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Mario Laborie Iglesias

HAS THE SYRIAN WAR ENTERED A NEW PHASE?

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Abstract:

The present document offers a brief revision of the different phases of the Syrian civil war; it analyzes the possible consequences that the August 21 chemical incident in Damascus may have with a view to the future of the war; and it considers the options for his ending.

Keywords:

Syria, civil war, chemical weapons, Assad, political opposition

ANALYSIS

The fact that the Syrian regime has agreed to destroy its chemical weapons, as a way to prevent a punitive attack by the Western powers led by the U.S., has been greeted with relief by the foreign offices all over the world¹. On September 21, according to the deadlines set by the Russia- U.S. agreement signed in Geneva, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) received the initial declaration of the chemical weapons that Syria has in possession².

On August 21, the most remarkable chemical weapons incident of the war took place³. That day a rocket attack, equipped with a chemical agent (sarin gas), killed 1,429 people in a Damascus suburb⁴, according to the U.S. Such attack against civilians raised immediate rejection by the U.S. administration and its allies and began preparations towards a military intervention against Assad, who was held responsible for the use of sarin.

Western relief arises from the knowledge that there are significant conditions that cast doubt on the success of military action. However, the opposition to the Syrian regime have shown their disapproval to this being cancelled or at least, delayed indefinitely. The rebels hoped that the Western attack, even if limited, would be a turning point in Syria's civil conflict

Since the first peaceful protests in the spring of 2011 until early September 2013, the Syrian civil war has passed through four phases: regime repression, the spread of the rebellion, conflict stagnation and regime's offensive. Even in the case of a foreign military intervention not coming to an end, it is crucial to ask how the use of chemical weapons by Assad may affect the future of the Syrian conflict. The use of chemical weapons at a phase where they have a military advantage can be considered a major strategic mistake.

¹ SIDDIQUE, Haroon. "Syria minister hails Russia over chemical weapons 'victory'". The Guardian. 15/09/2013. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/15/israel-cautious-welcome-syria-chemical-weapons>

² ESCRITT, Thomas. "Syria meets deadline for chemical weapons disclosure". Reuters. 21/09/2013. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE98K08H20130921>

³ "Activistas denuncian un ataque con armas químicas del Ejército en Siria". Europa Press. 21/08/2013. Available at <http://www.europapress.es/internacional>

⁴ RICHTER, Paul. "John Kerry says Syria chemical attack killed at least 1,429 people". LA Times. 30/08/2013. Available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/>

This paper presents an overview of the different phases that have elapsed in the Syrian war, analyzes the possible consequences that this chemical attacks may bring over for the future of the war and evaluates the options to end a conflict that has caused more than 100 thousand deaths and millions of refugees and displaced persons.

The four phases of the civil war

First phase: outbreak and revolt repression

The feeble protests, demanding social and political changes, initiated in March 2011 were violently suppressed by the Syrian security apparatus. During this first phase, the imbalance of power between the government and the opposition was overwhelming. The armed forces and the Mukhabarat, Syrian secret police, the dreaded shabihas, backed by pro-government militia, moved freely around the country carrying out brutal repression. However, far from stopping the rebellion, repression raised the intensity of the conflict and triggered a spiral of violence that, ultimately, has led to the current civil conflict.

Second phase: the revolt spreads

Halfway through 2012 the situation started to shift. External powers provided heavy weaponry, explosives and intelligence support, thus allowing rebels to extend the revolts in other areas of the country, especially those where the majority of the population were Sunni. The increased activity of the opposition army caused significant losses among the regime forces and suppressed the police and army's freedom to operate. These forces were limited to give ground and concentrate their units in the main bases⁵.

The rebels, who as of now control more than 70% of Syrian territory, progressed, in Damasco as well as the cities of the North, although today the seem incapable of controlling completely any of the major towns of the country. In addition to external support, the opposition progress was based on the greatest cooperation between its different factions. According to information from the field, the Al-Nusra Front, with jihadist affinity, and the Free Syrian Army units would have coordinated their actions, which was an important operational novelty⁶.

⁵ A research carried out by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and published in mid-March of 2013 estimated that at the beginning of the conflict, Assad had about 300,000 two years later, he would only have about 50,000. This lack of personnel has forced the government to recruit women. SLY, Liz; RAMADAN, Ahmed. "Syria, pressed by war, deploys all-female units". The Washington Post. 11.03.2013 Available <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/>

⁶ This already confirmed cooperation, in an operational and tactical level, is rejected, at least officially, at strategic level by the opposition leaders. Further information at "Syria rebels distance themselves from Qaeda Iraq ally". Ahramonline/AFP. 09/04/2013. Available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/>

Third phase: deadlock war

At the beginning of 2013 the regime's strategy focused on forming a defensive circle around Damascus, cleanse the city of Homs from rebels and surrounding rural areas, and then attack the centers of resistance of Aleppo⁷. The city of Homs has vital strategic importance, as it is the hub that connects the capital to the coast and north of the country. With much of the countryside in the hands of the rebels, the war is practically concentrated in these three cities and on the road that connects them.

In Damascus, the intense combats spread along the road that surrounded the city. Loyalist forces to the regime tried to impede the rebel advance with heavy artillery fire, settled in Mount Qaisoun that dominates the capital, while the regime's air force intensified their attacks. Loyalist troops were better equipped and well fortified, but the numerical superiority of the various rebel Sunni groups was overwhelmingly, though, as now, they were short of ammunition and heavy weapons.

Fourth phase: Regime's offensive

Under the parameters listed above, at the end of winter, Assad is aware that he cannot win this war. Taking into account the opposition's fragmentation, he decides to make a strategic shift and go on the attack.

As seen in the previous phase, the war is mainly located in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and the strip between this cities and the Mediterranean coast. Between April and August 2013, these areas have experienced several attacks by the regime's forces, with massive support from Hezbollah militia.

After a series of violent battles, on June 6, the loyalist army retook Qusayr, a city close to the border with Lebanon. This is a settlement of considerable strategic relevance, given it serves as a communication junction between the Alawite sector and Northern Lebanon, in addition to being a crucial supply route for the rebels⁸. The cities of Qunaytirah and Daba'a fell into the hands of the regime during this same attack.

After the fall of Qusayr, Assad's army announced the launching of the operation "Northern Storm", that aimed to take Aleppo⁹, and so the air raids began against the rebel positions in this city. Currently, it seems like the regime is actually directing its efforts towards the consolidation of their power in central Syria by dominating the Homs region. The purpose of

⁷ SOURJ, Arabi. "Syria's Assad Receives Lebanese Delegation". Syria News. 21/04/2013. Available at <http://www.syrianews.cc/>

⁸ "Syrian troops take full control of strategic town". Associated Press. 13/05/2013. Available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/>

⁹ KLOSTERMAYR, M. "Syria: Operation Northern Storm has already begun". Syria News. 11/06/2013. Available at <http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-operation-northern-storm-begun/>

this would be to divide the rebel area and ensure the so-needed communications between Damascus and the coastline. If so, Aleppo would be left as a secondary target.

At the same time, Assad is aware of the strategic value of Damascus and the outcome of this battle, which will affect the rest of the conflict. In consequence, many of the best regime military units are committed to the defense of the capital. In Damascus, the regime's offensive strategy is aimed towards certain districts considered strongholds of the insurgency. As an example, Qaboun or Barzeh, from which attacks against the city center were launched¹⁰

On the rebel side, in order to loosen the regime's pressure over Homs and Damascus, the rebels are carrying out attacks against settlements with a majority of Alawite population in the coastal areas of the region of Latakia¹¹.

The use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime: A new phase in the war?

Since the beginning of the war, the Obama administration considered the use of chemical weapons by Assad as a "red line"¹². This being said, when on August 21, the incident with chemical weapons previously described took place, the tension increased exponentially. Although the UN has confirmed unequivocally that Damascus had used sarin indiscriminately¹³, which constitutes a crime against humanity, it is very difficult to be 100% sure that the one responsible for this attack with chemical weapons was the Assad regime. However, statements and military preparations by Western countries foreshadowed the imminent punishment intervention against Assad.

The last-minute Russian-American agreement has opened the diplomatic channels and has blocked, for now, the Western intervention against Assad. Taking into account the unpredictable consequences of this action, the international community has shown relief. For important reasons, and despite their own reports over the use of chemical weapons in

¹⁰ EL DEEB, Sarah. "Syrian Troops Launch Offensive On Rebel Strongholds Outside Damascus". Huffington Post. 22/06/13. Available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>

¹¹ YACOUB OWEIS, Khaled. "Syrian rebels push into Assad's Alawite mountain stronghold". Reuters. 05/08/2013. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article>

¹² "US has a range of military options in Syria". The Times of Israel. 26/04/2013. Available at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/>

¹³ ALANDETE, David. "La ONU confirma "inequívocamente" que se usaron armas químicas en Siria". El País. 16/09/2013. Available at http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/09/16/actualidad/1379346856_579753.html

Syria¹⁴, the American administration has failed to show determination to get involved more actively during the two and a half years of civil war. This hesitation lies basically on the inability to unify the opposition front and jihadist dominance on the battlefield.

Opposition's fragmentation

The opposition to the regime, mainly Sunni, is highly fragmented and unprepared both organizationally and in the objectives. Despite external support, the disagreement among the various ideologies, along with the serious discrepancies among the leaders in exile and those who remain in the country have currently made the creation of a united opposition front impossible¹⁵. This opposing fragmentation prevents achieving a consensus on important issues, such as coordination of military strategy or the government of the "liberated zones"¹⁶.

From a political point of view, the National Coalition for the Opposition Forces and the Syrian Revolution (CNFORS), commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition, is the main coalition opposing Assad and the only recognized opposition group as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by various countries and international organizations. Created in Doha in November 2012, under the leadership of a number of Western and Arab States, the CNFORS integrates various factions, including among others the Syrian National Council¹⁷, the General Commission for the Syrian Revolution or the Local Coordinating Committees¹⁸. Its purpose is to serve as an organization, with a moderate attribute, to channel aid from international donors to the rebels¹⁹.

However, the divisions within the National Coalition are obvious. Ahmed Muaz Al-Hatib was elected head of the National Coalition in the Doha meeting, although he resigned this position last March 24, citing the "indifference" of the international community to find a

¹⁴ CAÑO, Antonio. "Estados Unidos denuncia por primera vez que Siria ha usado armas químicas". El País. 25/04/2013. Available at <http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/>

¹⁵ "Guide to the Syrian opposition". BBC News. 23.04.2013. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>

¹⁶ LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario. "La división del apoyo internacional a la oposición siria". Esglobal. 03/06/2013. Available at <http://www.esglobal.org/la-division-del-apoyo-internacional-a-la-oposicion-siria>

¹⁷ The SNC is the most important formation of the NCSROF. Founded at Istanbul in August 24 2011, this organism is said to be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, and is also claimed to receive help from Turkey. "The Syrian National Council". Carnegie Middle East Center. 01/01/2012. Available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications>

¹⁸ SAYIGH, Yezid. "The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem". The Carnegie Endowment". 03/04/2013. Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/>

¹⁹ SOFER, Ken; SHAFROTH, Juliana. "The Structure and Organization of the Syrian Opposition". Center for American Progress. 14/05/2013. Available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/>

solution to the conflict²⁰. However, behind the rhetoric, actually the resignation was due to his frustration with the internal politics of the Syrian opposition and the lack of prospects for a solution to the conflict²¹.

At the beginning of 2013, Hatib expressed his willingness to engage with representatives of the Assad regime, under the following conditions: the release of 160,000 political prisoners and the delivery of new passports and two-year extension of its validity for Syrians who have left the country²². This proposal was immediately criticized by other leaders of the National Coalition, which until last July had at all times dismissed negotiating with the government²³. Hatib's successor, Ghassan Hitto, Islam-orientated, resigned the post only four months after his appointment, as a result of their inability to unite opposing forces²⁴.

The National Coordination Committee (NCC), founded in September 2011, is one of the most significant opposition groups. Directed by veteran opponent Hussein Abdul Azim, it unites 13 Syrian left parties, three Kurds as well as independent activists²⁵. The NCC, which has not been integrated into the National Coalition, has advocated dialogue with the government, in the belief that Assad's ouster would lead the country into chaos. The NCC believes that a political solution is still the most appropriate way to end the conflict. However, this solution requires some preparation, which would include a ceasefire under international supervision, the release of prisoners, the return of refugees and humanitarian aid to those in need²⁶.

In December 2012, in the military field, the Joint Supreme Military Command (SMC) was created with the intention of becoming the Ministry of Defense of the National Coalition²⁷. Both organizations are the international branch of the Syrian opposition, although the relationship between them is more nominal than real. Under the command of General Salim Idriss, a former Syrian army general and currently the commander of the Free Syrian Army

²⁰ "Syrian National Coalition leader Moaz al-Khatib resigns". The Guardian. 24/03/2013. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world>

²¹ "Moaz al-Khatib: The priority is to save Syria". Al Jazeera. 11/04/2013. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/>

²² "El líder de la Coalición Nacional Siria dispuesto a negociar con representantes de Asad". Ria Novosti. 30.01.2013. Available at <http://sp.rian.ru/international>

²³ In July, the recently appointed leader of NCSROF Ahmad Jarba, exposed his willingness to hold a meeting with some representatives of the Syrian regime, changing radically his traditional position. GORDON, Michael R. "Syrian Opposition Leader Says He Would Meet Assad Officials". The New York Times. 25/07/2013. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/>

²⁴ MOURTADA, Hania; BARNARD, Anne. "Another Leader Quits Post in Syrian Exile Group". The New York Times. 08/07/2013. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/>

²⁵ "Guide to the Syrian opposition". BBC News. Disponible en <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/> Last checked 18/09/2013.

²⁶ AL-ABED, Tareq. "Syria's Opposition Still Divided. Mistrustful". Al-Monitor. 14/03/2013. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/>

²⁷ Previously, between 2011 and 2012, the FSA created regional committees, later on, the FSA have tried to involve them into the chain of command of the SMC.

(FSA), the main objective of the SCM is to establish a unity of command among the many armed groups and reduce the influence of extremist groups.

Out of all of those integrated in the SMC, the FSA is the most significant group. It is estimated that it possesses approximately 50 thousand combatants²⁸. In addition to the FSA, the SMC integrates the Syrian Liberation Front, the Syrian Islamic Front and 9 other independent armed groups, which would mean a total force of between 100 and 150 thousand troops²⁹. Despite the efforts and external support received so far, the SMC has managed to impose a coherent military strategy and has been unable to effectively coordinate the activities of the various armed groups in the battlefield. The main division factor is the divergence of opinion among military commanders on the ground and the supreme command of the SMC when working with jihadist groups. While the former would be promoting the alliance with the radicals, the central command of the SMC, in fear of losing Western support, remains opposed to that possibility³⁰.

However, besides the SMC, there is a myriad of armed groups operating throughout the country (according to UN, there are over 1000 armed militia in Syria³¹) being those linked to Al-Qaeda the largest raising suspicions among the international community. In early 2013, the 13 members of radical Islamist groups issued a video message in which they rejected the National Coalition and declared the city of Aleppo as an Islamic state³². The merge of Al-Nusra Front with the Islamic State of Iraq in a single organization, the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant", has caused fear among those who have openly expressed their support for the Syrian revolution, and especially between the U.S. and its allies.

The situation in Syrian Kurdistan

Despite its traditional antagonism with the Syrian regime, since the burst of those popular uprisings in that country, the Kurdish-majority provinces have remained alien to the armed clashes. In May 2011, President Assad granted to more than 100,000 Kurds Syrian citizenship, which they were deprived of before then. Since that moment, the Damascus government ceded control of the main cities of the Northeast to the People's Protection Committees (YPG in Kurdish acronym), the armed militia "Democratic Unity Party" (PYD in Kurdish acronym)³³.

²⁸ O'BAGY, Elizabeth. "The Free Syrian Army". Institute for the Study of War. Middle East Security Report 9. Marzo 2013. Available at <http://www.understandingwar.org>

²⁹ Sofer and Shafroth, Op.Cit.

³⁰ SOWELL, Kirk H. "The Fragmenting FSA". Foreign Policy. 03/09/2013.

³¹ Valerie Amos on "The International Response to Syria's Humanitarian Catastrophe". Middle East Institute. 07/05/2013. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/>

³² "Rebeldes rechazan la Coalición Nacional de Siria y declaran su propio Estado islámico". RT Actualidad. 20/11/2012. Available at <http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/>

³³ LABORIE IGLESIAS; Mario. "Los kurdos y el conflicto sirio". Documento de Análisis 52/2012. IEEE. 27/11/2012. Available at <http://www.ieee.es>

Although there are Kurdish opposition groups, their main political forces have tried to stay out of the sectarian strife and consolidate their newly won autonomy. However, in early 2013, Kurdish militiamen and Arab rebels fought together against the forces of the Syrian army, in north of the city of Aleppo, which looked like the beginning of an alliance against the regime³⁴.

Like other Syrian minorities, Kurds mistrust of Sunni Islamists. And this is justified. Since November of 2012, some rebel groups are trying to take the Syrian Kurdistan. As a result, the Kurd militia is confronting ferociously Al-Nusra Front and Ghuraba al-Sham (jihadist oriented organizations) combatants. This fighting is producing an exodus of Kurd civil population towards the Iraqi Kurdistan³⁵. At this point, we cannot rule out the involvement of Turkey, who would be interested in destabilizing the areas controlled by Kurdish nationalists³⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the current circumstances, the Western dilemma is whether to support the rebels and, if so, what faction. A collapse of the regime would create a much bigger chaos in the country than that now experienced by Libya, which could spread to neighboring countries, and groups linked to Al Qaeda would benefit.

In any case, the use of chemical weapons, being or not the trigger of a western military intervention constitutes a strategic error from Assad that can change the course of war. In a moment where the military operations were favorable to him, having brought the world's attention, will harm the achievement of his political goals, and it can even damage his relation with countries that support him. Remember that Iran, which suffered during the war against Iraq the consequences of these weapons, is a strong advocate of banning the full use of these arsenals³⁷. Moreover, it is safe to say that from this moment the external support to the rebels will increase.

In these circumstances, none of the sides seem to be in conditions to reach military victory and the return to a deadlock situation seems to be more plausible. Therefore, unless the U.S, the European countries and the Sunni world firmly wage on a change of regime, the only alternative for the war's solution is still a diplomatic one. However, this option bestows

34 NISMAN, Daniel. "Have Syria's Kurds Had a Change of Heart?" The Huffington Post. 08/04/2012. Available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>

35 "Syria Kurdish militias battle al Qaeda fighters, driving civilians across border into Iraq". CBS/AP. 20/08/2013. Available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/>

36 "Turkey's support for Syrian rebels in Kurd killings may backfire". RT. 08/08/2013. Available at <http://rt.com/op-edge/turkey-kurds-rebels-killing-203/>

37 "Las armas químicas envenenan las relaciones entre Teherán y Damasco" (Chemical weapons poison the relations between Tehran and Damascus). EuroNews. 06/09/2013. Available at <http://es.euronews.com/2013/09/06>

significant uncertainties.

Finally, in an arena that goes far beyond a mere civil conflict, a crucial factor, when boosting the much-desired negotiated solution to the Syrian conflagration, is the course to follow the discussions on the future of Iran's nuclear program. The rise to power of the new president, Hassan Rouhani, has raised some positive aspects. If Tehran is really looking for an agreement, it can be assured that their support to the Syrian regime is on the table. This is the agreement that is not only awaited by Syria, but by the Middle East as a whole.

*Mario Laborie Iglesias
TCOL.ET.ART.DEM
IEEE Senior Analyst*