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Position Paper

The Steady Rise of Regional Conflict over Syria



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net>

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It was clear since the popular uprising escalated in opposition to the rule of President al-Assad and the ruling regime's inability to eradicate or contain the mass political movement that the Syrian crisis would develop into regional, perhaps even international, commotion. Considering Syria's location at the heart of the Arab-Islamic Orient, and its great impact on the role of major regional forces such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in addition to its role in Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria's future is an issue greater than Syria itself. Also, because the Syrian crisis has persisted for over seven months without nearby prospects, the regional and international commotion over Syria is expected to erupt in a manner unknown to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions which were able to succeed to bringing about change in the regime structure within just a few weeks.

In other words, the longer the internal conflict over Syria's political future persists, the more the attempts of foreign intervention, taking initially a regional façade unquestionably absorbed with international dimensions and later developing into an intertwined regional and international conflict. There is no doubt that announcing the establishment of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul (2nd October), which is supposed to include the wider sector of opposition forces and popular movement activities, increased the pace of this commotion.

This paper explores the implications of announcing the formation of the national council as well as the development of the positions of major regional players in the Syrian crisis and the current impact of these positions.

Implications of the Formation of the National Council

Considering the multiple attempts to establish an organisation representing opposition forces and the popular movement since the Syrian revolution's outbreak in mid-March, it was not easy to predict the Syrian national responses to the announcement of the formation of the national council. Indeed, the council project, in its extended form, included a broad sector of the opposition forces and the extensive preparation time allowed for the inclusion of the largest number of local coordination assemblies that organise and lead popular movement activities in various Syrian cities. However, establishing the council in two phases (the first announcement on 15th September and the second expanded on 2nd October) gave rise to familiar doubts about its success in affirming its credibility to the popular movement. The first surprise came on the day of the announcement itself when spontaneous protests erupted in the Damascus countryside, Homs and other northern towns in support of the council immediately after the council's first statement was read. However, the actual popular referendum on the council occurred on Friday, 7th October when all of the rebelling Syrian cities and towns witnessed mass protests in support of the council, which the national coordinating body – which includes Leftist, national and liberal forces and figures led by Hassan Abdul Azim – was unable to investigate. This does not necessarily mean that the national council has become the only faction representing revolution forces and the popular movement, but it definitely gained a much stronger position than any other faction.

However, early statements of council leadership that the council will acquire Arab and international confessions were not based on an accurate reading of matters. Chief Western countries welcomed the establishment of the council and its representatives met with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and the British Foreign Office Minister responsible for the Middle East. Still, none of the Western countries announced official recognition of it. Official recognition of the council, in the language of international relations, means automatic withdrawal of recognition of the Syrian ruling regime (as per the Libyan case) and Western and most Arab countries find it rather early for such a step especially because the council, unlike the National Transitional Council in Libya, does not control any portion of Syrian territory.

The only recognition the council received was from the Libyan National Transitional Council, after which its representatives were invited to Tripoli for an official visit on the 18th October. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had met with a number of council heads in Ankara the day before in the first official meeting between Turkey and Syrian opposition forces. Moreover, the Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby met with council representatives in Cairo on 18th October after their visit to the Libyan capital.

The various meetings with Western officials, the Turkish foreign minister and the Arab League secretary general in addition to official Libyan recognition promoted the status of the national council. It is expected that another Arab state will work to convene public meetings with council heads and representatives. However, the question that remains up in the air is whether the existence of the council will advance Arab efforts to find a quick solution to the Syrian crisis.

The Turkish Stance:

Truly, a decisive and conclusive Turkish stance on Syria's situation has not been established yet. During the first months of the Syrian revolution, Ankara leaned toward the preservation of President al-Assad's regime after substantial implementing legislative, constitutional and political reform in the regime's structure. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed that his country's close alliance with Syria would be an effective means of influencing the Syrian president. However, Turkish officials' frequent meetings with the Syrian president during April and May did not achieve anything worth mentioning. As the number of victims of the Syrian crisis increased and the calls of Syrian protesters for Turkish intervention were repeated, the trust between Ankara and Damascus was fading strongly. Certainly, Davutoglu's visit to Damascus in August and his marathon meeting with President al-Assad marked the end of the policy of pressure for reform.

Since that meeting, bets about the possibility of Turkish intervention increased. Nonetheless, it is clear that there are limits to what Turkey is capable of doing as direct Turkish military intervention in Syria requires an international legal (and Arab political) umbrella as well as a Turkish parliamentary resolution. Considering the Chinese and Russian positions in the United Nations Security Council, it could be said that the international umbrella is unavailable in the foreseeable future as this is before Turkish leadership began to consider the benefit of such intervention and the possibility of achieving Arab and Turkish parliamentary support for it. On the other hand, imposing extensive Turkish economic sanctions on Syria will cause detriment to the Syrian people's living conditions considering the close economic and commercial relations between the two countries. How, then, will Turkey be able to act to support the Syrian popular movement?

What Turkey has done so far is provide space in the country for various Syrian opposition forces (and not just Islamists as commonly held) whether for convening meetings or for expressing their positions and inherently banning weapon supplies to the Syrian state, terminating communication with al-Assad's regime, adopting a discourse contrary to the regime's policies toward the popular movement, and finally, the Turkish foreign minister's reception of a delegation from the Syrian National Council. The Turkish prime minister will probably announce the implementation of numerous measures toward the Syrian regime after Eid al-Adha (the "Festival of Sacrifice," or the second holiday of the Islamic calendar marking the end of annual pilgrimage to Mecca) during Erdoğan's visit to Syrian refugee camps, which was postponed due to his mother's death. Despite the Turkish government's reserve, it is not expected that the set of measures to be implemented will include military characteristics although Turkey sought to reinforce its forces along the Turkish-Syrian borders a while back.

Although the Turkish measures oppose the Syrian regime, they have not yet reached the level of complete break or direct threat, as the impression was that Ankara, more than any other capital, seeks to overthrow the Syrian regime and control the process of change. One reason for this impression is the vast freedom Turkey provides for Syrian opposition activities. Other reasons are related to the geopolitical and human bond between Turkey and Syria, and the realisation of all concerned parties that Turkey will play a major role in any potential international military intervention in addition to the sympathy between Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party and Syrian Islamist forces that form the larger sector of opposition forces. This impression became a source of increased anxiety for Iran and some Arab states.

The Iranian Position:

Military adviser to the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and former commander of Iran's revolutionary guards, Rahim Safavi, explicitly threatened Turkey (9th October) in the context of accumulation of disputes between the two great Islamic neighbours, as he stated that Turkey must "expect much trouble (from its people and neighbours) if it does not reconsider its policies toward Syria and continues to install NATO anti-missile radar systems and promote Islamic secularism". Part of Safavi's statement in an interview with an Iranian semi-official news agency was repeated by Iranian President Ahmedinejad.

Iranian anxiety over Turkish policies, in Safavi's opinion, has three dimensions: Turkey's role in its direct regional scope (Syria), the weight of Turkish-Western relations (NATO), Turkey's intellectual and culture influence in the controversy over the future of Arab-Islamic countries (the call for secularisation). Surely, escalating disputes between Turkey and Iran, after a short political and economic honeymoon, are no longer camouflaged. If the propagandist notion of "Islamic secularisation" and the installation of NATO anti-missile radars which also includes Turkish defence precautions are disregarded, Syria must be considered as the source of tension in emerging Iranian-Turkish relations.

Syria signifies an exceedingly important strategic base for Iranian influence in the neighbouring Arab east as it provides a route to the Mediterranean and a safe passage to Lebanon, and is a reliable partner, thus rendering Iran a party in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Furthermore, the Iranian-Syrian alliance is considered a vital guarantee for Iranian influence in Iraq. Tehran had looked to the Syrian-Turkish convergence with apparent concern in the past few years; and although the deterioration of relations between Ankara and Damascus is to Tehran's advantage, Iran will exert its utmost effort to prevent the overthrow of the regime in Damascus and the emergence of a new Syrian regime closely aligned with Turkey.

Iranian officials, including Ahmedinejad, attempted weeks ago to distance Tehran from the persistent escalation of levels of bloody suppression practiced by the Syrian regime against the popular movement. However, Tehran's calls for reform in Syria must be observed in detail rather than just in a general position. Certainly, the reform that Iran approves of in Syria is not much different from the Syrian idea of reform, meaning that Syria would shift to a more liberal political regime and, with cautious and controlled political plurality, would be involved with commissioning the government, its prime minister and their overthrow without affecting the president, his vast powers and related apparatuses.

The Arab Position:

In contrast to the withdrawal of Gulf ambassadors from Damascus, which was not followed by additional procedures against the Syrian regime, a clear Arab position had not yet been established until the end of August, the month that witnessed a significant rise in both the popular protest movement and the level of repression. The Arab League Council (at the level of foreign ministers) agreement over the Arab initiative on Syria on 28th August is considered the first indication of the reunification and activity of the Arab regime since the eruption of Arab revolutions in December 2010. The initiative brought about a medial and conservative perception of a solution for the Syrian crisis responding

to some of the popular demands (termination of state violence, withdrawal of the army and security forces from streets, release of detainees, etc.), and acknowledges the continuation of Bashar al-Assad's presidency until 2014, calling for negotiations between the regime and the opposition to settle on reform measures.

However, the Syrian president did not receive the Arab League Secretary General until the 10th September. It was apparent by the end of the meeting that al-Assad refused to take the initiative in hand. During the following weeks, and with the increasing escalation of the cycle of violence, rates of dissent from the Syrian army grew and Western sanctions began to take their toll on the country's economy and state resources while the opposition succeeded in announcing the establishment of the national council. Therefore, when Arab foreign ministers met once again on 16th October to discuss the crisis, the regime was drawn against a condition worse than the one it met in August. At the end of a long meeting, the league council agreed to give the Syrian regime two weeks during which an Arab delegation would visit Damascus in order to launch talks between the regime and opposition forces under the auspices of the Arab league to reach a Syrian national agreement regarding a reform programme. This time around, the regime did not reject the Arab league's decisions firmly and it announced its reception of the Arab council during the following week.

There is no doubt that the Arab initiative, with its conservative perception of change, provides al-Assad's regime with a helping hand. However, the regime's aims of initial rejection were not founded on merely on the sovereignty of the Syrian state but also on the illusion of fear that the initiative was presented for the Arab umbrella for foreign intervention. Although it is difficult to say that there is a single Arab position, Arab agreement in the league council's two meetings indicates the existence of a minimal united Arab position on Syria. This position is based on an Arab assessment that neither parties in the Syrian crisis is able to settle the confrontation, that Syria's situation and position require an attempt to avoid foreign intervention, that the eruption of civil war in Syria will threaten Arab security in a wide Syrian vicinity and, that it is necessary that Arab countries refrain from leaving the Syrian file exposed to an Iranian-Turkish stampede.

It is not clear whether the regime, upon receiving the Arab delegation (scheduled to arrive in Damascus on Wednesday, 26th October, will agree to negotiate with the opposition, especially the national council, and whether the extent of reform envisioned by the regime is considered acceptable by the Arab delegation and convincing to the Syrian public and the Syrian political opposition forces. However, it has been noticed that in any case the Arab League Council's second meeting on Syria may result in a substantial rise in rates of bloody repression practiced by the regime against the popular movement.

Conclusions

Despite the awareness of the three regional parties (the Iranian, Turkish and Arab parties) of each other's positions, a serious dialogue between them has not yet been initiated. It is uncertain whether such is even being considered. The absence of communication channels and dialogue between the three parties promotes the dynamics of commotion between them. Also, because conditions in Syrian territory do not indicate an impending settlement in favour of the regime or the popular movement as it is expected that commotion will become more critical. However, the region does not live in the 1950s during which Syria was an arena for regional and international conflict which dissolved the role of the Syrian people themselves and thus, what it witnesses now is a vast popular opposition movement giving the Syrian people the greater role. This calls for a fundamental and quick review by the three parties in the tumult, especially the Arab party whose position lacks the clarity found in the Iranian and Turkish positions.

On the one hand, Iran's position supports the regime in Damascus and exerts its utmost effort to prevent the process of reform from affecting the regime's essence and existence. Tehran does not seem to care much about Arab and Syrian popular reactions to its position on the crisis as the necessities of the survival of the Syrian regime, according to Iran and its role in the Arab east, far exceed any popular reactions. On the other hand, Turkey acted gradually in the past few months on disengagement with the Syrian regime and it now appears as though it is on the verge of explicitly embracing its overthrow, after it welcomed all spectra of Syrian opposition and hosted a large number of Syrian refugees, and the Turkish-Syrian borders have now become a safe refuge for dissident constituents of the Syrian army.

What the Arab position lacks is adequate clarity to assume an effective role in determining the course of the Syrian situation. While it supports reform, the extent of reform the Arabs want in Syria is ambiguous and although it calls for dialogue between the regime and the opposition, the Arabs do not seem to have visibly determined the issues and objectives that should be raised in the dialogue, or the identity of the opposition that will assume the position of the regime's interlocutor. Even as the Arab position strives to prevent civil war or foreign intervention in Syria, it is doubtful that the Arabs have selected the tools and means they will use to impose their vision on the parties of the Syrian crisis. Thus, the Arab position lacks the trust of both the regime and the opposition.