

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

37 / 2012

December 2012

The Real Challenge of Syria for the International Community

by Pavlos Efthymiou

PhD Candidate in Politics and International Studies, St. Edmund's College, University of Cambridge

The “Arab Spring” is one of those critical global events that do not give much prior warning before they arrive, but once they have arrived, they confront the international community with major dilemmas of potentially far-reaching ramifications. There is no single answer to the rapid and ongoing developments in the Middle East and North Africa. For instance, why did 2.000 deaths in Libya¹ warrant an intervention whereas 40.000 dead and counting in Assad's Syria do not? Why do we accept for every Israeli life lost, the death of 32 Palestinians, or, at the same time consider Israel's decision not to invade Gaza a major concession and compromise? Why would a nuclear Iran be a *casus belli* for the US and Israel while nuclear Pakistan, a country with profound internal problems (including an ongoing war on its North-West border) does not seem to worry the international community to nearly the same extent?

What we have, as usual, are states trying to pursue foreign policies on the basis of cost-benefit calculations in circumstances of deep uncertainty.

Nuclear Pakistan, may be otherwise unstable, but its nuclear capacity seems to, ‘balance’ nuclear India, conveniently allowing third parties to distance themselves from the bilateral confrontation (reducing potential risks associated with guaranteeing the security of one actor). Israel, the dominant military power in its neighborhood, is not held (effectively) accountable to anyone outside Israel for its actions in the Occupied Territories and the Gaza Strip, and yet third parties distance themselves from the resulting tensions. As far as the Syrian crisis is concerned, the number of commentators asking why there has been no major UN, NATO - or other Western for that matter - decision on some form of intervention is rising rapidly. One can link this to the resurfacing of worries expressed by analysts, experts and many western officials over the potential use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian government against the opposition forces ‘the more desperate the regime grows’². Many refer, in fact, to the example of Libya where there were no Western casualties, suggesting that a similar, limited and targeted intervention, would have limited or no human cost, while it would at the same time ensure a victory for the opposition. The main reason however why no ‘Libya-style’ - i.e. No Fly Zone on paper, stretched to ‘NFZ plus No Tank Zone and no Heavy Artillery Zone operation - is underway now in Syria is because in fact, there can be no analogy with Libya.

The systematic discussions and interviews I conducted over the course of the last month with military analysts, experts on the Syrian issue and high ranking British and American airforce commanders all reached the same conclusion – that there is no intervention formula which can exclude, non-negligible, human casualties for the intervening force / coalition³. Syria's over two hundred Russian anti-aircraft warfare (AAW) systems, many of which mobile and on the cutting-edge of surface to air AAW technology, along with its older AAW systems which the regime has strategically modernized constitute the main deterrent against any intervention template. Furthermore, what is also of central importance is the fact that the Syrians are using highly developed non-NATO command and control

¹According to maximum UN estimates pre-intervention (as cited in Milne, 2011 -

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/libya-war-saving-lives-catastrophic-failure>).

² Two sub-points: a) one might at this stage wonder why the 40000 Syrian deaths brought about by bombs dropped by Assad's fighter jets matter less than deaths chemical weapons could cause, but the horror implied in the use of these weapons and associated memories in the West coupled with a need to set a ‘red line’ (not least to save face for prolonged inaction) perhaps best answer this; b) worries over potential chemical weapon usage by the regime at this stage are rather self-contradicting, as Assad has been strategically avoiding situations which would help foster an ‘intervention momentum’, agreeing on several diplomatic initiatives over the time of the crisis and probably knows very well that there is no future for him (not only in Syria) if he actually uses such means.

³ Conference material; interviews in London conducted in November and December 2012, Cambridge and Boston.

The Real Challenge of Syria for the International Community

networks which cannot be safely blocked or intercepted. As a senior US airforce strategist put it: the Syrians have been moving their anti-aircraft units around, using decoys, and, since updating and modernizing surface to air systems is a quite simple task, it is believed that Syria has a great deal of fully functional systems strategically positioned in the areas controlled by the Assad regime. Turkey found out about this the hard way last June when it saw its F-4 Phantom downed during a reconnaissance overflight in Syrian airspace.

The West and its allies do not seem ready (at this stage at least) to sustain casualties in the course of their efforts to contribute to a ceasefire in Syria. They so far choose not to do so in a crisis situation where it has been clearly demonstrated that diplomacy alone cannot end this civil war. Further to the projected casualties cost, analysts also 'weigh': a) the economic cost involved; b) the political ramifications and potential aftershocks in the broader region and the Muslim world (which also depends on the legitimacy of the mission – UNSC, EU, NATO, Arab League endorsement); c) the danger of 'being drawn in' (i.e., leading to boots on the ground); d) the risk of having to 'stay in' (i.e. a protracted engagement); e) the risk of post-intervention reconstruction in unstable and uncertain circumstances in the country (and the costs, not least in terms of public opinion at home and abroad, post Afghanistan and Iraq that this might involve); and finally, f) worrisome scenarios for the 'image' and perception of the intervention, in the medium-long run, in the Arab, Muslim and developing world.

According to the latest information, the opposition forces are seriously gaining ground, gradually bringing the battlefield to Damascus. If the international community, in its entirety, or at least the West and its allies, fail to assume robust political actions at this crucial stage to contribute to putting an end to hostilities in Syria, it risks being outrun by events. This means stepping up support of the opposition through funding and supplies (as do the French), and ensuring the greatest possible recognition of the National Coalition in the UN. It might be that the 'recognition asphyxia', isolating, exposing and delegitimizing fully the Assad regime will generate a momentum for greater assistance; it is not sufficient though to bring down the regime which has still the firm allegiance of the military⁴. Especially given the 'recognition momentum' the West should now be more prepared to contribute, by all means required if necessary, to a ceasefire in Syria. This would come at a cost, but inaction might come at a much higher one. It may be, that if no major initiative is assumed to decisively change the balance of forces in Syria, the Western stance will not be recorded in the collective conscience and memory of the Syrian people as one of support in their democratic struggle. Instead, it risks going down in Syrian history as a Western failure: that the Syrian people, alone, overthrew a regime that was long supported by many Western actors and EU member states. They will remember that many outsiders had opted, for a considerable time of the crisis, staying with 'the devil they know' and that, in general, the international community had distanced itself from their struggle.

Everyone of course needs to conduct their own cost-benefit analyses responsibly and with a view to the future. This is particularly true for states traditionally claiming special ties and friendship to the Arab World. Greece is perhaps a case in point. It will be pointless for anyone to claim such friendships if they fail to be there for the people of these countries, at least politically and diplomatically, when they are needed the most.

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail eliamep@eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Learn more about our work - Visit our website at www.eliamep.gr/en and our blog at <http://blogs.eliamep.gr/en>
Should you wish to **unsubscribe** from our mailing list please send a blank message to unsubscribe@eliamep.gr

⁴ Several regimes rejected by the international community have survived for decades.