

Syria Alert

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How can a war be prevented?

“The gates of hell are wide open and the fire is approaching.”¹

The Syrian uprising started 7 months ago as a fully nonviolent uprising. Today, under pressure from the massive and brutal violence used by the Syrian regime and the lack of a concerted action by the international community, calls for violence are increasing. Armed groups consisting of defected soldiers are a fact on the ground. Syrian authorities have allowed and facilitated a wide proliferation of small arms and mobilized sectarianism to realize their warnings of an Iraq-scenario. Neighbouring countries and regional powers are merely interested in protecting their internal security and geo-political interests. These factors all contribute to a highly explosive situation that could let Syria slip down into full scale internal armed conflict that would draw regional and international forces into military intervention.

In order to prevent a war, prompt, firm and concerted action by the members of the international community and the different Syrian political actors is required. Within Syria and internationally, a 2-track approach is needed, where some parties exert pressure on the Syrian government, while others promote political dialogue and concrete transition proposals. Meanwhile, efforts to protect civilians, avoid impunity and prevent conflict have to be intensified.

In this second Syria Alert policy brief, IKV Pax Christi presents an analysis of the developments in Syria, and recommends actions to be taken by the international community and the Syrian political actors.

Emboldened regime expands its brutal attacks on civilians

The failure of the United Nations Security Council to agree on a resolution to take measures against Syria and the Arab League’s division on suspending Syria have given the Syrian authorities yet another signal that they can continue their violent campaign against their own citizens. The Syrian

¹ Hassan Abbas, “The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria”, Arab Reform Brief 51, October 2011, via <http://www.arab-reform.net/spip.php?article5080>.

army continued its attack on the city of Homs and attacks and arrest campaigns were launched against Damascus suburbs after the Arab League meeting of 16 October. Dozens of civilians are killed on a daily basis, including children. Thousands of Syrians are missing, took refuge outside the country, have been arrested and tortured. Targeted killings of opposition leaders have also become common practice. The violent campaign to repress opposition has worn out the people. The Syrian government has concerted to spread fear and division with support of the state-run media and private channels owned by people related to the regime. It has succeeded in giving a sectarian angle to the dynamics and to draw certain groups into violence. Proliferation of small arms has been facilitated by the Syrian regime, by arming civilians and allowing for smuggling of arms into Syria.

Sectarian mobilization

The Syrian popular uprising was from the beginning clear in its refusal of violence and of sectarianism, being a movement of Syrians from all different religious and ethnic backgrounds for all Syrians of all different backgrounds. Concerted efforts by the regime, through its security forces and *Shabiha*, the militias of the Assad family², and media, aimed at creating fear amongst people and mobilize sectarian divisions. This was done by presenting the uprising as a movement of radical Sunni Muslims, threatening that the Sunnis would take revenge against Alawis, but also by arming certain groups and by assassinations carried out by security forces and *Shabiha* that are blamed on Sunnis.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has since many years gone through a democratization process and joined the call for a civil democratic state. Other, more radical, political Islamic groups are very marginal. But the opposition and specifically the Syrian National Council in which the Muslim Brotherhood is represented, have failed to reassure the minority groups such as the Christians, Druze and Alawis. They have failed to come with explicit guarantees on how minority rights will be protected and how revenge against those who supported the regime will be avoided. Therefore they have failed to win critical mass from these groups for their cause and allowed for their withdrawal into the safety of their own community.

The Free Syrian Army

In reaction to the brutal violence against civilians, Syrian soldiers started defecting since the beginning of the uprising. They started to organize themselves to protect communities against attacks from the army, security forces and *Shabiha*. First the defected soldiers organized themselves under the name of the Free Officers under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Hussain Harmouth. In the end of July, shortly after Colonel Riyad al-As'ad defected, he announced the establishment of the Free Syrian Army. After the disappearance of Hussain Harmouth in late September, these two groups of defected soldiers announced their unification under the name Free Syrian Army (FSA). Since then, they have increased their attacks on security forces, *Shabiha* and more recently also on

² The *Shabiha* is a militia loyal to the Assad family, established under Hafez al-Assad and then run by his nephews, notorious for their brutality. They were originally active in the coastal area mainly (Latakia, Tartous, Baniyas) and involved in criminal activities such as smuggling. Today they are used as a paramilitary force to support the repression and have been accused of crimes such as extrajudicial killings, random shooting at civilians and looting.

the army. The operations of the FSA are centered in the Idlib and Homs provinces, but operations have also taken place in other locations such as Albou Kamal and Hama. The Free Syrian Army claims to have 10,000-15,000 fighters³ but others estimate the figures lower.

Syrian opposition divided over military option

The Free Syrian Army enjoys increasing popular support given the ongoing violent repression by the Syrian security forces and army. Many of the leaders of the uprising however do not agree with their military strategy and emphasise that the revolution should remain nonviolent in order to succeed. Human rights activist Razan Zeitouneh for example, who plays a leading role in the uprising, called upon the Free Syrian Army to hand in their weapons and join the nonviolent protests. The Syrian National Council has until now ignored the Free Syrian Army, underlining its own nonviolent strategy, but failing to take efforts to manage the use of violence or bring the FSA under civilian control. Now that the Libyan revolution succeeded in ending the regime of Muammar Qadhafi, it is likely that the military option will gain popularity amongst the population and support for the Free Syrian Army will increase.

This same division applies for the opposition's attitude towards foreign intervention. The Free Syrian Army has called for a no-fly zone in Northern Syria and for military support from Turkey. Opposition activists have also called for the establishment of "safe zones" under international supervision. The Syrian National Council denounces the idea of foreign intervention, but calls for protection of civilians. The main instrument promoted is the deployment of international human rights monitors. Especially amongst the Syrian activists inside Syria, there is strong opposition against militarization and against international intervention. But there are also increasing voices, also during demonstrations, that call for international intervention to stop the killing.

No plan for political transition

In the meantime, there is still no plan for political transition. The Syrian National Council and most other opposition forces, refuse dialogue with the regime as long as violence against civilians continues. But it has also failed to come up with a concrete step-by-step plan, a road map, on how Syria can make the political transition towards the civil democratic state they want it to be. Two weeks after its announcement, the SNC has still to come with a plan. In its meeting of 16 October, the Arab League gave the Syrian government and the opposition 2 weeks to start negotiations about political transition. Initiatives that have come from Syrian civil society and intellectuals, have been neglected or obstructed by the government and some have even been imprisoned for their efforts to promote a political process.⁴ On the other hand, the SNC and other opposition forces refuse such dialogue as long as the killing and violence continues.

³ Interview Colonel Riyad al-As'ad in al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper, 9 October 2011: <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=26872>

⁴ Dr Muhammad Ammar, a nonviolent activist and religious leader from Deraa province, was arrested on ... May after he had been invited by Assef Shawkat, head of security and brother-in-law of president Bashar al-Assad, to discuss his *Road Map* to find a way out of the crisis.

Regional actors with their own agendas

The ongoing massive violence against civilians and the growing calls to respond with violence, create a very dangerous situation that could easily draw regional actors into conflict. The neighbouring countries want stability across the border. Especially for Lebanon the risk of spill over is pressing. The Syrian army has already been involved in incursions on Lebanese soil, during which Syrian forces killed a Lebanese man on 6 October. Turkey has stated “it will not allow another Hama” and as killing of civilians goes on, the country is the most likely actor that will at some point be ready to use military force to protect its interests. The Syrian government has enjoyed support from a number of regional actors. In the first place Iran, which has provided the Syrian government with financial support to deal with the economic crisis resulting from the uprising and sanctions, but which has also provided security support. Activities of Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been reported by eye witnesses⁵. Other countries still supporting the Syrian government are neighbouring Lebanon but also Arab countries such as Yemen and Algeria. Saudi Arabia has only recently shifted towards more pressure on the Syrian government. The fact that this shift took place after the alleged Iranian plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in the US, underlines how regional relations can impact on the internal situation and vice versa. Any such regional intervention or confrontation is likely to draw the international community, most likely via NATO, into the conflict.

A concerted multi-track effort still offers a way out

Although the scenarios for the developments in Syria are grim and the risk of escalation into war and regional conflict is serious, it is still possible to turn the tide and “close the doors of hell.” But this will require prompt, firm and concerted action by the members of the international community and the different Syrian political actors and should include the following components:

1. A 2-track approach by the international community, in which pressure on the Syrian government to end its violent repression is increased and political initiatives are promoted. Those countries that have taken the lead in pressuring the Syrian government should coordinate with those countries that still have good relations with and political leverage in Damascus. That means the EU should continue its efforts to step up sanctions and get other countries to join these sanctions, while it should coordinate efforts with actors such as Russia and the Arab League to mediate a political solution between the Syrian government and the opposition.
2. Supporting a 2-track approach from within Syria. While the massive nonviolent protests should continue to pressure for transition, a process to pave the way for a political agreement has to be promoted too. A concrete step-by-step plan for transition should be part of such political efforts. This should be the priority for the international community, not the unification of the Syrian opposition. Active diplomacy between the international community and the SNC and other relevant political and civil society actors in Syria should be supportive of such a political process. Meanwhile, moral and practical support should be

⁵ See for example this Youtube video claiming to show an ID card of an Iranian Revolutionary Guard member: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga9-3jYZLNQ&feature=player_embedded.

provided to the peaceful demonstrations and physical presence by high level diplomats can provide protection.

3. Protection of civilians. The international community has the responsibility to protect Syrian civilians. Diplomatic efforts to ensure a UN mandate for human rights monitors are needed. Concerted efforts by EU diplomats vis-à-vis their Russian and Chinese counterparts should be developed to get them on board. Simultaneously, efforts have to be taken by diplomats present in the country to monitor, report and be present where they can.
4. Make clear that crimes against humanity and grave human rights abuses cannot stay unpunished. These violations have to be documented with the possibility of opening a case at local courts or the International Criminal court. Individual countries can also draw up lists of people allegedly involved in such grave abuses. While lower level responsible officers can be offered immunity under certain conditions, those responsible at the highest levels should not be offered a way out.
5. Conflict prevention measures. To that background, the Free Syrian Army cannot be ignored. The SNC and relevant international actors such as Turkey should establish a dialogue with the FSA on a number of topics: to study the possibilities of negotiating a cease fire or putting conditions on the use of military force; of cooperation on a unified strategy and bringing the FSA under civilian control; on supporting defectors and avoiding impunity for grave human rights violations. Meanwhile, the SNC should come with guaranties and concrete proposals on how it will ensure minority rights during and after transition and how it will work to avoid revenge against those who supported the regime. Given the wide proliferation of small arms, any transition plan should also include a disarmament plan.

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