

Syrian Stalemate

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Bashar al-Assad has failed to quell a stubborn rebellion despite his regime's massive edge in military manpower and weaponry – but also because of these material advantages. His forces, replete with heavy armor, attack aircraft, and big guns, have tried to use something akin to our Powell Doctrine of “overwhelming force.” Yet the insurgents’ nimble, loose-jointed networks of small cells have slipped most of the heavy punches thrown at them, and they have launched increasingly stinging counter-blows of their own.

How is it possible for such a ragtag movement to persist? Without the kind of NATO-provided close air support the Libyan rebels enjoyed? The answer lies in the fact that the Syrian military, like armed forces of most nations, is organized into a few large, bulky units, while insurgent cells are smaller and far more fluid. Thus the Syrian Army, most of whose striking power is concentrated in eight tank divisions, has a terrible time trying to deal with the “pop up” attacks by roughly 1,000 eight- to ten-man rebel fire teams. Air strikes against small bands of fighters are problematic, especially in urban terrain – resulting far more in the killing of innocents than of insurgents.

That the rebels are receiving increasing numbers of anti-tank weapons – and perhaps now a few shoulder-mounted antiaircraft missiles – makes them increasingly deadly. But their real advantage lies in being able to launch offensives simultaneously in half a dozen Syrian cities. We hear mostly of the fighting in and around Damascus and Aleppo, but the rebellion is flaring all around the country – and the regime hasn't yet figured out how to scale down its forces into smaller units and deploy them widely enough to tamp down these hotspots.

In short, the insurgent network is swarming regime forces, like killer bees, or ants overwhelming a crippled beetle. Analogies from nature aside, the simple math of the Syrian civil war is that the rebels attack many points at the same time, while the Syrian military is only able to focus its counterattacks on a few points at any given moment. For the regime, this is a losing proposition in the long run. Bashar al-Assad still has a large, well-armed military, and the Iranians and Russians will likely keep restocking his arsenals for a while. But unless he can create a counter-swarm of his own, his days are numbered.

However certain Bashar's ultimate downfall may be, it is not imminent. The insurgents’ principal strength, their network of small cells, is also their main weakness, as the diverse bands of fighters lack a unifying narrative to cement their common purpose. The simple story of an oppressed people struggling to overthrow a tyrant is complicated by the desire of some insurgents to settle old scores with the long-ruling Alawite minority, and the visceral hatred others have for Syria’s sizeable Christian community. The presence of al Qaeda fighters is a wild card that further complicates the prospects for direct external military intervention, and makes even choices about better arming the rebels highly

problematic. Mitt Romney has spoken of giving aid to the “good insurgents,” but they are very hard to distinguish clearly.

Another difficulty for the insurgency is that Bashar has a network of militiamen, the *shabiha*, able to make great mischief. But his use of them quickly backfired. Bashar began the conflict by launching the shabiha against nonviolent demonstrators; as their name suggests (it translates roughly as “thugs”), they have behaved very badly, beating, raping, and murdering protestors – actions that only fanned the flames of insurgency. While the shabiha are still out there – and still pose serious problems for the rebels – the social damage they inflict with their depredations is too great. In short, they have the kind of organizational structure best suited to fighting the insurgents, but their actions, on balance, do far more harm than good to the regime.

Another way Bashar has tried to raise his game is by taking advice from Hezbollah activists and Iranian cadres that seem to have made their way into Syria. Hezbollah fighters employed a network-and-swarm concept against the Israeli Defense Forces during the Lebanon War in the summer of 2006. They organized in countless small teams that held their own in the field against one of the world's best militaries. But Bashar isn't facing the IDF, which looks a lot like his own armed forces. Instead he is going up against something that looks a lot more like the Hezbollah order of battle. He needs a model to counter irregulars, not a concept for fighting conventional forces. At the margin, the Iranian advisors are providing him useful insights – but not enough to achieve a decisive advantage over the insurgents.

Bashar's last, best hope may lie now with the Russians. Not in receiving more arms from them, but in learning from their wars with the Chechens. In 1996, a large conventional Russian army was driven from Chechnya by a loose-knit swarm of tribal fighters. Yet a few years later, the Russians came back and defeated them. How? They succeeded by creating and unleashing a network of small units of their own, and by co-opting some of the clans. That is, they learned how to use swarm tactics against irregulars – a real doctrinal breakthrough in military affairs. It is rumored that some of the Russian counterinsurgency specialists who helped turn around Chechnya are now providing advice along these lines to regime forces.

But could the Syrian Army really undertake such a radical shift in the middle of combat operations? It is certainly possible, but every indicator suggests that the regime's military leaders are habituated to highly centralized control and heavily scripted operational plans. And even if the army does make the effort to change its concept of operations, it will be necessary to halt ongoing offensives while the force is reconfigured. This would cede much of Syria to the rebels, a gambit fraught with peril and profound material and psychological consequences.

The bottom line is that the regime's military performance is highly unlikely to improve to the point at which it can defeat the insurgents – unless Bashar is willing to “roll the iron dice” (as German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg put matters on the eve of World War I) and take the risk of scaling down his forces into small units and have them wage a kind of

guerrilla warfare against the guerrillas. For their part, the rebels are just as unlikely to succeed in the near- or mid-term without either vastly improved armaments or outside intervention in the form of air support. Giving them more lethal weapons risks having them sent downstream to al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations. And more overt military intervention risks conflict escalation, certainly with Iran, and possibly with Russia, which has a naval base in Syria and has expressed deep concern about the security of the Christian community there.

A stalemate. Which, in a caring world, would energize an innovative diplomatic approach, one that does not insist on Bashar's immediate removal, but does demand the safety, security, and gradually increasing liberty of the Syrian people.