

Ripples through the Region

Whatever its ultimate outcome, the conflict in Syria has sent shockwaves across the Middle East, adding instability to an already volatile region. The flood of refugees out of Syria, the presence of jihadist elements among the rebels and the threat of chemical weapons all pose significant challenges for the security and stability of Syria's neighbors, as well as America's national interests.

Tens of thousands of Syrians have fled to Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, creating a considerable humanitarian and political problem. Beyond the obvious difficulties for the refugees themselves, this mass exodus is taxing scarce resources and exacerbating existing economic woes. And as tensions between Syrian refugees and local residents rise, there is a real danger of violence and unrest.

While civilians have been escaping Syria, Islamic extremists have entered the country in growing numbers, joining the battle against the regime of President Bashar Assad. These extremists, many of whom are veterans of the ongoing strife in Iraq and operate under the banner of al-Qaeda, have claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks, most of them suicide bombings and car bombings.

Having contributed to the escalation of the violence in Syria, jihadist groups are also a security concern for neighboring countries. They have not hidden their intent to branch out and attack other countries, and Israel in particular has warned that these groups are liable to turn its border with Syria into a base for terrorist operations.

Perhaps the most dire regional concern is the possibility that Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons—the largest in the Mideast—could fall into the hands of terrorists or be used by the Syrian regime in an act of despair. This concern is well-founded: the regime has said it would be prepared to use these weapons against foreign attackers, and has moved parts of its vast arsenal out of storage.

Preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their use against a civilian population is not only a matter for Syria's neighbors, but a key national security interest of the United States. Indeed, President Obama has said that the U.S. regarded the movement or utilization of such weapons to be "a red line."

The horrific violence in Syria has turned cities into battlegrounds and led to a major humanitarian crisis inside the country. But the risks to the entire region from the ongoing turmoil are no less grave.