

Evolution and Outlook of the Syrian Crisis

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The Syrian crisis has become a tough knot to unravel. The relentless battle that Bashar al-Assad's regime is waging against the opposition is compounded by the intrigues of the regional powers that have become involved, directly or indirectly, in the conflict, making it that much harder to find a solution. Following the start of the popular mobilisations on 15 March 2011, the Syrian regime bet the house on the so-called "military solution." In President Assad's view, it was a struggle to the death that could only have one winner. The human cost of the first two years of the crackdown has been high: 70,000 deaths, one million refugees to neighbouring countries, and another three million internally displaced persons. To halt the rebels' advance, the regime has not hesitated to use its heavy artillery, shelling entire towns and cities from both ground and air. In addition to the regular troops, it has deployed the *shabiha*, death squads thought to be responsible for multiple massacres. However, despite its overwhelming military superiority, the regime has continued to lose ground and is on the defensive.

The rebels, in turn, have embarked on a civil war of uncertain duration without first calculating its costs. The opposition remains seriously divided, as evidenced by the recent resignation of Moaz al-Khatib, head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the widespread criticism of the choice of the hitherto unknown Ghassan Hitto, a businessman who has lived in Texas for the last three decades, to head the interim

government. Meanwhile, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) does not speak with a single voice or have a common strategy. In all, there are more than a thousand rebel military units, each one fighting its own war. Some human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, have expressed concern for the war crimes being committed not only by the regime, but also the rebels, including torture and the summary execution of prisoners. Moreover, the last year has witnessed a dangerous radicalisation of the rebels due to their infiltration by hundreds of Arab Islamists seeking to wage their own *jihad* against the regime, which they consider to be apostate because of the predominance in it of the Alawite minority.

A Badly Wounded Regime

The Syrian crisis has continued to mutate since it first broke out two years ago. What began as an anti-authoritarian uprising became, from the summer of 2011 on, an armed conflict between two clearly distinct sides. Today, it is possible to speak of a medium-intensity civil war with the active involvement of neighbouring countries: Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Once it became clear that the demonstrators would not be deterred by cosmetic reforms, Assad opted for the "military solution," which, in turn, convinced the opposition of the need to take up arms to defend the population. The Syrian President proceeded to burn all his bridges. Of the all-encompassing, all-powerful state of yore, all that remains today is a rickety and crumbling façade. The regime's authority has been heavily eroded, as it has lost control of part of the country. As a result of this weakness, it has

¹ This text was finalised before May 2013 (Editor's note)

been forced to resort to increasingly emphatic means to halt the rebels' advance. The massacre of defenceless populations has become widespread, as witnessed by the cases of Hula and Deraya (to name just two examples), as has the use of weapons of war (including Scud missiles and MiG-21 fighters) against rebel-controlled neighbourhoods, which has had a staggering cost in terms of human life and has accelerated the exodus of the population.

The climate of chaos has spread through much of the country, with armed militias imposing their own law and organised crime groups engaging in extortion and looting. Moreover, the economic crisis has grown more acute as a result of the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. The Syrian pound continues to slide and has fallen from 50 to 130 to the dollar. The prices of basic necessities, such as bread and petrol, have doubled or tripled, and most cities are facing shortages.

Moreover, the regime has suffered several major blows in the last year, among others, the assassination of the military leadership responsible for managing the crisis (including the Defence Minister Daoud Rajiha, the Deputy Defence Minister Assef Shawkat, and the head of the security forces' crisis management office Hassan Turkmani) and the defection of key figures (such as Prime Minister Riad Hijab, General Manaf Tlass of the Republican Guard, and the Ambassador to Iraq, Nawaf Fares).

Given this explosive situation, Assad has chosen to use a strategy of "divide and conquer," trying to open up schisms within the population by manipulating its confessional heterogeneity. In some communities, there is a growing fear that Syria will follow in the footsteps of Iraq and become embroiled in a sectarian war. The car bomb blasts in the Christian neighbourhood of Bab Tuma, the Shiite shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, and the Druse district of the suburb of Jarmana (all in or around Damascus) seem to confirm these fears. The Alawite minority, which has enjoyed certain advantages for decades, fears persecution should the regime fall. Indeed, the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic denounced, on 20 December 2012, the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict following the massacre of 200 Alawites in the city of Aqrab.

A Fragmented Opposition

One reason for the Syrian regime's continued survival two years after the start of the uprising is the fragmented nature of the opposition, which has proven incapable of uniting around a common action plan and is divided with regard to what strategy to take. The fragile internal cohesion, lack of resources and dependence on its sponsors are some of the limitations affecting the Syrian National Council (SNC).² This weakness is largely due to the systematic persecution suffered by the opposition during the fifty years of Baathist rule.

In response to pressure from the Friends of Syria group, the SNC undertook, through the "National Covenant for a New Syria," to unify the ranks of the opposition. On 11 November 2012, in Doha, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed, led by Moaz al-Khatib, the former imam of the Umayyad Mosque. Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Oqaidi was chosen to head the FSA's Military Council. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) retained a large share of power and emerged as the backbone of the new formation, recognised as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League and the members of the Friends of Syria group.

At the military level, the rebel forces, grouped around the FSA, have made significant progress, such as taking much of the provinces of Hama and Idlib and certain neighbourhoods of Aleppo, the country's second-largest city. They moreover control some border controls with Turkey and Iraq and various military bases. However, the rebels' advance has been hindered by their inability to coalesce into a united front. Indeed, there are currently more than a thousand militias operating on the ground, some of which do not recognise the FSA's authority. This atomisation has served as a justification for the international community's refusal to arm the opposition.

One of the greatest concerns for Western countries is the infiltration of radical Salafi groups. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the regime initially claimed to be fighting al-Qaeda. It is precisely the paralysis of the international community, which was absent from the early stages of the conflict, that has allowed the regime to crush peaceful demonstrations and rebel

² ÁLVAREZ-OSSORIO, Ignacio. "Le Conseil National Syrien: genèse, développement et défis." *Maghreb Machrek*, vol. 213, p. 55-67, 2012.

forces with impunity, thereby drawing more people to the cause. The Western arms embargo on the rebels has simply increased their dependence on the Persian Gulf oil monarchies, which not only ship weapons but also aim to have a voice in post-Assad Syria. The influx of jihadist elements could have been prevented if the international community had taken decisive action early on in the uprising, as it did in Libya.

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As it stands, a plethora of Salafist groups have a growing influence on the ground, including, among others, Ahrar al-Sham, the Tawhid Brigade, Jamaa Islamiya, Ghuraba al-Sham and the Farouq Brigade. The most notorious by far is the al-Nusra Front, which the Obama Administration has included on its list of terrorist organisations for its alleged ties with al-Qaeda in Iraq. A report by the International Crisis Group noted that “present-day Syria offers Salafis hospitable terrain – violence and sectarianism; disenchantment with the West, secular leaders and pragmatic Islamic figures; as well as access to Gulf Arab funding and jihadi military knowhow.”³

Everything seems to suggest that Syria is not the battleground for just one war, but rather for several being fought at the same time. The clash between the regime’s forces and the rebels is certainly the most obvious, but another conflict is also playing out, albeit beneath the surface, between the regional powers that back or oppose Assad. Consequently, the outcome of the Syrian war no longer depends solely on the capacities of each side in the conflict, but also on the strategies adopted by those countries in the region that hope to wield influence in post-Assad Syria and, of course, the degree of engagement the international community is willing to accept. It is precisely this multiplicity of actors and their respective interests in the game that makes it so hard to find a lowest common denominator to end the crisis. As Moaz al-Khatib stated at the Doha talks

held from 25 to 26 March 2013, “I am opposed to any type of external interference as it will clearly be aimed at dividing Syria.”

A Negotiated Solution?

As Syria slides into the abyss, Western countries are engaging in doublespeak. Though they claim to support the opposition, they maintain an arms embargo that serves only to perpetuate the military superiority of the regime, which is generously supplied by Russia and Iran.

Despite the deteriorating situation on the ground, the Obama Administration continues to support a negotiated situation. On 30 June 2012, talks were held in Geneva, attended by both the US and Russia. A transition plan was approved that called for the formation of a national unity government with figures from the opposition and members of the current government, the holding of legislative elections, and the drafting of a new constitution that would give full executive powers to the Prime Minister. The parties in attendance chose a path of “constructive ambiguity,” as they did not specify whether Assad had to first step down for the plan to be implemented. The UN-Arab League envoy, the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, returned to Geneva on 9 December that year for talks with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, stressing that “a political process to end the crisis was necessary and still possible.” The Friends of Syria group, meeting for the Marrakesh talks a few days later, likewise endorsed the plan.

In light of these movements, vice President Farouk al-Sharaa, whom many see as the head of an eventual transition government, told the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* that, even though the Syrian President still hopes “to achieve a decisive victory before engaging in a political dialogue (...) some in the party and the armed forces have believed from the outset of the crisis, and continue to believe today, that a political solution is the only alternative and that there is no going back to how things were before.”⁴ In fact, in early 2013, Assad came out again in favour of a national dialogue. Moaz al-Khatib,

³ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition.” *Middle East Report*, vol. 131, 12 October 2012.

⁴ *Al-Akhbar*, 17 December 2012: www.al-akhbar.com/node/173812

leader of the National Coalition, also called for negotiations, although he was subsequently discredited by his own platform.

Post-Assad Syria

The Baath Party came to power in 1963. In 1970, the “Corrective Movement” was launched, bringing Hafez al-Assad to the presidency. On his death, a hereditary republic was established under the leadership of his son. Since its independence, Syria has known only brief stints of democracy, such as those following the elections of 1954 and 1961. Consequently, doubts regarding the possibility of eventually establishing a multi-party democracy able to ensure territorial unity and safeguard minority rights are well founded.

The future of post-Assad Syria will depend, essentially, on how and when the authoritarian era ends. The civil war in which the country is currently embroiled has now entered its third year, and there is no sign of a light at the end of the tunnel due to the regime’s stubborn belief that it is fighting to ensure its very survival. Nor does a negotiated solution to the crisis seem feasible, as all the potential bridges for dialogue have been burned. Given the technical draw at the military level, the regime’s superior air power has halted the rebel forces’ advances to Damascus, where Assad’s loyalist forces have taken cover while they await the final battle that will determine the outcome of the war.

Unless the relationship between the different forces changes dramatically, we may witness the gradual Lebanonisation of Syria, that is, a situation in which the territory becomes fragmented and is controlled by different armed factions. The loyalist forces could be tempted to engage in ethnic cleansing along the coastal strip between Tartus and Latakia in order to create a safe haven for the Alawite population should Damascus fall. To this end, they would have help from Iran and Hezbollah, who seek to maintain their respective shares of power in post-Assad Syria.

Therefore, the main challenge for the opposition is not only to ensure the country’s territorial unity, but also to convey the message that the Alawite minor-

ity has nothing to fear if Assad falls. As the National Coalition has often noted, post-Assad Syria must ensure the full equality of all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity or confession. Only those people with blood on their hands should be prosecuted, and the criminalisation of the Alawite minority, which accounts for 12% of the population, must be prevented at all costs. Both the opposition and different prominent figures from the Alawite community have already taken the first steps towards this reconciliation.

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On 23 March 2013, a group of Alawite opponents of the regime meeting in Cairo asserted, “This revolution is a revolution for all Syrians against dictatorship, despotism and corruption” and that “equating the ruling regime with the Alawite sect is a deadly political and ethical mistake, for the Syrian regime is not an Alawite sectarian regime, nor has it ever been in the Alawites’ service. On the contrary, the Alawite sect was – and still is being – held hostage by the regime.”⁵ The communiqué also denounced the sectarian logic used by the government: “The Syrian regime is lying when it claims to be protecting minorities – especially the Alawite minority. It is a lie intended to make Syrians fear potential and imminent Islamic extremism, according to the regime.”

The second threat to Syrian territorial integrity is related to Kurdish nationalist claims. The Syrian Kurdish minority has a long history of persecution and political, social and economic marginalisation, due to the fact that it is the most cohesive non-Arab community in the country and the only one that might pose a threat to the Baathist nationalist project. From the start of the uprising, the Kurdish-majority regions have kept a low profile with regard to mobilisations against the regime and have taken advantage of the power vacuum to establish a considera-

⁵ Traducciones de la revolución siria. “Comunicado de opositores alauíes reunidos en El Cairo.” 25 March 2013: <http://traduccionsiria.blogspot.com.es/2013/03/comunicado-de-opositores-alauies.html>

ble degree of autonomy in the province of Hasakah. Much of the Kurdish population believes that the time has come to make up for lost time and claim both their identity-based and national rights.

In fact, the Kurdish parties are calling for the establishment of a federal state, modelled after the one established in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, an idea that is strongly opposed by the Syrian opposition. On 26 July 2012, in the Iraqi town of Erbil, the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish National Council founded a Kurdish Supreme Council and defence militias, which were deployed on the ground following the withdrawal of the regular troops. This move caused considerable concern among the Syrian opposition, who saw Syrian Kurdistan striking out on its own and distancing itself from the uprisings.

Another big question mark hovering over post-Assad Syria is precisely whether the same mistakes will be made as were made in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, among them, the disbanding of the army and the de-Baathification of the government, measures which only served to exacerbate the sectarianism. In this regard, it should be recalled that the Syrian Baath Party, the “leader of the State and society” according to the Constitution that has been in force for the last forty years, has two and a half million members, that is, one tenth of the country’s population. Furthermore, the government employs around one and a half million people, some of whom are sympathetic to the regime. Disbanding the army and dissolving the sole party or government would have devastating effects, as they would cause the immediate collapse of the State, just as occurred in Iraq.

The Role of the Islamists

Finally, it remains to be seen how exactly power will be shared once the Baathist regime has fallen and, above all, what role the MB will play in the future government. The organisation has been severely persecuted since 1982, causing its leaders to leave the country and take up residence elsewhere in the Arab world and in Europe. To offset their influence, the regime sponsored an official brand of Islam through its control of the religious institutions and,

above all, promoted different Sufi brotherhoods, which have acquired considerable influence over the last decades.

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Today, the MB holds a predominant position within the Syrian opposition and aspires to play a key role in post-Assad Syria. In its 2012 “Pledge and Charter by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood,” the group came out in favour of the creation of a “modern, civil state with a civil constitution rooted in the will of the Syrian people and (...) drafted by a founding assembly that will be chosen in free and fair elections,” as well as of supporting the emergence of “a democratic, pluralistic State [that operates on the principle of] transition of power” in which all citizens would be equal regardless of religion, sect, ethnicity, school of thought or political orientation. Unlike their 2004 “Political Project for the Future Syria,” the Pledge did not make any reference to *sharia* as the main source of law.

Although it seems clear that the MB is destined to play a prominent role in post-Assad Syria, it is doubtful whether it will achieve a hegemonic position due to the country’s confessional heterogeneity (25% of the population consists of Alawites, Christians, Druses and Ismailis). Moreover, no single actor has a monopoly on political Islam, given the deep roots of the Sufi brotherhoods. At the same time, it remains to be seen what position will be held by the Salafist groups, which, despite their minimal presence in the country, have increased their influence thanks to their Saudi backing. Should the war escalate, it could strengthen these groups, which aim to impose a theocratic state governed by *sharia* law and which, moreover, are openly hostile towards Alawites. Nevertheless, Syria is a plural country with a long history of peaceful coexistence between the different religions. It is thus possible that these extremist formulas will not be embraced by the majority of the population.