

# The Turmoil in Syria: What Lies Ahead

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After over a year of internal unrest and oppressive violence against the civilian population, Syria recently saw the implementation of an official ceasefire, followed by the deployment of UN observers to guarantee the actual cessation of hostilities.<sup>1</sup> However, an analysis of the history of the protests and the growing divide between the Assad regime and the Syrian population reveals both the tenuousness of the current ceasefire as well as the precariousness of Syria's political future. Similarly, a closer look at the ongoing violence taking place within Syria curbs the enthusiasm of those who asserted that a diplomatic mission such as the one headed by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan would be sufficient to ensure the implementation of a stable political solution.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the recent ceasefire should not be seen as tantamount to the end of the Syrian crisis, and should instead lead the international community to renew its political, diplomatic, and economic efforts to resolve the conflict, calling for stronger and better coordinated international involvement.

The article looks at Syria in the period following implementation of the ceasefire, explaining the roots of the current predicament, assessing possible future developments, and analyzing the potential impact of the ongoing crisis on the region, with a specific focus on Israel. Finally, the analysis discusses the role of the international community in mitigating the violence and facilitating a political resolution to the crisis.

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## Ceasefire, Political Deadlock, Military Stalemate: The Syrian Predicament

When the wave of unrest that shook the region with the so-called “Arab Spring” initially hit Syria, there was widespread skepticism regarding the opposition’s capacity to have any substantial effect on President Bashar al-Assad and his entourage.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, like Tunisia and Egypt, Syria is an authoritarian regime ruled through emergency laws and oppression by an out-of-touch ruler who does not represent his constituents. Moreover, with the country controlled for decades by the Alawite minority, which represents roughly 10 percent of the entire Syrian population, the overwhelming Sunni majority has for years been treated like second-class citizens – a powerful, potential precondition for revolution. In addition, in early 2011 Syria was in a state of severe economic crisis, with rampant unemployment and growing social inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the iron fist with which Damascus had crushed any previous internal protest – epitomized by the bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood-led revolt in Hama in 1982 – was largely interpreted as the main obstacle in creating momentum for the anti-Assad forces to rise up and challenge the regime. Even after Hafez al-Assad’s death in 2000, his son Bashar effectively followed his father’s footsteps in violently suppressing any internal opposition. He did so first in the 2000-2001 so-called “Damascus Spring,” a civil society movement that rose in the aftermath of Hafez’s death, demanding social and political reforms. More recently, he similarly crushed a Kurdish revolt in 2004 and a wave of internal protests in 2005, following Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the complex and difficult relations between Syria’s different religious, ethnic, and sectarian groups (Christian, Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish, Druze) and the deep political and religious-secular divides within communities themselves were likewise seen as a leading factor in preventing the rise of a strong opposition to the Assad regime.

However, and notwithstanding this plausible assessment, the strength and size of Syria’s coercive apparatus and the existing divides within anti-Assad groups were not enough to prevent the rise of a genuine nonviolent protest movement in early 2011. Subsequently, the initially spontaneous protests taking place in the periphery of the country escalated in size and

magnitude and extended geographically, in part because of the regime's violent over-reaction to the protests.

Indeed, the Syrian government's reaction to the initial protests only added fuel to the fire, precipitating rather than diffusing the crisis. The chosen approach, which included a mix of cosmetic political changes, a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the protests, and violent crackdowns on demonstrations that initially were for the most part peaceful, largely backfired, escalating the crisis from local demonstrations to a full fledged mass civil and political movement. Moreover, as the regime's brutal repression of the protests continued, the movement gradually shifted from strategic non-violence to armed struggle.

Since then, extremely high levels of violence have been one of the defining characteristics of the Syrian conflict, as the two sides became increasingly entrenched in their positions, driving themselves into a bloody stalemate. This predicament, which is still valid as of April 2012, largely depends on two factors, first, the strength and cohesion of Syria's coercive apparatus. The regime in Syria managed to survive and remain in power since the 1970s largely by preserving total internal control. This has been achieved by investing in a coercive apparatus, relying on extensive clientelism, and exercising direct control over all institutions of government.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Assad today can still count on the loyalty of the armed forces in particular and the coercive apparatus in general. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, in Syria the military and security apparatus, far from being perceived as a *super-partes* institution, is closely identified and connected to the regime, and therefore Assad's potential downfall also represents a direct threat to its own status and power. The security sector thus has a strong incentive to continue backing Assad, which in turn explains why there have not been mass defections from the Syrian military, and why the regime has so far not imploded from within.

In addition, the Assads have survived and prospered as a minority regime by ensuring strong internal control, projecting power, and enforcing a zero-tolerance policy with respect to internal dissent. This also explains the nature of the predicament Syria currently finds itself in: the regime, built on coercion and force, is unable to genuinely implement much-needed reforms and begin a serious dialogue with the opposition, as this would be tantamount to the demise of the unrepresentative, elitist, authoritarian, and centralized regime. From the regime's point of view,

the current crisis is perceived as a zero-sum game, leaving little hope for a peaceful negotiated political transition.

The second factor underlying the current deadlock and virtual stalemate is the general weakness of Syrian civil society, the sharp internal divides within the anti-Assad forces, and the lack of a widely cross-sectarian anti-Assad political alliance.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the protest movement is largely Sunni, with the Kurdish and the Christian minorities hesitant to become involved. In addition, not only does the Syrian National Council – the “government in exile” in Turkey – not speak authoritatively for all the Syrian political forces, but also the Free Syrian Army lacks strong command and control and the capacity to oversee and coordinate the activities of all the anti-Assad armed groups on the ground. This situation, the product of decades of systematic targeting and destroying of any internal political opposition by the Alawite regime, makes it harder for the incumbent political coalition to confront the relatively strong and united Assad regime.

This combination of a powerful, determined, yet largely illegitimate regime and a popular yet divided and militarily weak opposition has created a bloody stalemate. Moreover, the zero-sum game prism through which the Syrian regime has looked at the crisis and the accompanying escalation of violence has deeply affected the political opposition as well, which now also believes to be engaged in a “death struggle” with the regime.<sup>8</sup> In this context, it is clear that an externally-imposed ceasefire alone is unlikely to lead to a smooth political resolution of the crisis.

### **Looking Ahead: Scenarios and Regional Impact of the Crisis**

Given the current impasse in the Syrian crisis, the possible future scenarios for Syria are not reassuring.

First, without further international involvement in support of the anti-Assad forces, the current ceasefire could represent an opportunity for the regime to regroup and attempt to crush the political opposition and restore the status quo ante. However, it is unlikely that this “victory” would truly represent a lasting one for the regime, as the past months have deeply eroded its internal legitimacy as well as the Syrian social fabric. The regime would therefore survive, but it would be increasingly isolated from both its population as well as from the international community. From a regional perspective, this scenario would represent

a powerful rollback to the ongoing “Arab Spring,” while it would also reassure Syria’s regional allies, such as Iran and Hizbollah, which have been investing in Assad’s remaining in power.

A second, more nuanced, variation of this scenario would be for the ceasefire to hold and for the two parties to develop an uneasy internal equilibrium. While this would prevent the country from drifting into renewed immediate violence, it is unlikely that the ceasefire alone – failing to impose the capitulation and exile of Assad – would lead to a negotiated political transition. In other words, under this “prolonged ceasefire” scenario, the two sides would regroup and prepare for the next round of hostilities.

Third, with the ceasefire looking increasingly shaky, Syria could revert back to internal conflict, with the potential of escalating into a full-fledged civil war. This scenario is increasingly more likely due to the combination of the growing number of defections from within the ranks of the regime and the rising financial help provided from the Gulf states to the armed opposition.<sup>9</sup> This scenario would have staggering humanitarian consequences for the Syrian people, and would also be risky for the rest of the region and for the international community alike.

Ongoing instability in Syria combined with the growing influx of Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries could further contribute to the instability of the region, especially in the case of Jordan.

Finally, provided there is strong international involvement and possibly even international military intervention, the internal balance of power could switch in favor of the opposition forces, leading to either the internal implosion of the regime or its military defeat. Assad’s capitulation represents a best case scenario in the attempt to avoid prolonged internal conflict and regional instability. However, the departure of the dictator from the political scene, either by death or exile, would not guarantee per se the end of the hostilities. In this sense, only a combination of international involvement in the post-conflict phase and the facilitation of a politically negotiated agreement between the different stakeholders would lead to a true cessation of hostilities. Although this scenario is not risk-free, given the impossibility of knowing what post-Assad Syria would look like, an assessment of the severe humanitarian, political, and security implications of prolonged internal violence suggests that the status quo is untenable.

From an Israeli perspective, the ongoing Syrian crisis is similarly worrisome, with every scenario holding potential risks. The “business as usual” option (with Assad managing to dodge the bullet and remain in power) would not represent a serious threat, as over the past decades Israel has already developed a *modus vivendi* with Assad. However, the reinstatement of the status quo would also be a positive development for Israel’s regional foes like Iran, and it would represent a missed opportunity to redefine the balance of power in region. In addition, with the Syrian opposition repressed and confined again to the margins of society, Israel could indeed have concerns regarding radicalization and the drift towards radical Islamic extremism of the anti-Assad opposition.<sup>10</sup> In turn, this may lead to increased disturbances in the border area between Israel and Syria.

Instability and the potential explosion of a civil war in Syria could be even more worrisome for Israel. On the one hand, a weakened Syrian regime would negatively affect Syria’s allies like Iran and Hizbollah, certainly a positive development for Israel. However, the increasing lawlessness within the country is not a positive development for Israel, as it could potentially affect the quiet of the Syrian-Israeli border. In addition, an unstable and conflict-ridden Syria could become a magnet for foreign jihadists, something that is particularly worrisome when put in the context of Syria’s extensive chemical stockpile, believed to be one of the world’s most sophisticated.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise from an Israeli perspective a post-Assad regime would represent both a new threat, given the potential rise of an antagonistic Islamist government,<sup>12</sup> and an opportunity for Iran’s sphere of influence in the region to be weakened and for a new chapter with its northeastern neighbor to be opened. Given the risks of the alternative scenarios, this might be the least negative option.

### **The Syrian Crisis: The Role of the International Community**

With the two sides in Syria deadlocked and perceiving the conflict as a zero-sum game, it appears obvious how third parties can play a powerful role in shaping the conflict. However, when assessing the role and impact of the international community in Syria, it is impossible not to note how the lack of agreement on intervention has seriously undermined the potential to positively affect the situation on the ground. For its part, this

international cacophony over Syria is dictated by the radically different priorities and interests of external actors involved in the crisis.

On the one hand, Assad can count on a slim yet committed number of allies, starting with his regional partners, Iran and Hizbollah.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Assad has been able to fend off international intervention due to Russia and China's refusal to authorize stronger international involvement in the UN Security Council. Their reasoning is simple: both countries strongly resist the notion of "contingent sovereignty" behind the authorization of international humanitarian interventions. Specifically, China and Russia have been particularly skeptical towards authorizing "responsibility to protect" (R2P) missions such as in Libya, feeling that they were "fooled" into abstaining from stopping the intervention in Libya only to later discover that the R2P doctrine had been used as a pretext to bring about regime change. In addition, Moscow has relied on its alliance with Assad both to project power in the Middle East as well as to reassert its role in the international community. In turn, this implies that any serious effort to resolve the crisis in Syria needs to include a deal brokered with Moscow. This is an extremely difficult task, as Russia is highly hesitant to give up its role as "spoiler" and the power it derives from this role.

On the other hand, the countries, both regionally and internationally, that have openly opposed the Assad regime and backed the opposition have been unable to decide on a common approach to deal with the Syrian crisis. In this sense the most supportive parties of the anti-Assad forces have certainly been Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in light of the direct interests of the Gulf countries in seeing the demise of a close friend of their main foe, Iran. As such, these countries have severed diplomatic relations with Syria, openly taken steps to financially support Syria's opposition, and urged the international community to intervene militarily to impose regime change.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey has also taken an increasingly forceful stand with respect to the Syrian crisis, shifting from an initially conciliatory posture to open calls for Assad to step down and for the creation of "safe zones" to protect the Syrian refugees within Turkey and the establishment of humanitarian corridors within Syria.<sup>15</sup> In April 2012, Syrian shootings of Syrian refugees within Turkish borders led to an irate response from



Ankara, which went as far as invoking article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (the mutual defense assurance clause for NATO members).<sup>16</sup>

Aside from Turkey, other NATO member states have been far less enthusiastic in promoting the idea of military intervention in Syria, with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen repeatedly insisting NATO has no intention of intervening.<sup>17</sup> This is hardly surprising, given the ongoing economic crisis, the growing public reluctance to become involved in “out-of-area” operations, the relatively lesser national interests at stake in Syria, and the lack of a clear UNSC authorization to act. In addition, the idea of becoming involved in yet another complex internal conflict with major post-conflict stabilization challenges leaves NATO countries extremely reluctant to bet on military intervention to facilitate the ousting of Assad.

Therefore, until now, the anti-Assad coalition, loosely brought together by the United States through the Friends of Syria group, has so far only been able to agree on a very general set of measures to put pressure on the regime. This approach includes, first, placing diplomatic, political, and economic pressure on the regime to increase its isolation. This objective is achieved by downgrading diplomatic relations, imposing a series of economic sanctions, and politically supporting the opposition forces. An important example of this type of political pressure is the suspension of Syria from the Arab League in November 2012.<sup>18</sup> However, the lack of unity and coordination within the Arab League has diminished the political impact of the measures designed to isolate Assad. The international community has also focused on sanctions, including freezing of assets and oil and arms embargoes, while banning transaction with both the Syrian government and its central bank.<sup>19</sup>

These measures can be useful in helping to further erode the domestic legitimacy of the regime, facilitating defections and further alienating the Syrian people from Assad. However, in order for these measures to be effective, there must be a better coordinated and stronger reliance on all the tools in the political and diplomatic toolbox. This would involve at the very minimum a coordinated strategy to cut off diplomatic relations with the regime as well as increase the economic pressure on Damascus. However, for this strategy to work, the Friends of Syria should also be much clearer on their desired end goal: there should be an open call for



Assad to step down, while offering the dictator exile and immunity in exchange for leaving the political arena while he still can.

In addition, for this coercive diplomacy strategy to work, there must also be a concerted effort to foster a supportive relationship with the Syrian opposition forces. In the last Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul there was already a trend towards increasing non-lethal aid to the opposition forces, including communication equipment to help them coordinate their efforts.<sup>20</sup> This should also be accompanied by political outreach and efforts to assist the anti-Assad opposition forces in bridging their divisions, a key requirement in ensuring their legitimacy. The relationship with the opposition should be strongly based on an idea of “conditionality”: assistance in return for complying with international humanitarian law and for absolutely refraining from reprisals and acts against the civilian population. This would be particularly important in post-Assad Syria, to avert the country’s descent into a downward spiral of sectarian violence.

An effective strategy to deal with Assad and his regime should also deal more directly with the “elephant in the room”: how to effectively pressure Russia to relinquish its support for the Syrian regime.

Finally, while currently there seems to be little or no serious international consideration of military intervention, renewed attention should be given to both how to project a credible threat of force as well as to the study of additional options, including the use of a multi-national stabilization force to engage in a limited R2P operation.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, post-Assad contingency plans should also be devised to contain the chances of descending into renewed internal violence.

In other words, with the ceasefire ever more shaky and with both parties involved in the Syrian conflict perceiving the situation as a zero-sum game, the international community has an important role to play in mitigating both the potential for long term internal violence as well as regional instability, which would have adverse consequences on all of Syria’s neighbors, including Israel. However, for the international community – through the Friends of Syria framework – to step up to the plate, there must be both a clear investment in economic, political, and diplomatic pressure to force the capitulation of Assad, as well as extensive contingency planning to ensure that the post-regime change transition does not lead to a new chapter of internal violence and regional instability.

## Notes

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- 11 Charles P. Blair, "Fearful of a Nuclear Iran? The Real WMD Nightmare is Syria," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 1, 2012, <http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/fearful-of-nuclear-iran-the-real-wmd-nightmare-syria>.
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- 13 Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Crushing the Radical Axis," *The National Interest*, January 26, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/crushing-the-radical-axis-6410>.
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