is increasingly conspicuous.

That brings us to Nouri al-Maliki, the Shiite prime minister of Iraq and a man known for paranoid thinking even in the best of circumstances. Maliki has concluded that the Syrian conflict endangers the Shiite supremacy in Baghdad that has been his signature achievement. This fear, more than authoritarian impulses, has motivated Maliki's crackdown on Sunni leaders — which has plunged Iraq into its own crisis. Turkey's assertiveness and Maliki's response, in turn, have prompted Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds to consider whether they should split off their own regions into separate mini-states — a move that looks much more feasible if Syria tilts toward Sunni rule.

Iran, of course, is fighting back. It has dispatched weapons and advisers to Syria, and it is pressing Maliki to open a corridor across Iraq to facilitate more material support. Maliki,

I'm told, is resisting — for now, at least. But the lines of what could easily become a regional sectarian war are clearly drawn.

The Palestinian Hamas movement, ruler of the Gaza Strip, is having its own Syrian crisis. The shift of regional power has all but ruptured its supply link to Iran and forced its external leadership to flee Damascus. This has the effect of strengthening both Hamas's Gaza-based leaders and the rival Fatah movement in the West Bank. And it means foreign patronage of Hamas could shift toward Erdogan's Turkey, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or even Jordan. In the meantime, Israel can watch with quiet satisfaction as its biggest enemies — Iran, Hamas and Assad — are sapped of strength.

The problem for prospective regional winners such as Israel and Turkey is that Assad may not go quickly. There is no sign that he or the Alawite leadership are willing to accept the exit strategies being discussed at the United Nations, with or without Russian support. For now the regime appears intent on fighting to the bitter end. With several Alawite-dominated elite divisions and plenty of tanks and artillery, Assad has the capacity to hold out for months; with continued Iranian and Russian help, that could stretch to years. Remember: The civil war in neighboring Lebanon lasted 14 years.

A quick Assad collapse will expose Russia to the loss of its Syrian naval base and residual Middle East influence. A prolonged fight will expose the critical weakness of the United States. With U.S. or NATO military intervention in Syria ruled out, President Obama's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq just as this crisis was mounting all but eliminated U.S. leverage.

American strategy now consists largely of public statements proclaiming Assad's inevitable downfall — a bluff that, it is hoped, will sway Vladimir Putin and Assad's generals. What if it doesn't? We could see a Syrian war that widens and deepens — with an outcome well beyond the U.N. Security Council's control.

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U.S., allies drop Syria sanctions demand, seek deal with Russia at U.N.

UNITED NATIONS — The United States and its European and Arab partners have agreed to drop a demand to impose U.N. sanctions and a voluntary arms embargo on Syria, in exchange for a commitment from Russia to allow adoption of a U.N. Security Council resolution that paves the way for President Bashar al-Assad's departure from power.

The latest offer — outlined in a new version of a draft resolution under negotiations in the 15-nation council — represents a retreat by the United States and its European and Arab allies, stripping away the most painful measures aimed at Syria, and taking off the table the issue of its weapons purchases from Russia, Syria’s closest ally.

Amateur video streamed live on Wednesday showed a burned out tank and destroyed armored personnel carrier on the streets of Rastan in Homs. A group of men, some of them brandishing their guns, stood on the destroyed personnel carrier.

But the pact would for the first time place the Security Council, and possibly Russia, squarely behind an Arab League plan outlining a timetable for a transfer of power to a government of national unity, and ultimately new parliamentary and presidential elections. And it would mark the first time since the violence began that the council has adopted a binding resolution condemning Syria’s conduct.

Security Council diplomats said they are confident that they have fashioned the broad parameters of a possible deal that would end months of inaction on Syria by the council. But they cautioned that Russia has yet to agree to support an unambiguous endorsement of the Arab League political plan, and that the entire proposal could unravel if it doesn’t. Western and Arab sponsors planned to continue pressing their case for a resolution on Thursday night. Russia’s U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, threatened to veto the measure if it was brought to a vote Friday, saying his government needed more time to negotiate the terms of the resolution, said two council diplomats who were in a closed-door session.

The Arab League secretary general, Nabil Elaraby, and the chairman of the league’s council of ministers, Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim al-Thani, have appealed to the Security Council to lend its weight to a plan calling for the beginning of talks between the Syrian government and opposition, leading to the establishment of a unity government within two months. Under the plan, Assad would be required to grant one of his deputies authority to cooperate with the united government, which would be led by an individual selected by rival parties.

Elaraby sought to reassure Russia that the resolution is not intended to justify military action, to sanction Syria or to force Assad to leave power.

The Russians “don’t want the Arab peace plan, which says the president delegates power to the vice president,” he said in an interview with CNN. “We didn’t ask that the president should step down, but only to delegate powers to the vice president.”

But Elaraby said that Russian support for even a new, watered-down resolution would “put pressure” on the regime and drive home that Moscow won’t stand up for it indefinitely.

Russia, which is backed by China, has insisted that the Arab League and the Security Council lack the right to impose a “pre-cooked” political settlement on Syria, saying any plan for a transition needs to be negotiated by the Syrian government and the opposition. Churkin has insisted that his government would block any resolution that was designed to bring about regime change in Syria. It has offered to host talks in Moscow.

In an effort to assuage Russian concerns that the draft might serve as part of a pretext for future military action, the sponsors of the text have offered to include language expressly stating that the resolution does not “compel states to resort to the use of force or the threat of force.”

The latest draft replaces that language with a provision, which is still not agreed upon by all parties, that expresses the council’s intention “to resolve the political crisis in Syria peacefully without foreign military intervention.”

Amateur video streamed live on Wednesday showed a burned out tank and destroyed armored personnel carrier on the streets of Rastan in Homs. A group of men, some of them brandishing their guns, stood on the destroyed personnel carrier. (Feb. 1)

The Syrian government launched a brutal campaign of repression against peaceful demonstrators early last year, killing between 5,000 and 6,000 people, according to U.N. and other diplomatic estimates. In recent months, the violence has worsened as opposition forces have taken up arms against the Assad government, leading the country to the brink of all-out civil war. The Security Council adopted a presidential statement in August condemning the Syrian government’s conduct and calling for a political dialogue with the opposition.

In October, however, Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution that threatened sanctions against Damascus if it didn’t halt the killing.

The latest draft “condemns the continued widespread and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities” and demands that Syria immediately cease attacks against protesters. It also condemns violent attacks against government targets by armed opposition forces.

But the text struck out a provision calling on states to “take necessary steps” to prevent the flow of weapons into Syria. It also eliminated another provision that called on states to reinforce existing Arab League financial and travel sanctions, and to impose similar measures against Syria.

If Syria fails to comply with the U.N. demands, according to the draft, the Security Council, in consultation with the Arab League, will consider “further measures,” including possible sanctions, to ensure Damascus does comply.

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The Washington Post

Syria: It's not just about freedom

By [Charles Krauthammer](#), Published: February 2

Imperial regimes can crack when they are driven out of their major foreign outposts. The fall of the Berlin Wall did not only signal the liberation of Eastern Europe from Moscow. It prefigured the collapse of the Soviet Union itself just two years later.

[The fall of Bashar al-Assad's Syria](#) could be similarly ominous for Iran. The alliance with Syria is the centerpiece of Iran's expanding sphere of influence, a mini-Comintern that includes such clients as Iranian-armed and -directed Hezbollah, now the dominant power in Lebanon; and Hamas, which controls Gaza and threatens to take the rest of Palestine (the West Bank) from a feeble Fatah.

Additionally, Iran exerts growing pressure on Afghanistan to the east and growing influence in Iraq to the west. Tehran has even extended its horizon [to Latin America](#), as symbolized by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's solidarity tour through Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba.

Of all these clients, Syria is the most important. It's the only Arab state openly allied with non-Arab Iran. This is significant because the Arabs see the Persians as having had centuries-old designs to dominate the Middle East. Indeed, Iranian arms and trainers, transshipped to Hezbollah through Syria, have given the Persians their first outpost on the Mediterranean in 2,300 years.

But the Arab-Iranian divide is not just national/ethnic. It is sectarian. The Arabs are overwhelmingly Sunni. Iran is Shiite. The Arab states fear Shiite Iran infiltrating the Sunni homeland through (apart from Iraq) Hezbollah in Lebanon, and through Syria, run by Assad's Alawites, a heterodox offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Which is why the fate of the Assad regime is geopolitically crucial. It is, of course, highly significant for reasons of democracy and human rights as well. Syrian Baathism, while not as capricious and deranged as the Saddam Hussein variant, runs a ruthless police state that once [killed 20,000 in Hama](#) and has now killed more than 5,400 during the current uprising. Human rights — decency — is reason enough to do everything we can to bring down Assad.

But strategic opportunity compounds the urgency. With its archipelago of clients anchored by Syria, Iran is today the greatest regional threat — to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states terrified of Iranian nuclear hegemony; to traditional regimes menaced by Iranian jihadist subversion; to Israel, which the Islamic Republic has pledged to annihilate; to America and the West, whom the mullahs have vowed to drive from the region.

No surprise that the Arab League, many of whose members are no tenderhearted humanitarians, is [pressing hard for Assad's departure](#). His fall would deprive Iran of an intra-Arab staging area and sever its corridor to the Mediterranean. Syria would return to the Sunni fold. Hezbollah, Tehran's agent in Lebanon, could be next,

withering on the vine without Syrian support and Iranian materiel. And Hamas would revert to Egyptian patronage.

At the end of this causal chain, Iran, shorn of key allies and already reeling from economic sanctions over its nuclear program, would be thrown back on its heels. The mullahs are already shaky enough to be making near-suicidal threats of blocking [the Strait of Hormuz](#). The population they put down in the 2009 Green Revolution is still seething. The regime is particularly reviled by the young. And its increasing attempts [to shore up Assad](#) financially and militarily have only compounded anti-Iranian feeling in the region.

It's not just the Sunni Arabs lining up against Assad. Turkey, after a recent flirtation with a Syrian-Iranian-Turkish entente, has turned firmly against Assad, seeing an opportunity to extend its influence, as in Ottoman days, as protector/master of the Sunni Arabs. The alignment of forces suggests a unique opportunity for the West to help finish the job.

How? First, a total boycott of Syria, beyond just oil and including a full arms embargo. Second, a flood of aid to the resistance (through Turkey, which harbors both rebel militias and the political opposition, or directly and clandestinely into Syria). Third, [a Security Council resolution](#) calling for the removal of the Assad regime. Russia, Assad's last major outside ally, should be forced to either accede or incur the wrath of the Arab states with a veto.

Force the issue. Draw bright lines. Make clear American solidarity with the Arab League against a hegemonic Iran and its tottering Syrian client. In diplomacy, one often has to choose between human rights and strategic advantage. This is a rare case where we can advance both — so long as we do not compromise with Russia or relent until Assad falls.

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