

There are few landmarks more important to the lives of the inhabitants of Syria and their capital city, Damascus, than the Jisr Arra'is, or the presidential bridge. While the bridge is rarely included in any discussion of the historical sites in this ancient city, it is a vital route that ties key Damascene neighborhoods and centers of power in Syria. The fact that the bridge remains firmly in government hands speaks volumes about Syria's civil war, which began in early spring 2011, has claimed tens of thousands of lives, destabilized Syria's neighbors, and burdened a region already filled with millions of refugees with hundreds of thousands of new ones.

Anyone crossing the Presidential Bridge would instantly recognize its importance. Not only does the bridge link the homes of the nation's elite in Abu Rummaneh and Malki with the business, government offices, and schools in Baramkeh, but it also sits next to the massive Four Seasons Hotel, the Takiyya Sulaymaniyya, a major historical landmark, the city's central bus station, and the Syrian National Museum, which houses priceless artifacts, including one of the few known synagogues with human images. Equally importantly, the bridge overlooks the main highway that connects Damascus' historic center with the homes in Mezzeh, the massive suburban housing blocks beyond Mount Qasioun, and the Umayyad Square. The square, which is a short walk from the Presidential Bridge, is a key Damascene crossroads and the center of Syria's military—a concentration of facilities equivalent to America's Pentagon. In addition, the Umayyad Square is less than a mile from the Presidential Palace and is surrounded by national cultural institutions: Syrian State Television, the Damascus Opera House, the Syrian National Library, and Syria's foremost university, Damascus University.

However, the Syrian government's ability to hold on to the Presidential Bridge, should not be taken as a sign that it is winning the conflict or will crush the current rebellion in the same way that it destroyed a previous rebellion in 1982. The country's large and well equipped security forces have been unable to prevent a peaceful protest movement from becoming a multi-pronged and armed rebellion. That rebellion has demonstrated that it has the ability to permanently hold portions of the country, kill thousands of soldiers and others allied with the government, and shell targets in central Damascus, including the military facilities at the Umayyad Square. The insurgency has won countless recruits from the regions affected by the historic 2006-2011 drought, which forced two to three million Syrians into extreme poverty and the evacuation of regions that had been continuously inhabited and cultivated for 8,000 years.

Despite fierce ethnic differences between Arab and Kurdish Syrians and equally fierce ideological battles between religious and secular Syrians, the Syrian rebel coalition has made the current government unacceptable internationally—in the West but also in regional and international institutions where the West has little influence and where Damascus has long unquestioned legitimacy for decades: the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. In March 2013, Syria's rebel coalition assumed control of Syria's Embassy in Qatar and Syria's seat at an official summit of the Arab League in Doha, Qatar. In addition, the Arab League authorized member states to provide military aid to Syrian rebel groups.

For all of these accomplishments, the rebel forces do not appear to be able to decisively break the government and its supporters, who have remained resilient in central Damascus and elsewhere. The government's international allies also continue to provide crucial military aid. The conflict may continue for some time to come, and we cannot rule out the possibility that Syria will disin-

tegrate politically in the same way that Yugoslavia did in the 1990s. Foreign military intervention may also be inevitable.

However the Syrian conflict is ultimately resolved, we can say one thing with certainty today: if the rebels seize control of the Presidential Bridge, they will have inflicted a devastating blow on the Syrian government and will be well on their way to winning the battle for Damascus and all of Syria.