

Syria Alert

Issue V, 22 February 2012

Seeking ways out of the violence

Since the UN Security Council vote on a resolution in support of the Arab League initiative for Syria early February, violence in Syria has increased. The Syrian government interpreted the Russian and Chinese veto as a carte blanche to repress the uprising with violence. Since then, hundreds of civilians have been killed, on top of the thousands that had already been killed.

In this Syria Alert policy brief, IKV Pax Christi recommends to focus on protecting civilians in Syria and on de-escalating the violence on the ground and in the region. The international community should specifically: 1) Provide technical, financial and moral support to the nonviolent forces that promote a democratic Syria for all its citizens; 2) Seek political engagement of all relevant actors, including China and Russia, in pressuring Damascus to allow entry to UN human rights observers and in promoting a political way out of the crisis; 3) Assess all possible non-military instruments to protect Syrian civilians and not exclude the option to pragmatically use military instruments to protect civilians.

1. Support the nonviolent forces for change

Together with many in the international community, we are outraged about the ruthless killing of civilians. Unfortunately, there seems to be no short term perspective to an end of the suffering of the Syrian people. Even on the long term there is a great risk that an armed uprising or even a foreign military intervention will lead to an extensive period of violence and instability. However, it is noteworthy, to the background of all this violence, that there are around 300 local coordination committees active, the large part of which continue their activism in a non-violent, non-sectarian and inclusive way. These committees organize daily nonviolent protests in hundreds of places all around Syria and with participants from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. The nonviolent forces are the ones who promote tolerance, a pluriform society, human rights and reconciliation. Supporting these forces now, against the odds of the violence, is a crucial investment in the future of a democratic, peaceful Syria where all citizens regardless of religion or ethnicity are equal.

- The EU should provide moral, practical, financial and technical support to the nonviolent uprising, for example through groups such as the Local Coordination Committees.
- The EU should set up a dialogue with the Syrian National Council to develop a road map towards an inclusive democracy, civil rights, rule of law and ensuring the rights of all

religious and ethnic communities for post-Assad Syria. In return the EU should offer robust support for the implementation once the time is there. A clear signal of the SNC that their future vision for Syria is based on these principles, is vital as a signal to those who fear an exclusivist, sectarian agenda of the opposition.

2. Promotion of a political solution

Since the Chinese and Russian veto in the UN Security Council, calls for military intervention have increased, both from inside Syria and from outside. The creation of a “Friends of Syria” group signals that the West has given up hope in the UN. This division has very much weakened international influence and the chances of a political way out of the crisis. All efforts should now be aimed at building an international coalition to deescalate the situation and make room for a political solution. Stepping up smart sanctions against leading figures in the Syrian regime would be a way to put more pressure to accept diplomatic initiatives, but the EU should ensure that these sanctions do not hurt Syrian civilians, especially the most vulnerable groups in society.

- Efforts should be made by the EU and other Western countries to engage Russia and China in an international coalition that works to end the violence and promote a political solution. The first priority is to de-escalate the situation. Pressuring Syria to accept UN human rights observers would be one instrument to do that.
- Work with the Syrian National Council and other opposition groups on a concrete step-by-step road map that aims at avoiding or minimizing power vacuum in a transitional phase and at laying the foundation for an inclusive democracy based on civil rights and the rule of law.
- Step up sanctions only when they specifically target leading figures in the Syrian regime. Avoid that sanctions hurt the most vulnerable. The EU should set up an external evaluation of the effectiveness of its sanctions policy towards Syria leading to clear lessons learned.

3. Protection of civilians

The international community has the responsibility to protect Syrian civilians now that the Syrian government is clearly not able or not willing to do so. This should be the central approach to the situation in Syria. Since the violence against civilians is reaching more dramatic proportions and causes outrage around the world, calls for military intervention increase. Calls for “humanitarian corridors”, “safe zones” or “buffer zones” are too much formulated in terms of a military solution and mix the objective of protecting civilians with providing support to the armed resistance or even regime change. At this moment, military intervention is neither feasible nor supportive of the primary goal of protecting civilians. Therefore we recommend the following:

- The EU should push for an assessment and implementation in the framework of the United Nations of all feasible non-military instruments that contribute to the protection of civilians. These could include maintaining diplomatic presence in Syria, expanding presence of human rights observers, collecting evidence of crimes against humanity and grave human rights violations and holding those responsible accountable.
- The EU should encourage neighbouring countries to ensure safe refuge to Syrians fleeing from the violence. The EU should generously support these countries in their efforts to give

shelter to refugees. The EU should also support the ICRC plans for humanitarian pauses and to ensure with all possible means the delivery of humanitarian goods into affected areas in Syria. Through actors such as Russia and the Arab League, Damascus should be pressured to make a safe passage to neighbouring countries possible for refugees.

Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement IKV Pax Christi

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