TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
TEL AVIV NOTES
AN UPDATE ON MIDDLE EASTERN DEVELOPMENTS BY THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER
Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman Assistant Editor: Brandon Friedman

Volume 7, Number 17 September 10, 2013

Bashar al-Asad's Moment of Truth

Eyal Zisser

The tide of the Syrian civil war had seemed to turn in favor of Bashar al-Asad's regime during the past few months. Asad's forces, with considerable help from Hizballah units, had apparently halted the rebels' momentum and seized the initiative. One noteworthy gain was Hizballah's conquest of al-Qusayr, in the district of Homs, during June 2013. The importance of this city, which had been in rebel hands since the summer of 2012, was that it was the key to controlling the link between Syria's interior – the Damascus-Aleppo axis – and the Syrian coast and Alawi heartland. In addition, al-Qusayr is a strategic point straddling the main route from Lebanon to Homs and northern Syria. It was along this route that weapons, aid, and even volunteers had flowed into rebel hands from the adjacent Sunni areas of Lebanon, including Tripoli.

The Syrian regime also solidified its grip on the city of Homs, even if it could not completely control it, and pushed rebel forces back from some of the entrances to Damascus, while the rebels continued to control many of the surrounding villages to the city's east and west and some of neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city itself. The rebels also increased the pressure on regime forces in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and drove them from the northeastern part of the country, the al-Jazira region, and even mounted an offensive that extended as far as the southern coast of Syria, into the areas populated by an Alawi majority, the regime's stronghold. Nevertheless, the fact is that except for the city of al-Raqaa in the east, the rebels have not been able to gain full control over any of Syria's large cities, or any province in its entirety. Their achievements, while not inconsiderable, have been limited to controlling villages and their surroundings in a number of areas of the country.

Bashar al-Asad is still far from victory or even from gaining the upper hand in the

war. But the rebels are even further from victory than Asad. In the absence of external intervention and continued financial support and arms flowing from sympathetic states, it is doubtful if the scales can be tipped in the rebels' favor. They are still fragmented and unable to close ranks: after more than two and one-half years of fighting, they have failed to fashion a political and military leadership that is a necessary condition for victory.

In the past few months, there have even been squabbles between the various rebel groups – mainly between radical Islamist factions and the other rebel groups. Today the rebels are fighting as much among themselves as they are against the regime's forces. For example, members of al-Qa`ida operating in Syria have fractured. In January 2012, al-Qa`ida in Iraq founded *Jabhat al-Nusra Li Ahl al-Sham* ("Support Front for the Syrian People"). But in April 2013 a split occurred between the new Syrian branch and its parent movement in Iraq. The latter then began operating as "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" and created a Syrian branch as a rival and competitor to *Jabhat al-Nusra*. Other Islamist factions operating in Syria are the Syrian Islamic Front, which is supported by Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, which is affiliated with the venerable Muslim Brotherhood and supported by Qatar.

Apart from the main Islamist factions fighting against the regime, there is also the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella organization that includes hundreds of groups. These are usually local and independent, and coordinate loosely with one another for the purposes of repelling regime forces operating in the areas under their control. Emerging disputes in the largely Kurdish northern and eastern parts of Syria further complicate the picture. There the population has also been torn between rival parties and camps. Constant battles have raged between Kurdish fighters and the rebel groups, supported by local Arabs, over control over the region's oil fields and grain stores.

Given the rebels' internal fissures and the regime's achievements in recent months, why then would Bashar al-Asad need to use chemical weapons on August 21, 2013 against his opponents, in the area of al-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya, on the outskirts of eastern Damascus?

The answer is that for more than six months the regime had repeatedly used chemical weapons in limited quantities, along with rocket-fire, air-raids, and artillery to win localized but nonetheless important battles, e.g. over Khan al-Asal, which controls the northern approach to Aleppo, thus enabling the regime to supply its forces fighting the rebels there. Al-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya the site of the latest attack, has been the location of a rebel base and outposts that threatened

Syria's nearby international airport.

It seems that despite the risk of a firm international response to a large scale chemical weapons attack, it may have been difficult for the regime to understand the special sensitivity in Western societies to using such weapons, which are the product of European history. It may be fair to assume that for Asad's regime, there is no real difference between a massive aerial bombardment, concentrated artillery strikes, launching deadly surface-to-surface missile strikes, and the targeted use of chemical weapons.

Moreover, while President Obama warned a year ago that Asad's using chemical weapons would be crossing a red line, in practice he avoided responding to reports of such use and thus signaled (albeit unintentionally) to the Asad regime that it could continue to do so with impunity.

Although the information about exactly what happened on August 21st remains partial, it is very possible that Asad was simply acting brazenly; alternatively, one of his officers, acting according to the approval in principle granted by the Syrian President, perhaps felt free to utilize a larger amount than usual of the deadly chemicals. It is even possible that this was a mistake or an operational mishap, resulting in an unexpectedly high number of civilian deaths, including many young children.

Nevertheless, it seems clear the Syrian army is waging a campaign to exterminate or expel the rebels and the population that supports them. To be sure, this was perhaps not the regime's original objective, but is the outcome of an inexorable brutalization of all parties to the conflict. There is no other possible explanation for the massive use of deadly weapons of terror, such as aerial bombardment, concentrated artillery fire, surface-to-surface missiles, and even chemical weapons against the rebels and their supporters in densely populated areas. One result has been that between four and six million Syrians, between 20-30 percent of the total population, are either internal or external refugees, most of them Sunni Muslim supporters of the rebels living in villages and peripheral areas. If this trend continues, Bashar may well be able to eventually declare victory, after having defeated or emptied the country of his opponents and their supporters.

But on the way to victory, Asad appears to have hit a bump in the road in the form of Barack Obama and the United States. To be sure, it is clear that the U.S. does not want to be directly involved in the Syrian civil war, and especially an Afghan or Iraqi-style quagmire. Indeed, in recent months a consensus has emerged within the U.S. security establishment against any U.S. military action

that would necessitate committing large numbers of ground forces to operations in Syrian territory. In addition, the Pentagon has also stated that the Syrian opposition is a collection of rebel bands incapable of replacing Asad, and that overthrowing Asad's regime would thus result in chaos and anarchy that would allow radical groups like al-Qa`ida to take over, something which would ultimately drag the U.S. in even deeper.

But under pressure from the media, intellectuals, and powerful political forces surrounding him, Obama may be forced to act. His dilemma therefore is how to take precise action that will leave a lasting impression on world opinion, but at the same time not involve the U.S. in an unwanted war. The apparent solution will be a localized and painful blow against select military targets across Syria.

How will Bashar al-Asad respond in such a situation? It's hard to say. In the past, facing similar situations, he avoided taking any retaliatory action. For example, Asad did not respond in September 2007, when Israel attacked and destroyed the secret nuclear facility that Asad was trying to build. And he also chose to ignore Israeli strikes that were carried out, according to Western sources, against Syrian military sites located deep in the Syrian interior in January, May, and July 2013.

What remains for Asad is a life and death struggle between the rebels and his regime. He believes that he has a good chance to ultimately triumph. Consequently, becoming entangled with the U.S. or Israel would be tantamount to suicide. Therefore it is assumed in Israel and beyond that Asad will seek to contain the anticipated confrontation with the U.S., and focus on fighting the rebels.

Russia, Iran, and Hizballah are presently providing Asad with crucial military, financial and, in the case of Russia, diplomatic aid in his war of survival. Iran has forced Hizballah into the fighting in Syria, but it is hard to imagine that Tehran will risk confrontation with the U.S., or that Hizballah would be willing to challenge Israel for the sake of Asad.

The problem for Asad is that even a limited U.S. strike may undermine the delicate balance between the regime and the rebels and threaten his rule. Pinpoint strikes against his air force, precision attacks on the centers of the military's command and control, and above all the moral message of support to the rebels may turn out to be the blow that triggers an earthquake.

What is Asad likely to do with his back to the wall? Saddam Hussein chose to escape from his palace and go into hiding in an attempt to save his life. The

question is what would his top military officers and soldiers make of such behavior? Would they continue to follow orders and guidelines, or would they also try to save themselves? Their calculations could be affected by the fact that Syrian military capabilities have been diminished: missile arsenals have been depleted and the army's maneuverability is severely limited.

One way or the other, the ball is currently not in Bashar's court but in Washington's, and the future of the Syrian civil war is likely to be decided as much by Barack Obama as by Bashar al-Asad.

Eyal Zisser is Dean of Humanities at Tel Aviv University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.