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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Political Settlement becomes Obsolete after the Syrian Presidential Elections

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2014

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Presidential Elections and International Initiatives for a Solution in Syria	1
The Effect of the Presidential Elections on a Potential Political Solution	4

Introduction

Despite the acute political and social crisis that Syria has been enduring since the start of the revolution in March 2011, and despite the tragic humanitarian consequences of the ongoing military conflict in the country, the Syrian regime held presidential elections on June 3 in which three candidates, including President Bashar al-Assad, participated.

The regime and its regional and international allies attempted to promote the elections as the first “pluralist” elections to take place in Syria in more than half a century, claiming that the presidential contest was the “fruit” of political and constitutional reforms undertaken by the regime, which were “crowned” by the promulgation of the new constitution in 2012. Nevertheless, the United Nations rejected these elections, insisting that they “undermine the efforts in search of a political solution in Syria”. The United States, the European Union, Turkey, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and others also rejected the elections, with some describing the Syrian regime’s call for the people to vote as a “charade” and a contest “whose results are known beforehand”. The Syrian opposition, with all its different groups and factions, even those described as being “conciliatory” toward the regime, agreed to reject and boycott the elections, dubbing them as “illegitimate”.

International and regional opposition to the elections was prompted by the forced exclusion of half of the Syrian people from participating in the electoral contest due to the circumstances of the war and the ensuing mass displacement, or because the elections were supervised by a regime that lacks legitimacy and is stained with the blood of its people. Additionally, the holding of elections amid a sharp political and social crisis and an ongoing military conflict signifies the deepening and the perpetuation of the struggle, and ultimately eliminates all chances for a political solution.

The Presidential Elections and International Initiatives for a Solution in Syria

The political initiatives for the resolution of the Syrian crisis—issued prior to the Geneva conference on June 30, 2012, the first Arab initiative on September 10, 2011, the second Arab initiative on January 22, 2012, and the Kofi Anan plan—made the holding of presidential elections conditional on a halt to violence, the launching of political and

societal dialogue, and the forming of a national unity government to oversee the elections. However, with the persistence of the crisis and the escalation of the regime's violence, the international and regional forces that are active in the Syrian case reached the "Geneva-1" communiqué, which calls for a transitional governing body that would be able to exercise full executive powers. This announcement, which reflected an agreement among the various parties involved, implies that the presidential elections would constitute the "end" of the transitional stage and that the announcement and organization of these elections would fall within the tasks of the transitional body that is to be formed.

Because of its weak position on the battlefield and the ascendancy of the opposition forces, the regime, under international and regional pressures, continually "welcomed" the Geneva-1 communiqué in its official discourse, without openly agreeing to it. It avoided addressing the question of presidential elections and the possibility that al-Assad may run as candidate for another presidential mandate. The 2012 constitution that was approved, however, gives Assad the right to run for two more presidential cycles.

Iran, which welcomed Kofi Annan's plan, did not expressly call for political transition and for al-Assad stepping down and refused to agree to the "Geneva-1" communiqué because it clearly called for the formation of "a transitional governing body" with full executive powers. In an attempt to avoid being excluded from a prospective political solution by new international understandings, Iran launched a six-point political initiative on December 16, 2012 that called in its third article for "the effectuation of a comprehensive national dialogue that prepares the ground for the formation of a transitional government to organize parliamentary elections and a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, in addition to allowing for the presidential elections to be held at their specified date".

Iran sought to provide the appropriate circumstances to make this initiative "executable" or "worthy of discussion" among the influential international parties engaged in the Syrian crisis. Thus, it indirectly intervened militarily through loyal parties and militias, such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias, in order to shift the situation on the field to the regime's benefit. Since the al-Qusair battle in June 2013, Iran became the main overseer of the conduct of military operations in Syria, while the role of the Syrian army became limited to providing arms to the Tehran-affiliated militias. In parallel to the direct military role, Iran also played an important diplomatic role, contributing to the success of the Russian initiative in September 2013, which led to an

agreement about handing over Syrian chemical arsenal, with the objective of preventing a punitive military strike against the regime after it used chemical weapons in the Ghouta neighborhood of Damascus in August 2013.

With the change in the military balance, the receding of the possibility of a military strike being directed against the regime, and the opening up of the international community to the regime in order to fulfill the chemical weapons deal, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad began to "insinuate" that he might run in the presidential elections scheduled for 2014 during his interviews with the Arab and Western media in late 2013, linking his decision to the people's demands. Even so, the regime was not in a position that could permit it to officially declare its intention to hold the elections, and the UN Security Council resolution no. 2118 clearly indicated the necessity of establishing a transitional governing body in accordance with the "Geneva-1" communiqué, in addition to calling for a new international conference in Geneva for the resolution of the Syrian crisis.

The Syrian regime was forced, under Russian pressure, to attend the "Geneva II" conference while Iran, again, refused, to acknowledge the "Geneva I" communiqué, leading to its exclusion from the conference. The regime was strengthened by Iranian military and political support, so it acted to sabotage the efforts of the Arab and international mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, to launch a credible process of negotiations. Iran also exploited the failure of "Geneva-2" and the allies of the Syrian opposition refrained from taking serious steps to re-open the path for a political solution or change the balance of forces on the ground. Thus, Iran was able to take advantage of this situation to emphasize its own political initiative, which is backed by the military advances achieved with the support of Iran's militias. Since the beginning of March 2014, the tone of the Iranian political rhetoric escalated, indicating that Iran has become the main actor in the Syrian crisis. This state of affairs was affirmed during both the battle of Yabrud in the Qalamun Mountains and the process of negotiations in Old Homs; Tehran prevented the Syrian army from participating in the takeover of Yabrud, limiting the mission to the forces of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias, such as the "Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas" militia and others. In Old Homs, moreover, Iran was the sole party negotiating with the Islamic Front in order to withdraw the opposition fighters from the city in exchange for the release of Iranian captives in Aleppo, and for supplying the Shiite towns of Nubbul and al-Zahra (Aleppo countryside) with food and aid. In support of the Iranian desire to hold the presidential elections at their specified

date, the Syrian parliament approved the election law on March 13, 2014, opening the way for al-Assad to announce his official candidature on April 28, 2014.

The Effect of the Presidential Elections on a Potential Political Solution

It would not be an exaggeration to state that holding the presidential elections has eliminated, at least during the current phase, any opportunity for a political resolution to the Syrian crisis in accordance with the Geneva-1 communiqué. Despite the fact that Western and Arab parties are focusing on undermining any attempt by the Syrian regime to bestow “legitimacy” over Bashar al-Assad’s persistence in power, the absence of any effective measures to respond to the regime’s skirting of all political initiatives and its imposition of a new political reality will encourage Iran to continue pursuing its plan to keep al-Assad at the helm of the Syrian political establishment. This reality was clear during American President Barack Obama’s latest speech at West Point military academy. Obama defended his policy choices in Syria, and with the exception that he would commit to supplying the “moderate” armed opposition, there was no mention that the US would possibly undertake serious steps to further a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

Regionally, at this stage, the Syrian crisis does not constitute a “priority” for the pro-opposition governments; for example, the Egyptian crisis and the stability of the new regime after the “victory” of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in the latest presidential elections heads the list of priorities for Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy. Turkey, on the other hand, appears to be focused on its domestic issues, especially with the renewal of protests and the increase in domestic criticism of Erdogan’s foreign policy toward Syria, particularly in regards to the Jihadist movements, which prompted the Turkish government to designate the al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization on June 3, 2014. Waning interest in the Syrian crisis and the halting of arms shipments had severe repercussions on the factions of the Syrian armed opposition, ultimately causing its retreat from important fronts, such as Aleppo and Deir-al-Zour, in the face of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Given this state of affairs, Iran is attempting to exploit the Syrian presidential elections in order to revive its initiative and promote it in international circles as the only available and acceptable solution to the Syrian crisis. Tehran does not view the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or the other opposition factions

operating outside Syria, as “effective and influential” parties on the Syrian domestic scene. Thus, since the beginning of 2014, Iran has sought to negotiate with the influential armed battalions and factions within the geographic area of each of these organizations, pushing them—through promises or threats—to strike permanent or temporary ceasefires with the regime, which would permit it to minimize the size of the battlefield. These efforts would also permit Tehran to later implement its proposal regarding the formation of a “national unity government,” which would assume some of the presidential powers in order to manage the transitional phase, organize parliamentary elections, and amend the constitution while maintaining al-Assad in his post. Iran’s foreign minister, Jawad Zarif, has openly expressed this desire during the parliamentary meeting of the “friends of Syria” held in Tehran at the beginning of June 2014, when he exclaimed that “the reconciliations that have happened in Syria affirm the fact that solutions can be reached through internal dialogue”.

By holding elections, the Syrian regime sought to send multiple messages. For example, they wanted to create the impression among its supporters and allies that the regime has vanquished the opposition and is still in control in Syria, while impressing upon the international community that the only political solution acceptable to the regime is one that is tailored according to its wishes and keeps it in power. Moreover, the regime would like for Syrian society to revert to the fear the regime’s security agencies previously caused throughout the country because such a society would allow al-Assad’s regime, with its corruption and despotism, to continue. Moreover, the elections were used to reveal and be rid of the regime’s opponents who live in areas under its control. By holding elections with predetermined results, the regime was attempting to subdue and insult the Syrian people, which leads to the prevalence of a state of frustration and hopelessness among the populace, causing it to surrender and acquiescence to the persistence of the current regime.

After the “elections,” it is also likely that the regime will undertake some measures to improve its chances of survival, such as striking “reconciliation” deals (permanent or temporary) in various regions, releasing a number of detainees, and forming a new cabinet that includes a number of opposition figures (domestic and in exile). Meanwhile, the regime will attempt to communicate with some opposition figures and movements abroad in order to promote the impression that a new “political moment” has begun, without putting in question the continuity of the regime. The regime also wants to sow discord among the opposition so that certain states would be willing to work with the regime to combat “terrorism”. Militarily, the regime viewed these elections as a

“mandate” to pursue its battle against the revolution, the “essence” of the electoral program that was proposed by Bashar al-Assad during his meeting with Syrian clerics on April 29, 2014. During this meeting, he exclaimed that the country “is facing a state of societal and moral breakdown,” and that there are tens of thousands of Syrian terrorists, referencing the opposition fighters who enjoy the support of millions of Syrians, whom he collectively referred to as “the social incubator” of the “terrorists,” promising to combat them without mercy.

Regardless, the fact that the vast majority of Syrians and world governments refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the elections will continue to irk the Syrian regime, which means that the Syrian crisis will remain in full swing, making the “elections” no more than a passing phase of the Syrian conflict. Within a short time, the elections will lose their value and the momentum that they produced as a result of Iranian propaganda. Despite the regime’s attempts to spread frustration and hopelessness among Syrians, the Syrian people will continue to reject the continuity of the regime. After three years of the revolution, and the tragedy that has accompanied it, there is no doubt that the regime is still capable of practicing murder, torture, and displacement, and, therefore, it cannot rule or regain control over the country that it has destroyed. The Syrian crisis will continue, domestically and abroad, and will remain an item on the international community’s table in their search for new solutions in accordance with the evolution of the struggle, the balance of forces, and the level of political performance.

Lastly, it is important to note that all the forces of the Syrian revolution and the opposition continue to confront the regime without a clear plan. Even though the opposition was aware that the regime intended to hold elections, it failed to formulate the appropriate mechanisms, plans, and initiatives to undermine or respond to the electoral charade. Today, after the elections, the opposition is in a critical position, particularly if it does not seek to unite, politically and militarily, in order to avoid defections. This is something the regime continually works toward through communications with some constituents of the opposition, as do certain foreign powers; others may defect because of the state of frustration and lack of hope that has begun to afflict the opposition. The opposition must undertake a different political and media role and offer an inclusive national discourse while also attempting to regain the momentum of the Syrian cause among the international community by presenting it as a national political cause, not merely a humanitarian aid mission.