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Syrian war reaches explosive stage

By Victor Kotsev

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For many Syrian rebels, the unthinkable happened this week, when a key neighborhood of the centrally located city of Homs was recaptured by the army of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The fall of Homs, dubbed the rebel "capital," seems inevitable, and while that will not end the brutal civil war in the country, it will almost certainly usher in a new stage.

Syria's fragmentation can no longer be contained inside the country. To the north, the Kurds are threatening autonomy and fighting viciously with al-Qaeda affiliates at the Turkish border - the Turkish army, under a partial media blackout, was also drawn into these heavy three-way exchanges. To the south, Israel is at guns drawn, and periodically launches an air strike or two into Syria proper.

Hezbollah has directly involved Lebanon into the war, while the United States - the biggest player around, whose direct military involvement would surely transform the conflict beyond recognition - is sitting on the fence and weighing whether or not to heed the urgent rebel pleas for help.

The moment of truth may arrive relatively soon. The administration of US President Barack clearly hopes that the rebels can "do the job" on their own, but this hope is becoming increasingly unrealistic. There are many additional obstacles to the Syrian army's progress in Homs province, and more still on the road to Aleppo, [1] but if the current trend continues, it may only be a matter of a couple of months before US and its allies will face a Gaddafi in

Benghazi moment: a situation similar to that right prior to the intervention in Libya two years ago, when former Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi was threatening to reconquer his country's eastern center Benghazi.

Obama and the US stand much to lose if his Syria policy collapses and Assad recaptures Northern Syria. With so much political capital invested in the demand for Assad to leave power, Obama would face a serious backlash both at home and abroad. Syria's fate will have a major impact on many major strategic issues ranging from the Iranian nuclear calculations to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to Russia's behavior to global energy competition-and will reverberate correspondingly in domestic politics.

True, intervention is risky, both politically and militarily (given that Syria's patron Russia has equipped it with cutting-edge military technology), and could cost up to US\$1 billion a month. [2] At a time when major American cities are going bankrupt and American society is suffering war fatigue, another unpredictable Middle Eastern military adventure is a dangerous gamble.

But the Obama administration is already on that slippery slope. Earlier this month, congressional panels blessed the project to arm the rebels (officially), and now the Americans are making a show of testing the rebel supply networks. [3]

It's hardly a secret to anybody that the US has long facilitated arms to the Syrian rebels (see also Stratfor, [4]). Doing so officially is a very different gesture. Similarly to how one escalation led to another in Vietnam (and in many other conflicts around the world), it may not be long before the Americans find themselves fighting a ground war. Such a scenario has already been discussed semi-publicly in the context of alleged chemical weapons use by the Syrian regime.

Perhaps the best way out for Obama is to force the dissolution of Syria and to negotiate a truce between the different parts, Yugoslavia-style. This would require at most a limited intervention and would theoretically stop the carnage while allowing the geopolitical rivals to each receive a share of influence.

The fall of Homs would in fact be conducive to this scenario, since it would allow the government to consolidate its positions in the south and in the center and to link its current major power centers in Damascus and on the Mediterranean coast. As a matter of fact, similarly to the east-west divide in Libya, there exists in Syria a time-honored north-south divide, centered on the two largest cities Aleppo and Damascus, [5] which has influenced strongly the developments so far in the war and could determine its outcome.

Moreover, there is a hope that heavy American weapons supplies may, at the very least, create a balance of terror between Northern and Southern Syria. And the Kurdish drive for autonomy could further cement the partition of the country.

With respect to the latter, it is particularly worth noting that Turkey is sending mixed signals on Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Despite the Turkish government's rhetoric against the planned measure, it received for talks the leader of the most powerful Syrian Kurdish party, PYD (an ally, no less, of the Kurdish separatists in Turkey) and it is possible that it would try to establish a relationship with the Syrian Kurds similar to that with the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region.

"Turkey could accept eventual autonomy for the Kurds in Syria provided this was also accepted by the SNC [Syrian rebels], and would not support either side in the fight between the PYD and the radical Islamists," William Hale, a professor emeritus of Turkish politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London wrote in a recent email. "In short, it seems that - whatever it may have done in the past - Turkey has now changed sides and entered into an accommodation with the PYD."

It is far from guaranteed that the US and other major players involved will choose to go with the partition idea or that they will succeed in negotiating their own disparate interests. Stopping the regional spillover of violence would be even more difficult. All the different fronts between the Syrian government, rival rebel factions, the Kurds, Turkey, Hezbollah and Israel are liable to explode. With so many moving parts and clashing interests, lasting peace seems a distant dream.

With more than 100,000 people dead since the violence started, revelations over the brutalities of the Syrian civil war will likely continue to shock for years to come. And while the conflict itself stands to enter a new stage, the suffering shows no sign of abating.

Notes:

1. Obstacles to a Syrian Regime Victory in Aleppo, Stratfor, June 17, 2013.
2. Pentagon: US military intervention in Syria could cost \$1b a month, Ha'aretz, July 23, 2013.
3. US uses Syrian rebel supply lines as it prepares to send arms, Reuters, July 25, 2013.
4. Global Arms Markets as Seen Through the Syrian Lens, Stratfor, July 25, 2013.
5. Moaz al-Khatib, Moderate Syrian Leader, Resigns, as Islamic Front and Nusra Move on Damascus. Will the US build a Counter-force?, Syria Comment, March 24, 2013