

Syria's domestic cleavages: a snare for Western intervention

Ted Galen Carpenter - Mideast Flashpoints - 5/7/2012

Calls are growing in both Europe and the United States for the "international community" to intervene decisively in Syria's bloody civil strife. Prominent members of the US Congress, most notably Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joseph Lieberman, advocate not only sending arms to the Free Syrian Army (insurgent forces trying to oust the government of Bashar al Assad) but also to establish no-fly zones. The latter measure would ground Assad's air force and help both civilians and rebel fighters establish safe havens. The senators, known in American political circles as the "three amigos," have even suggested that the United States and its NATO allies launch air strikes against Syrian government targets. Although the Obama administration has declined thus far to adopt such drastic measures, it has repeatedly pushed efforts to get Assad to relinquish power.

Before the Western powers conduct yet another crusade to implement a strategy of regime change in the Middle East, it would be wise for officials to carefully assess the complex political environment in Syria and the potential for unintended, adverse consequences from Western intervention. Such due diligence should induce caution and avoid having the United States and its allies blunder into a dangerous minefield.

The searing images of civilian casualties coming out of Syria are hard to watch. Several thousand innocent people have perished since the resistance to Assad's regime erupted in March 2011, and there is little doubt that government forces are responsible for the majority of deaths. But the Western news media have once again (as they did in the Balkans during the 1990s) portrayed a complex, multidimensional struggle in stark melodramatic terms. Contrary to the dominant media narrative, what is happening in Syria is not simply a fight between the evil Assad regime and a noble opposition motivated by a desire for freedom and democracy. The actual situation is far murkier.

Syria's population is divided among Sunni Arabs (about 60% of the population), Christians (about 10-12%) Alawites, a Shiite offshoot, (also about 10-12%) Druze (about 6%) and various, mostly Sunni, ethnic minorities, primarily Kurds and Armenians. The Alawite Assad family has based its power for more than four decades on the solid loyalty of its religious bloc in a loose alliance with Christians, Druze, and, sometimes, with one or more of the other smaller, ethnic groups. What we see today is a largely Sunni Arab bid to overthrow that "coalition of minorities" regime.

Evidence mounts on the extent of Sunni domination of the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council (SNC), the insurgents' political leadership in exile. David Enders, a reporter for McClatchy newspapers, spent a month with rebel forces in northern and central Syria. He found that while the early anti-Assad demonstrations were sometimes multi-ethnic and multi-religious, "the armed rebels are Sunni to a man." Enders also debunked another common perception in the West that rebel ranks include numerous defectors from Syria's military. Although there were a few military defectors, most fighters turned out to be Sunni civilians. "The Sunni rebels have made overtures to other religious groups to join their struggle," Enders noted, but they had "little success." Despite some attempts at window dressing, the SNC is dominated by Sunnis, and in particular by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a staunchly Islamist faction.

The bitter sectarian divisions in Syria make the situation especially perilous for any Western intervention. Alawites make up some 140,000 of the approximately 200,000 career soldiers in

Assad's military of 300,000 active-duty personnel. Many of the others are Christians or Druze. About 80% of the officers are Alawites, and nearly all of the other 20% are members of the regime's ethnic allies. Given that the Free Syrian rebels are overwhelmingly Sunnis, the ingredients for the kind of sectarian civil war that convulsed Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and still plagues Iraq today, are very much in place.

James Jay Carafano, a scholar with the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, advocates a pro-active US policy regarding the Syrian conflict, but even he concedes that "many of the same toxic dynamics that drove the frenzy of violence in Iraq in 2006 are present in spades in Syria." Robert G. Rabil, the author of *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, makes an especially gloomy prognosis. The battle in Syria, he believes, is now "over consolidating sectarian cantonization, or the creation of sub-national units, each of which is dominated by a predominant sect."

There is yet another troubling dynamic to the Syrian violence. Although the Assad coalition is primarily secular, the ideological composition of the opposition is far more opaque. Radical Islamist elements are certainly present, although the extent of their strength is uncertain. There are some very worrisome indicators, though. Beginning with the massive suicide bombings in the city of Aleppo in early February, there has been a proliferation of episodes that resemble the terrorist techniques of al Qaeda and similar militant groups in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. David Enders notes that the recent bombing of Sayyed Al Zeinab, a Shiite shrine near Damascus, "has frightening overtones of the violence that shook Iraq in 2006." Such factors underscore the naïve nature of comments like those of Senator Lieberman that US and allied intervention, especially air strikes, would "break the will" of pro-Assad forces and result in an "end to this terrible waste of life." If only the situation were that simple.

Helping to oust Assad might be morally appealing to Westerners, but we need to beware of unintended consequences. If the aftermath of a US-led intervention is a turbulent, unstable Syria, with a new government heavily influenced by radical Islamist elements, which seems all too likely, we are not going to like the outcome. Unfortunately, as in the case of Iraq, the intellectual architects of such a policy fiasco will likely avoid taking any responsibility for their handiwork.