The Syria Crisis: dynamics, policy and security implications

Workshop hosted by the Centres for Global Affairs; and Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), at the University of Buckingham, 14 November 2014

Chair: Dr Julian Richards, Convenor for MA in Global Affairs, and co-director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), University of Buckingham

A one-day workshop was hosted at Prebend House, the postgraduate centre for International Studies at the University of Buckingham, on 14 November 2014. The workshop aimed to discuss the policy and security implications of the Syria crisis, focusing on three dimensions: implications for security in the UK, with a special emphasis on policy towards jihadist fighters travelling out to the conflict; underpinning dimensions of the conflict within Syria itself; and implications for international policy responses and strategy, including questions of intervention and conflict resolution.

We were grateful for inputs to the discussion from a range of internal and external speakers. Visiting speakers comprised DS Chris Geen from Thames Valley Police; Mr Jonathan Paris from the Chertoff Institute; Mr Haian Dukhan, and Dr Omar Imady, both from the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews. Speakers from within the University of Buckingham’s faculty comprised Drs Mohga Bassim, and Valentina Kostadinova. Dr Julian Richards acted as chair and discussant for the event, with additional perspectives from Professor Anthony Glees, director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies.

Executive Summary

1. Implications for security in the UK

- Estimates vary greatly as to how many British citizens have travelled out to Syria to wage jihad on behalf of such groups as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Official estimates vary between 200 and 500, while unofficial estimates have sometimes suggested the figure could be well above one thousand.
- In the UK, the police take the lead on the active elements of the “Prevent” strand of the Counter Terrorism Strategy, which involves engagement with vulnerable individuals who may find themselves being drawn into terrorism. This includes direct engagement with individuals who are in the “pre-criminal space” of terrorist radicalisation (that is, thinking about involvement in terrorist acts including fighting for proscribed groups) in a bid to persuade such individuals not to enter the “criminal space” covered by the Terrorism Act. The police also participate in a multi-agency intervention process called CHANNEL, which has had a number of individual successes in turning vulnerable people away from violent
extremism, although the breadth of its coverage and assessment as to whether it is hitting all of the cases of concern remain a matter of some conjecture.

- Case studies of those to whom the police are referred for pre-criminal intervention reveal a wide array of backgrounds and circumstances. Within this picture, however, there are some general themes, including: identity crisis issues, especially of second and third generation migrants; issues to do with social isolation; occasional mental health issues; and a frequent ignorance about the nature of ISIS and indeed of the conflict in Syria. Social media is making a huge impact on the way in which the jihadist ideology spreads among vulnerable individuals, with simplistic and romantic notions of jihad frequently obscuring a proper understanding of the conflict. In one case concerning a school-age boy, there was a notable lack of knowledge about the nature of extreme takfiri ideology, and of the notion that someone from a Sufistic Barelvi community would not be welcomed with open arms by a violently extreme Salafi group. Clearly in such cases, some basic education about Islam and Islamic communities can help.

- It was also noted that women (wives, mothers, sisters) can have a crucial role to play in spreading counter-narratives and persuading family members to turn away from violent pathways, although very often, women can be the hardest parts of the community to reach from the outside.

ii. **Underpinning dimensions of the conflict**

- The word that best sums up the Syrian conflict is “complexity”, and this applies on several levels. Clearly, the ethnic and religious map of the region is bewildering, as is the question of where a notion of “Syria” came from historically. The Romans, Ottomans and French all divided up districts regionally in different ways, and the Sykes-Picot agreement and the way in which it carved up the post-Ottoman lands in the region is well known. In some ways we could be witnessing an attempted “redrawing of the map”, or indeed, the “end of the Westphalian state” in the region. In other respects, however, the notion of unpicking centuries of history and the chaos that would be unleashed suggests that we should stick with a unitary Syrian state as far as we can.

- The chronological development of the conflict is interesting. As in Tunisia and Egypt, it began as a largely urban, middle class, and avowedly pan-sectarian and inclusivist protest (much of it initially centred in Damascus) against casual police brutality, and a lack of employment opportunities. But such early expressions of protest did not survive the wave of sectarian mobilisation that was subsequently unleashed. Interestingly, the majority of Syrian Muslim citizens follow a spiritual, Sufistic Islam, and would not recognise the extreme Salafi and takfiri code of ISIS.

- The relationship between ISIS and traditional tribal dimensions of community and governance in Sunni Arab areas of Syria and Iraq is a complex one. Generally speaking, dismay at the pro-Shia sectarianism of the Maliki government in Iraq; and at the brutality and authoritarianism of the Assad regime, have led many Sunni tribes to feel that ISIS, at least temporarily, offers a more stable and acceptable situation. Headlines about extreme brutality obscure the ground-level work that ISIS has been doing in such areas in providing
social services and strict governance. This, for many, makes them the lesser of two evils at
the moment. (We are also reminded that for all its undoubted brutality, ISIS is no worse in
many ways than the excesses routinely committed by the Assad regime, many of which have
passed over the years with little comment.)

- However, two things are critical: many of the tribes have bowed to pressure through
extreme intimidation, including mass executions of members of tribes that have refused to
submit to ISIS’s authority. Extreme fear is a powerful weapon in their rise. At the same time,
a note of hope in terms of a strategic way out of the conflict can be faintly heard: if the
Maliki and Assad governments make ISIS look acceptable by comparison, then the
installation of more effective, accountable, and less sectarian governments in Iraq and Syria
could cause ISIS’s star to wane in the longer term. Similarly, an experience of harsh and
authoritarian life under ISIS will lead to weariness in the people they govern.

- Work is underway on establishing mechanisms for measuring the underpinning econometric
dimensions of the conflict, recognising, it is suggested, that economic factors are at the
heart of civil conflicts of this nature (as argued by Collier et al. In the case of Syria, this
suggestion could be borne out by observations above as to how the protests in Syria initially
triggered the conflict). Over the next few months, an econometric analysis of the conflict will
be developed and will form the basis of a research paper, once suitable metrics and their
availability can be determined.

- In the meantime, it is worth noting that macro socio-economic indicators for Syria, such as
the HDI index, were already showing signs of poor and in some cases worsening
performance in the late 2000s. In many cases, these trends mirrored indicators in other
parts of the region that have suffered major disruption, such as Egypt. This could explain
how protests erupted in 2011, and how these formed the catalyst for a wider breakdown in
civil order.

### iii. Implications for international policy responses and strategy

- Ultimately, the resolution of this conflict, as with any case of civil conflict, will have to be
political rather than military in nature. Tunisia has perhaps shown how some political
consensus can be achieved and a post-uprising system can be put in place (in this case
constituted by a form of “moderate Islamist” government), although we should perhaps not
be too optimistic just yet about Tunisia’s political future.

- The question for Syria is this: if the authoritarian dynasty of Assad is eventually removed,
whether violently or through political agreement, what is the new asabiyya (spirit of kinship,
or in this context, system of governance) in this and other states in the region? From our
perspective in the West, some degree of democratic culture needs to come into the process,
if only at the factional stage of negotiation, if the raging conflict is ever to die down. But ISIS
throws up the question as to whether such states will turn towards a new democratic
asabiyya, or instead to a different kind of authoritarianism in the shape of violently takfiri
Salafism. As discussed, Tunisia offers one possible model, but Egypt has taken a different
path back towards authoritarian, military-led government. Meanwhile, states such as
Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf states, have not suffered the same degree of protest and
rebellion, while offering a form of hybrid parliamentary monarchism (to different degrees across those states). Syria’s history perhaps means that this particular option is not available.

- We should also reconsider the question of religious sectarianism and the manner in which this may be underpinning many of the cleavages in the region. Is the rise of ISIS partly a reaction to a fear among Sunni Arabs of the rise of Shia power to the East? We have already observed that the nature of the Maliki government in Iraq perhaps suggests that ISIS is the vanguard of a sort of Sunni rebellion. There is no doubt that the Middle East is locked in a form of Cold War between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, and this is fuelling and channelling many of the disputes and conflicts across the whole region. (Perhaps, with recent reports suggesting that ISIS may turn its attention towards the supposedly apostate Saudi monarchy, some of the dynamics of support and funding may shift.)

- For the international community, there are moral questions to be answered about responding to the humanitarian disaster that the Syrian conflict has created. It could be argued that Western countries such as the UK could do much better in accepting refugees for example: while the UK has accepted a few hundred at the most, countries in the region such as Lebanon are currently hosting more than a million refugees, representing more than 25 percent of its population.

- And how does all of this look from Washington? What happens when “the US takes early retirement from its global responsibilities”? In the waxing and waning of American political sentiment towards foreign interventions, the Obama era has been characterised by a retreat into the domestic shell of the most powerful nation in the world. The American public was not particularly tuned-in to the Syrian conflict, until beheadings of US citizens started to happen. With a change of president approaching in the medium term, political attention in the US is still likely to be focused primarily on issues such as health and economy, but history shows that the US invariably becomes dragged into major conflicts overseas. ISIS is already experiencing this in the shape of airstrikes. Clearly there is no appetite to extend involvement beyond this situation at the present time within the US, but this could change as the political balance changes in the US and the Republicans start to assert their new dominance in the Capitol. At the immediate time of discussion, however, Syria’s fourth year of bitter civil conflict does not look at all like being its last, and a stalemate is the order of the day on the ground.

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