

Syria Alert Issue IV

20 January 2012



Prevent further militarisation of the conflict

The meeting of the EU Council of Foreign Affairs to be held in Brussels on 23 January will discuss the current situation in Syria and further steps of the European Union. The safety of civilians in large areas of the country is under serious threat. A further militarization of the conflict in Syria is an imminent threat. The European Union should act to prevent this further militarization. Further sanctions against the regime can be useful. Yet the European Union has limited direct influence on the situation in Syria. Despite serious problems with the observers mission by the Arab League, extension and improvement of this mission still might be the best way to contribute to the protection of the lives of civilians in Syria and prevention of militarization of the conflict. At the same time the EU should stimulate a meaningful dialogue, not only between the different oppositional groups but also with actors that are still close to the Syrian regime.

In light of the current situation, IKV Pax Christi is of the opinion that the EU should focus on two main issues:

- *The EU should contribute to preventing a further militarisation of the conflict.*
- *The EU should focus on supporting peaceful actors and solutions.*

The figure quoted by the UN of an estimated 5000 killed and many thousands more in detention is probably much lower than the real figure according to human rights organisations. The Syrian government has not taken any steps up until now to reduce the violence of the army and the security services.

The monitoring mission of the Arab League has, however, resulted in a clearer recognition by other, above all Arab, governments of human rights violations, but up until now this has not led to a reduction in the number of victims. Despite various weak elements in the observers mission, it has led to more information on the situation in Syria and to an important internal debate between Arab governments. At the same time, it is clear that the overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrators are gaining more and more support from armed resistance groups and defectors from the military. The Free Syrian Army is taking an increasingly more active role and the coordination between the FSA and the local revolutionary committees has become more solidified.

There is currently a stalemate between the government and the demonstrators. The government has not succeeded in its attempt to use repression to bring to an end the demonstrations which have been going on for the last ten months. The opposition, on the other hand, has not (yet) succeeded in bringing down the government. This is mainly due to

the divisions within the opposition, and the fact that a part of the population still supports President al-Assad, either out of conviction or out of fear for change or the threat of Islamic terror.

The regime has made a point of trying to provoke an armed conflict, and has tried to divide the population along ethnic and sectarian lines. In this way the regime hopes to keep the support of various minorities (Alawites, Druze, Christians, and a part of the Kurds) and the Army. In particular the Alawite community has much to fear from a change in the political situation. The strategic location of Syria and the attitude of various neighbouring countries and global powers has meant the international community has a very limited number of options.

Whatever its deficiencies may be, the Arab League is really the only player who still has influence on the Syrian government and which wants to act to prevent a major armed conflict. For Syria, an isolated position within the Arab League is ultimately much more painful than any sanctions imposed by the EU.

Preventing further militarisation

- Stopping the supply of arms to the regime in Syria. Russia in particular is still supplying weapons and ammunition to the Syrian government. The EU should deploy all necessary diplomatic means to put pressure on Russia and bring this trade to an end. It is clear that Russia will block any form of military intervention in Syria, but it should be investigated under what conditions it would agree on a weapon embargo against the Syrian government. The supply of arms through other countries should also be prevented by diplomatic means. There is a suspicion that South Africa has been facilitating such supplies. Furthermore, the supply of weapons from other Arab countries to insurgents and military defectors should also be prevented.

- Military intervention is not an option at this point in time; even in the limited form of a no-fly zone or a security zone, this would not make a positive contribution to reducing violence against civilians. Even a limited form of military intervention would mean a further escalation of the militarisation of the conflict, which is precisely what needs to be prevented. An assessment of whether or not humanitarian intervention with military resources is desirable and justified should be made based on a number of clearly-defined criteria: *right intent, right authority, proportionality, last resort, realistic chance of success, and realistic post-war scenario*. One should not only ask the question whether the situation is grave enough to justify military intervention. The second key question is whether a military intervention would have a realistic chance to contribute to protection of civilians and save lives. Despite how reasonable the call for international protection on the part of Syrian civilians and the opposition might seem, the EU should nonetheless maintain the viewpoint that military intervention is not an option. There is a serious danger of a hasty decision being taken to undertake intervention fuelled by justifiable emotions. Once foreign military personnel are in Syria, however limited the number, there is no way back. Military intervention would open the door to further militarization of the conflict. Both Iran and Russia have declared that they will not agree with any form of military

intervention and would even take steps to give military support to the Syrian regime in such a situation. A regional conflict would not be in the interest of the Syrian civilian population. Even if intervention does not lead to a regional conflict, a situation similar to that in Iraq after 2003 is not unimaginable. Any form of militarisation will ultimately play into the hands of the regime because it will justify violent repression, or lead to more chaos, violence and threat to human security. European countries and the EU should be clear and honest about that towards Syrian opposition groups.

Peaceful actors and solutions

- Making the most of the monitoring mission of the Arab League. The decision of the Arab League to send observers is unprecedented, and should be seen as an essential step towards increasing the pressure on the Syrian regime from within the Arab world. A positive development is the further collaboration between the Arab League and the UN in order to reinforce the mission. At this point in time there is basically no alternative to getting more observers on the ground in Syria and to trying to reduce the violence, although there are serious problems.

There are many reasons for doubting the effectiveness of the mission. The Arab League will have to draw its own conclusions based on the conclusions of the mission after one month, but it should be confident that it has the support of Europe in increasing the pressure on the regime. At the same time the EU should stress in its contacts with the Arab League that it needs to be transparent on its findings on the situation in Syria. If the report shows that the observers were not able to do their work properly, or were straight-jacketed by the regime, the only meaningful option would be for a more robust mission in close collaboration with the UN.

- Supporting the non-violent groups within the Syrian opposition. Although it is understandable that civilians have taken up arms to defend themselves against the violence of the regime, and that military defectors are using their weapons, the Syrian uprising will only lead to a more peaceful and free Syria if the emphasis is maintained on non-violent resistance. Those Syrians who follow the road of non-violent protest should know that they are being supported in their peaceful struggle against this brutal regime. The EU will thus increase its credibility in the region.

A meaningful form of support could be to open dialogue with various oppositional groups. A European call for unity within the Syrian opposition however is not very helpful and effective, like the Syrian society the opposition is diverse. Yet channels of dialogue should also be opened to various other groups in the Syrian society, including groups still tending to support the regime.

Just like other non-governmental organisations in Europe and the Netherlands, IKV Pax Christi sees it as its task – and that of the international community, including the EU - to support non-violent groups within the opposition in all possible ways, and thus encourage them to improve the level of interaction amongst themselves, and to adopt a policy of openness and inclusiveness with regard to *all* population groups within Syrian society. This will help to win people over in Syria who are still unsure

about joining the uprising. The Syria of the future should become a home for all its inhabitants.

IKV Pax Christi is closely following the situation in Syria and is for many years working together with its partners in Syria. At the end of last December, IKV Pax Christi was able to consult with other organisations in Beirut about the situation and the action that needs to be taken. IKV Pax Christi has published a 'Syria Alert', with a detailed analysis and policy recommendations, three times over the last few months.

Jan Jaap van Oosterzee

vanoosterzee@ikvpaxchristi.nl / +31-6-48981486

20 January 2012