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Position Paper

'Hama Guidelines' and the Limits to a Military Solution



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In confronting the popular revolution in Syria, the regime resorted to the 'Hama guidelines' – the strategy applied by Hafez al-Asad to end protests that took place in Hama in the early 1980s and which he managed to quash because the context favoured him. Today, however, the context is not in the regime's favour because its forces are more thinly spread, the protests erupted over a broader area and there is more international condemnation of its actions.

On 27 March 2012, the day that Damascus agreed to the plan put forward by UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad visited the Baba Amr neighbourhood in Homs, where fierce battles between the Syrian army and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had raged for almost an entire month resulting in the near total destruction of the area. Taken together, these two events that received deliberately wide coverage by Syrian state media point to the choice the regime offered: either maintain Asad's rule through popular acceptance of weak and non-credible political reforms that will not bring about the freedom and democracy demanded by the Syrian people or face mass destruction of the kind witnessed at Baba Amr which was a replay of Hama in February 1982 and the punishment visited on it by Asad The Father. The regime will pay no heed to any initiative proposed to resolve the Syrian crisis, the most recent of which was Annan's six-point plan of 16 March 2012. It is obvious to careful observers that the latter plan carries the seeds of its own failure especially insofar as it places Asad at the helm of political reforms against which his regime had fought for the past year.

The Syrian regime sees the international community's reluctance to intervene militarily to modify the balance of power as being in its favour, regardless of whether this reluctance is the function of division between the major international players and particularly the role of Russia and China in hindering the passage of binding international resolutions; the fear of potential chaos in Syria after Asad; or the nature of international alliance-building outside the frameworks of established international institutions and which require precise calculations and complex and time consuming procedures (indeed the testimony of the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 8 2012 shows that there is preliminary military planning for international military intervention in Syria upon the orders of U.S. President Barack Obama). Above all, the position of the Syrian regime is built on the material and moral support which it receives from its regional allies.

The Syrian regime has triumphantly celebrated its recent achievements in confronting the armed opposition, its diplomatic proficiency in manipulating international initiatives aiming to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and in its ability to deepen the divide between international actors. Despite this bravado, the regime is in a very bad situation. The Arab League has reached an unprecedented consensus in its 22 January 2012 proposal of a mechanism for political transformation in Syria that entails an effective end to the current regime. Despite its failure at the level of the Security Council resolutions condemning Damascus, the international community has taken the General Assembly route to condemning the regime's practices in a resolution passed by a majority of 122 countries on 22 November 2011. Moreover, both the military and political arms of the Syrian opposition, and despite their internal divisions and lack of efficient leadership, have gained much international acceptance over time that has translated into several mechanisms, including the formation of the International Group of Friends of Syria (this group held its first meeting in Tunis on 24 February 2012, and its second meeting in Istanbul on 1 April 2012). There have also been repeated calls from Saudi Arabia to arm the Free Syrian Army as a representative of the armed opposition at home and abroad.

Analyses of the regime's military achievements since late January 2012, following its scorched earth strategy – or what are known as the 'Hama guidelines' – have largely been accompanied by assessments of the armed opposition as being on the verge of defeat. Those who suggest such assessments need to re-examine the situation on the ground and, more importantly, to understand the nature of the war being waged in Syria and what has come to be known in military literature as fourth generation wars (abbreviated as 4GW).

The regime's forces: great effort for modest results

Thus far, there have been four stages to the military response of the Syrian regime in terms of the regime's political position, its status on the ground and the Syrian political leadership's approach to addressing the crisis. The first stage continued until the end of March 2011. In this phase the regime deployed the police force along with the four main security apparatuses (general intelligence, military intelligence, air-force intelligence and political security), backing the regime's militias which have come to be known as the 'Shabbiha' (the thugs). The methods used to confront the popular protests were characterised by a mixture of traditional crowd dispersal tactics, selective use of live ammunition to kill protest leaders, mass arrest campaigns and the torture of active revolutionary cadres in an attempt to pre-emptively abort the protest movement, while attempting to appease protestors with measures such as the punishment of local officials, raising government salaries and promising the annulment of laws that restricted popular freedoms.

The second phase was from the end of March to the end of April 2011. In this phase, and with the evident failure of its tactics in the previous one, the regime mobilised all its security and military apparatuses to protect itself, including the Republican Guard, troops selected from the regular army that had sectarian allegiances (namely the Fourth Armoured Regiment and the both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth regiments of the special forces). The systematic nature of the repression was clear during this phase. Large units were used to carry out the initial preparations, surrounding and sealing off key services to districts, regions, and even entire cities. This was followed by heavy and random fire from outside the targeted areas, used as cover for elements of special forces, riot police and Shabbiha militias to take control of elevated points. From these locations, sniper fire would be used to stop movement on the ground, resulting in the total paralysis of all aspects of daily life in these areas in preparation for raids carried out by heavy infantry units which were used for targeted assassinations, mass arrests, and terrorising the remainder of the population. These operations would be followed by withdrawal from these areas and preparation for similar assaults on other neighbourhoods, regions and cities.

With the failure of the repression of the second phase, and despite the heavy death toll at the hands of the regime and the spread of the protests to new areas that included the capital and its environs, the regime entered the third phase of the repression near the end of April, 2011. This phase was marked by a deepening of the tactics of the second phase and the introduction of some regular units of the Army (the Fifth and Eleventh regiments) to face protestors in the north and south of the country despite doubts as to the loyalty of the soldiers in these units. The regime also opted to intensify the firepower with which it faced the protests by using artillery (rocket launchers) as well as tank fire, armoured vehicles and artillery support for these armoured vehicles. This phase was accompanied in early June 2011 by the onset of the crisis of refugees who fled the regime's violence in the southern regions, especially Dar'aa and its environs, and those who fled the repression and indiscriminate killings in Homs, Baniyas, Hama and Tel Kalakh seeking refuge in Lebanon. The crisis then escalated with the redeployment of the regime's forces further north – to Idlib, Jabal al-Zawiya and Jisr al-Shughur starting. In these operations, the regime's forces used helicopter gunships to bomb populated areas, leading to the mass displacement of civilians into Turkish territory, particularly Turkey's Hatay province and other regions of southern Turkey. This phase continued until mid-January 2012 and the crisis facing the regime became increasingly clear as it had failed to quash the protest movement despite the large scale of its killing operations and the acts it committed which reached the level of crimes against humanity, prompting the international community to condemn the regime. More importantly, the centres across the borders in neighbouring countries in which the refugees had gathered not only formed a driving force upon the international community to intervene for a change in the situation that led to these refugees' displacement, but these centres had also become safe havens for the activities of the leadership and the organisation of the armed opposition at home and abroad, as well as a source of funds and arms for this revolution.

Several factors led the Syrian regime to enter the fourth phase, the implementation of the Hama strategy, using excessive force not confined to areas of protests and without the slightest regard for human life or collateral damage. These factors included: the development of the opposition's armed operations; the exposure of the regime's forces to increasing attacks in the areas of their concentration and along their supply lines; the loss of the regime's control over many parts of the country, particularly in the provinces of Idlib, Hama, Homs, and to some extent Dar'aa and Deir Al-Zour; the emergence of armed resistance in Rif Dimashq and in the heart of the capital itself; the growing stress on the regime's most trusted units for counter-insurgency operations throughout the country; the increase of dissent and defection among the soldiers; and a growing international current calling for the establishment of safe areas inside Syria to relieve the pressure created by the refugee crisis in neighbouring states. This fourth phase was characterised by integrated military operations involving large military formations that begin with heavy fire for extended periods of time (lasting for 27 days in the case of Baba Amr) from military bases out of the reach of the opposition's limited firepower. This was followed by the penetration of these areas and the occupation of key points such as bridges, road junctions, government buildings and hospitals. Thereafter, manhunt operations were carried out quickly given that the majority of residents of those areas either fled or had been killed as a result of the pre-emptive fire. Small military units then stayed behind to ensure the opposition did not return and to restore a semblance of normal life while the main formations continued elsewhere to repeat similar operations.

It appears that despite the regime's acceptance of the Annan plan, it will continue with the Hama strategy, or rather the 'scorched earth' strategy, in the northern and central provinces, in Deir Al-Zour in the west, and in and around Dar'aa in the south. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the day after announcing its acceptance of the Annan plan, the regime's forces stormed the Madiq castle near Hama after eighteen days of heavy bombardment that destroyed a large part of the historic castle.

Free Syrian Army: A growing force

Although the armed opposition has been curtailed at the local level by the regime's brutal military campaign, particularly in the northern and western parts of the country, an assessment that incorporates the nature of this war – particularly insofar as it differs from conventional warfare – suggests that the units of the FSA had maintained their effectiveness and their presence as a major player in the Syrian interior and beyond. These units have maintained their presence on the ground as the most important measures of operational effectiveness in this kind of war through the growing popular acceptance of their presence in an environment of ongoing military operations despite the local population suffering great human and material losses. This harm caused by the regime is partly intended to create a state of popular aversion against the FSA, to later pave the way to turn the populace against it and into the arms of the regime. The popularity of the FSA is evidenced, for instance, by the fact that on the Friday following the regime's invasion of Baba Amr, the slogan of the popular protests was 'arms for the FSA'. This popular support is in addition to the ongoing attrition within the units of the military units fielded by the regime, particularly those deployed in the north, south and in areas around Damascus.

The FSA suffers from various disadvantages that largely stem from its recent formation and from the mobility and firepower advantages enjoyed by the regime's military. This is in addition to the slow pace of the international community and its reluctance to provide operational and logistical support for the FSA's activities, and the long time it took the international community to appreciate the concept and nature of fourth generation warfare, an appreciation that will come naturally over time albeit at great human and material cost. In addition to the great imbalance in favour of the regime's forces in terms of firepower and mobilisational capacity, the armed opposition suffers from a chronic shortage in the supply of arms and, in particular, ammunition and, as such, it cannot sustain combat for long periods of time. Furthermore, the FSA is predominantly organised on a local level rather than on a national level that can strategise over the entire field of operations, in addition to the weakness of the overall leadership and control mechanisms, meaning that a minimum of military cooperation and coordination

between the different localities does not exist. This is particularly evident in the repeated mistake of holding on to certain areas for long periods of time, as happened in Idlib, Homs and Rif Dimashq. In these cases, the regime had the time to mobilise its troops and deal separately and successively with the different areas (or pockets). More importantly, it provided the regime with a justification to heavily bombard these areas indiscriminately to punish the local populations, creating mistrust between the populace and the armed opposition who were blamed for causing the regime's attacks.

On the other hand, as a broad umbrella of armed opposition groups inside Syria, the FSA has many advantages that give it high survival capabilities and the ability to work on the ground. Of particular importance is the qualitative development in targeting the regime's forces' operational and logistical supply lines with tactics such as ambushes, direct fire and the extensive use of roadside bombs along highways. This is in addition to night-time attrition operations at checkpoints manned by the regime's troops at the entryways of population centres and along communications lines. Also recently highlighted, especially after the battle of Baba Amr, has been the high flexibility in the speed of redeployment from areas targeted by the regime's forces, accompanied by the capability to open new and simultaneous battle fronts, such as the combat operations in Rif Dimashq and the suburbs of Damascus to relieve pressure on the regions of Idlib, Jabal al-Zawiya and Hama which came under heavy attack by regime forces from the beginning of March 2012. Moreover, there are clear indicators of increased awareness and understanding of fourth generation warfare, especially in the carrying out of operations that aim to attract international media attention; bringing moral pressure to bear on the regime's political and military decision-makers (the Mezzeh neighbourhood operation of 18 March 2012 was a clear example of this); and without getting involved in or taking responsibility for bombings that can be described as 'terrorist' in populated areas. Indeed, the FSA has condemned such bombings, laying responsibility for them on the regime itself, in order to preserve regional and international impressions of it as a democratic tool of struggle.

Promising signs of significant improvement in command and control have begun to take shape with the emergence of regional and local military councils within Syria, as well as the formation of brigade level formations that have absorbed battalions that previously operated independently. Moreover, a military council for the FSA was established on 24 March 2012. This council is responsible for developing overall strategies, arranging for external funds and arms, and working to unify opposition factions under its unifying umbrella. This represents a positive step towards enhancing cooperation and coordination, factors that have thus far been missing in the FSA's operations. The council is also to strengthen cooperation at the national level with the leadership of the Syrian National Council (SNC).

'Hama guidelines' in a different context

From the regime's perspective, the intensive operations carried out according to the strategy of the 'Hama guidelines' seem inconclusive on the ground. The localised, and therefore limited, operational environment of the 1979-1982 uprising, and the absence of today's media and communication tools, allowed Asad The Father to use a relatively small military force to carry out arbitrary repression operations that wiped out thousands of opposition members in a short period of time. Today's popular uprising is much larger in terms of numbers of people, spanning a broad area across the country, and with a non-stop communications and media presence enabled by modern technology. This has forced the regime to use larger numbers of security units that are in short supply, as they are limited to those units set up to protect the regime and which have a particular sectarian, or in some cases party, allegiance. This has meant that there is a heavy burden borne by these units which have been exhausted by combat duties that have also been accompanied by severe psychological pressures given the exposure of their inhuman acts before the international community, and the continuous documentation and condemnation of these acts, paving the way to hold accountable those that committed them as there is no statute of limitations on crimes against humanity.

Facing the regime's forces is the FSA which has shown a high level of endurance and an ability to maintain growing levels of popular support despite high human and material losses. More importantly, this armed opposition has increasingly adopted the principles of contemporary guerrilla warfare. These principles account for modern communications technology, and the need not to overstep the red line between the legitimate right of self-defence and 'terrorism' in a conscious attempt to garner increased external support at the political and military levels with the hope, human and material costs aside, of reaching the point of international military intervention; a point that looks all the more likely with the passage of time given the regime's insistence on the indiscriminate use of lethal force to the very end. This, then, is the dilemma of the 'Hama guidelines' when used outside of their time and place, and even if there is familial continuity between the father and son who have employed this strategy.

If we look at the balance between the contending forces, we find that the regime's forces are increasingly exhausted with the passage of time as they lose control with the broadening of the popular protests while also facing external condemnation that has eroded the regime's international legitimacy. As for the FSA, it has quickly adapted to guerrilla warfare and succeeded in winning public sympathy in the areas of its operation. It has also managed to acquire varying degrees of international recognition enabling it to establish secure bases in Turkey. These are factors that enable the FSA to continue its fight and thereby further exhaust the regime's forces. This type of guerrilla warfare cannot be resolved militarily as hoped by the Syrian regime. Rather, the resolution can only be a political one, and the most accurate comparison at the current time would be the war in Afghanistan.

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