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Fierce battles cast hopeful shadow in Syria

By Victor Kotsev

12/4/2013

No good news seems to come out of Syria without a sinister shadow. Right around the time when a start date for the Geneva II peace conference was announced - it came last week and the big day is January 22 - some of the fiercest battles so far broke out, bringing the recorded death toll to date to more than 125,000 people.

Of course, this is not to say that the talks would necessarily end the violence if they happen as planned (many of the Syrian opposition members and especially the rebels on the ground oppose them and it is still unclear who exactly will participate from their side). But all the different factions appear to be preparing for them as they turn the heat up on the fighting and try to conquer as much territory as quickly as possible in order to create facts on the ground and to bolster their negotiating positions.

The main battles are taking place north of the capital Damascus and in the largest city Aleppo, though several other fronts are flaring up on a daily basis. The objective of the advancing Syrian army, as an inside source articulated to Agence France-Presse, is first to cut off the rebels' access to Lebanon by conquering the mountainous area of Qalamoun near the border, then to sweep through the outskirts of Damascus and the south, and only then to turn their attention north and north-east, where rebels, al-Qaeda linked extremists and Kurds control large swathes of territory.

[1]

Aleppo is an exception to this pattern, with the government army capturing a string of towns and bases near it and pushing into the rebel-held areas inside the city in fierce battles over the past few weeks. As the largest city and Syria's former trade capital, Aleppo is a particularly valuable prize which carries both symbolic and practical significance. Therefore, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appears impatient to score gains there, even at the risk of stretching his forces on multiple fronts.

Despite the recent advances, however, reconquering the whole country would be a tall order for the government, which faces an estimated 100,000 armed rebels, including some 15,000 hardened jihadists. [2] Even the fighting near the regime's home base in Damascus is proving extremely difficult and bloody, with dozens of soldiers and pro-government militiamen killed there every day. Recently the besieged rebels retook several towns and villages around the capital, and the battles have been going back and forth.

If the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the main source of the international media for such statistics, is to be trusted, the pro-government forces have suffered slightly more casualties than the rebels in recent battles and in the war in general, with civilian deaths about a third of the total. [3] If the fighting continues for much longer with such attrition rates, Assad, whose pool of supporters are mostly the minorities in the country, could simply run out of soldiers.

Of course, the Syrian president enjoys some external support, including manpower from Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi Shi'ite militias and Iran (for a BBC video report about the Iranian involvement on the ground in Syria, click here). But so do the rebels, and especially the al-Qaeda linked groups which have brought in thousands of jihadists from all over the world, including "unprecedented" numbers from Western Europe. [4]

What makes it particularly difficult to forecast the future course of the war is that the deeply divided rebels are currently undergoing major transformations that are fraught with intrigue and infighting but are for the most part opaque to the outside world. On the one hand, pressed by the regime's offensive, some of the most powerful Islamist groups in the country united recently to create what is believed to be the biggest rebel army on the field, numbering an estimated 45,000 fighters and challenging Assad, the remainders of the Free Syrian army and al-Qaeda alike. [5]

On the other hand, however, the first credible accounts of rebel defections to the army have appeared, and especially in Aleppo the opposition is reportedly worried that more pro-government sleeper cells might be in its ranks - which could make the government advance easier. As atrocities perpetrated by foreign jihadists and others rebels against the civilian population have worsened, some Sunni Muslims (the traditional support base of the opposition) have even allegedly organized their own pro-government militias. [6]

Adding to this volatile mix are the Kurds, whose main militia in Syria is slowly pursuing a campaign to connect their three separate enclaves in the north-east and to establish an autonomous government there. The YPG, or People's Protection Units, are pursuing a policy of neutrality vis-a-vis the Syrian regime and have been pushing back against the rebels and al-Qaeda jihadists while warily eyeing neighboring Turkey, which opposes their moves and has imposed an embargo on them. [7]

Despite the sharp recent increase in violence, the rebel intrigues and government advances, however, the overwhelming sense of the reports coming out of Syria is that of a profound stalemate. If anything, the redoubled effort of each side to consolidate and expand their gains as the talks loom large is a hopeful sign, an indication that all the main players are taking them seriously. The eventual partition of Syria, Yugoslavia-style, which could turn out to be the most practical way to end the violence, could well be on their minds too.

Notes:

1. Mortar fire kills 4 by famed Damascus mosque, Agence France-Presse, November 29, 2013.
2. U.S.: American fighters in Syria a security risk, Associated Press, November 30, 2013.
3. Approximately 126 thousand people killed in Syria, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 2, 2013.
4. Number of foreign fighters from Europe in Syria is historically unprecedented. Who should be worried?, Washington Post, November 27, 2013.
5. Syria Islamists unite as faction-fighting goes, Reuters, November 22, 2013.
6. Aleppo gears up for major regime offensive, al-Monitor, November 24, 2013.
7. Kurdish militia aims to connect Kurdish enclaves in Syria, al-Monitor, November 24, 2013.