

## **Briefing Memo**

### **The Security Situation in Syria: Present Conditions and Future Prospects**

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#### **Introduction**

The so-called “Arab Spring” triggered by the demonstrations in Tunisia from the end of 2010 led to massive anti-government demonstrations in six Arab countries. While regimes were overthrown in four of these countries, Egypt being a particular example, in Bahrain the administration has largely succeeded in containing the dissidents. Syria is now the only country where battles between the regime and the opposition still continue after more than two years, and is the topic of this briefing memo. In that country, initially, the regime cracked down on anti-government unarmed protestors. However, as time passed, the dissidents gradually armed themselves, and as a result, both sides have been engaged in a virtual civil war from the second half of 2011.

#### **Trends in the tactical situation**

The regime’s armed forces and the dissidents entered into full-scale combat from the second half of 2011. Initially, the regime forces were dominant. However, from around mid-2012 the dissidents gradually turned the tables on the regime and expanded their area of control. Aid from Gulf countries such as Qatar may have played an important role in this turnabout. Yet from around April 2013 the regime forces staged a recovery and in June recaptured the strategic city of Qusayr from the dissident forces. Support from the Lebanese Shiite Islamist organization Hezbollah and from Iran seems to be the largest factor in this recovery. In other words, the tactical situation has been largely influenced by external powers, and hence this civil war will not be settled by domestic actors exclusively. The Syrian case shares similarities here with those of Libya and Bahrain.

#### **Stances of foreign countries**

At present, only two important countries, that is Russia and Iran, actively support the Assad regime. Most other countries apart from these two criticize the regime. However, the actual stances of these countries toward Syria vary widely. For

example, the UK and France have adopted the positive stance of aiding the dissidents, including the future possibility of supplying weapons. Gulf countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia seem to have provided various support comprising weapons to the opposition. These Sunni regimes in the Gulf regard Iran, the Shiite regional power, as a threat. In order to shrink the Iranian sphere of influence, they aim to topple the Assad regime, which is close to Iran. On the other hand, each Gulf country has its own particular stance. For instance, it seems that while Qatar aids some groups in the opposition, Saudi Arabia support other groups. As for the United States, in terms of foreign policy it takes the stance of providing support for the dissidents, yet has taken a cautious stance regarding the supplying of weapons to the opposition or military intervention. There are several reasons for its cautiousness toward military intervention. First, the US wants to avoid the deploying of ground forces and their long-term stationing in the country, as occurred in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, because there are no Arab League resolutions or UN Security Council resolutions that authorize military intervention into Syria, the US does not have any pretext with which to justify air power-centered military intervention as it did into Libya in 2011. Third, if the US provides weapons to the dissidents, those weapons might be received by al-Qaeda affiliated organizations and they might use them in order to attack the US.

On the other hand, Russia has supported the Assad regime through its aggressive delivery of weapons which it had already contracted to sell. There is also debate about the presence or absence of delivery of S-300 air defense missile systems. While these systems may play an important role in deterring airborne attack by foreign armed forces, it is unlikely that the Assad regime will use these systems in battles with the dissidents. Russia is said to aid the Assad regime because it has provided Syrian naval facilities to the Russian navy and has been a longtime friend since the Soviet era. However, while the continuation of the Assad regime is essential for Iran, it seems that the regime has smaller importance for Russia than it has for Iran. If the pro-Iranian and anti-American Assad regime collapses, it is almost certain that the new Syrian regime will be an anti-Iranian and pro-American Sunni-dominant one, shrinking the Iranian sphere of influence. Therefore, in order to prevent such a situation, Iran has provided staunch support to the regime through the dispatch of personnel and exercising its influence on Hezbollah. When anti-government demonstrations erupted in Arab countries during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the best scenario for Iran was the collapse of the Sunni-dominant regime and the establishment of a new Shiite-dominant regime in Bahrain and the continuation of the Assad regime in Syria, which would have assured the expansion of the Iranian sphere of influence. Iran will

never accept the opposite scenario where the Sunni-dominant regime continues in Bahrain and a new Sunni-dominant regime emerges in Syria. As a result, Iran must keep up its aid toward the Assad regime.

As for Israel, it implemented some attacks on Syrian territory recently against a backdrop of fear that chemical and other advanced weapons of the Assad regime might fall into the hands of radical Islamists such as Hezbollah and the Nusra Front. Since the Shiite Hezbollah supports the Assad regime, and the Sunni Nusra Front belongs to the opposition, the two organizations are in a hostile relationship. On the other hand, both of the two are anti-Israeli non-state actors. If the Assad regime, which is anti-American and anti-Israeli and isolated in the international community, happens to collapse, Israel will inevitably face a new Syrian regime, which will be pro-American but still anti-Israeli and no longer internationally isolated. In addition, it will take a long time for that new regime to restore order to Syria and during that period Israel is likely to be impacted upon by the chaotic Syrian situation. Therefore, at heart Israel seems not to wish for a collapse of the Assad regime. However, the Assad regime has already fallen into an unstable situation. So in order to minimize its damage, Israel seems to have launched attacks on Syrian territory.

### **Future prospects**

It is difficult to predict the future situation. For example, the timing of the conclusion of Libyan civil war in 2011 was unexpected for many researchers. At that time, although it was believed that the situation of the war was in stalemate, the capital of Tripoli fell suddenly. The possibility that the same abrupt change could occur in the case of Syria must not be ruled out. However, I think the Syrian civil war will result in one of the following three scenarios.

#### **1. The Assad regime succeeds in crushing the dissidents**

This scenario is less likely. As shown in the Assad regime's recapture of Qusayr, the regime can succeed in recovery of control in an area where it deploys troops intensively. However, in order to position these forces in some area, the regime needs to move them from other areas. Such evacuations result in weakened control of those other areas. In other words, while the regime has enough military power to regain territory which it regards vital, it does not have the capability to control the entire territory. In addition, even if the Assad regime puts down the dissidents, it will not be easy for the regime to recover its position in the international community because the Arab League recognized the opposition as the legitimate Syrian representative in March 2013.

2. The civil war continues for the time being.

At present, the possibility of this scenario is high. Therefore, in order to avoid a prolonged civil war, the US and Russia are currently try to organize an international conference where both the opposition and the Assad regime participate. A few researchers expect that as a consequence of the prolonged war Syria will be divided into fragmented countries.

3. Dissidents overthrow the Assad regime

Feasibility of this scenario was higher until around March 2013. However, since the regime forces intensified their renewed assaults around April, in the short term the possibility of the collapse of the regime has decreased. If the regime is overthrown, Syria and its neighboring countries' situation will increase in volatility still further because the Alawites will continue their armed struggles as remnants of the former regime and the chaotic situation will spread into the neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, both of which suffer from sectarian conflicts.

**Conclusion**

In May 2013, hoping to break the deadlock, the US and Russia agreed to organize an international conference where both the dissidents and the Assad regime would participate. The agreement may mean that, against the backdrop of the prolonged civil war and based on an assessment that the dissidents were unlikely to topple the regime, the US temporarily mothballed its target of overthrowing it. If this is so, the agreement might show that the Assad regime has reestablished its position of superiority in the battlefield, and then improved its diplomatic presence. However, some researchers have the opposite view, that the US will switch from a negative attitude to affirmative support for the dissidents. Therefore, forecasting the future is almost impossible.

The “Arab Spring” was expected to bring about the democratization of the Arab countries. But what Syria needs right now would be peace, first and foremost.

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