

# Syria, Vertigo in the Face of a Radicalised Revolution and an Uncertain Future

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## The Origins of the Revolt

The revolutions in the Arab world have had many latent causes, but in all of them, specific events sparked the fire of revolt. In Syria, apparently it was enough for the regime to repress several protests against the arrest of a number of adolescents from Daraa who had painted graffiti against the regime for the spark to be lit. It was 15 March 2011, not unreasonably called the “Day of Dignity” by protesters. The regime’s defensive reaction to the first protests only caused protests to proliferate throughout the territory, rising in number of participants and elevating the tone of demands.

The daily trickle of deaths, injuries and arrests rose exponentially with the siege of Daraa, the onset of military-type operations in this and other cities and the actions of the *Shabiha*, the pro-regime brigades that have sown terror among the population.

The regime’s strategy has played out on various fronts since then. On the one hand is the repression against protesters and the action of the *Shabiha*. On the other hand, the government is making full use of the propaganda machine to create a vision belying the popular and pacific dimensions of the protests. In contrast to the images of protests and casualties disseminated by activists, the regime disseminates images of the *masira* or pro-regime rallies. As other leaders in the region have done, the Syrian regime systematically brands activists as either puppets of

hostile international actors or terrorists attempting to disturb the peace and set up a theocratic regime. The spread of information is particularly critical, considering that journalists are banned and the work of those entering clandestinely is torpedoed. Over time, the manipulation of information from both the state apparatus and the opposition has ended up generating a great deal of confusion and mistrust among international public opinion.

## The Specificities of the Syrian Context

Although it follows the path of the Arab revolts preceding it, Syria’s revolution displays unique characteristics due to the country’s social composition, the nature of its political, economic and military power and the regional context.

The Syrian population is enormously diverse. Arabs are the majority (80%), but there is a significant Kurdish community (15%) and other, less numerous minorities such as Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians and Turkmen. Insofar as religions, living together in Syria are Sunni Muslims (70-75%), Shiites, Alawi (12%, although some indicate their number as 20%), Druze (1-3%), Ismaili (1-3%) and Christians (10%). In addition, there are Palestinian refugees (2.3%) and Iraqi refugees (some 1 million or more, who are returning to Iraq due to the conflict). Depending on how one looks at it, all the minorities together can add up to 40% of the population, so that on the whole they are no longer so “minority”.

Syrian diversity has served to foster a culturalist reading of the conflict, although the roots of the conflict should not be sought in enmity between confessions but in political contention and, ultimately, in the struggle for power. Diversity is a key factor insofar as the regime has manipulated it through a policy of sectarianisation that has prevented unified collective action.

To a certain extent, the regime has co-opted specific sectors of these minority communities and made them accomplices and hostages to their survival. However, the organic cohesion of this circle of power would not be possible without the support of certain sectors of the Sunni entrepreneurial and commercial middle class in large cities, who have benefited from the economic privileges that their relations with the government in power has brought them. Until the summer of 2012, this framework of political-economic networks had protected the Damascus and Aleppo metropolises from massive expressions of discontent, since this is where economic growth and wellbeing is concentrated, in clear contrast to a rural environment excluded from progress and suffering from the droughts of the past few years. This economic argument explains the strong rural, decentralised nature of the Syrian revolution.

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In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, where there was a more or less independent worker movement and a nascent civil society network, in Syria the Assad family's Alawi clan spread its dominion over all elements of society and the State (labour unions, educational institutions, associations, etc.), making Syria the first hereditary republic or *yumlaka* - from *yumhuriyya* (republic) and *mamlaka* (kingdom). The hegemony of the family clan and the major Alawi presence in the military has saved the regime for months from desertions and has allowed it to conduct a policy of repression against the population in the name of the "stability" - i.e. survival - of the regime and its loyalists.

From a geostrategic point of view, Syria is located in a region of enormous vulnerability and political instability. The fragility of neighbouring Iraq can be added to that of Lebanon, a country with which it has maintained a complex relationship of intervention and influence through the Lebanese Hezbollah militia. A major ally to Iran, Syria constitutes the cornerstone of what has ostentatiously been called the "Shiite crescent" and maintains its confrontation with Israel

through the Lebanese militia. Although direct conflicts between both countries have been highly sporadic over the past few decades, the enmity against Israel has allowed Syria to call itself the champion of the Arab cause and the anti-imperialist struggle.

## The Regime's Promises, Devoid of Credibility

To retain a certain legitimacy and international credit for its capacity for reform, promises did not take long to arrive, although the path of repression continues relentlessly, making those words empty. After the President's speech on 30 March 2011 came concessions to conservative Islamism and the nationalisation of 100,000 Kurds in the Al-Hasakah Governorate. Nonetheless, the prospects for change have no credibility in the eyes of a population that feels it has torn down the walls of fear.

In his third public speech, Assad committed to undertake a reform process, such that after local elections, a constitutional referendum was held in February 2012 and parliamentary elections were announced for May. The revised constitution eases restrictions on the creation of new political parties, limits the presidency to two, seven-year terms in office and ends the monopoly of the Ba'ath party on Syrian politics and society, making way for a multi-party system.

Both the referendum and the elections took place in a climate of generalised violence. The amendments adopted were merely cosmetic and had no impact on the distribution of power. None of the new parties running in the elections enjoyed credibility and, although this reform process is much more than any Syrian would have dared to imagine before March 2011, the revolution has reached the point of no return.

## From Pacific Revolt to Civil(?) War

The Syrian revolt was originally a pacific, non-violent movement. Its social composition, the nature of its demands and the use of demonstrations as the main mechanism for expressing dissent demonstrate that it is not rooted in a conscious initial strategy or concrete ideological preferences. Nonetheless, the repressive tactic employed by the regime has decisively contributed to radicalisation. Perhaps the revolt would not have been able to withstand the repression without the protection of the deserters from the armed forces, who have progressively organised to

form the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a non-coordinated organisation which has also been joined by personnel from the civilian sphere and external militias.

It is difficult to date the start of the revolt's militarisation, but possibly in the summer of 2011, when repression by the regime rocketed. At that time, the armed opposition groups started to organise to protect demonstrations and rebel areas and began to fight the Shabiha and security forces. Supplied by the clandestine inflow of arms, the armed opposition began to adopt guerrilla tactics and also began displaying more ideological biases and even a distancing with certain sectors wishing to keep the insurrection peaceful.

The definitive turning point in the degree of violence was symbolised by the Bab Amro bombing in Homs, where in early 2012, the regime deployed its elite units to recover territory that had escaped from its control.

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Moreover, the massacres, the responsibility for which is uncertain and which follow patterns of sectarian violence, seem to be inexorably leading to civil war. Syria is displaying untenable levels of violence with the massacres of civilians – among them many children – in May in Al Huleh, June in Qubair and July in Treimseh. The responsibility for said massacres is still pending investigation. Activists accuse the pro-regime militias of perpetrating them but the regime continues to deny any responsibility.

In the summer of 2012, the confrontation was officially declared a civil war by the United Nations, the regime itself and the International Red Cross, among others, due to the massacres of civilians and the scope of confrontations. Nonetheless, the activists and certain analysts refuse to accept this qualification, as they consider that it continues to be a struggle of the people against the regime and not a war between two factions of the population.

In July 2012, the rebels' guerrilla tactics put the army in check at its most loyal strongholds, Damascus and Aleppo, and managed to inflict a blow to the

heart of the military leadership in an attack killing the Minister of Defence, among others. The battles for Damascus and Aleppo, the capture of several border positions and the multiple points of revolt show a regime against the ropes.

By late July, the seventeen months of revolt had taken a human toll of 19,000 lives, according to the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, and according to the UN, there are over 150,000 refugees and some million and a half displaced people.

## A Divided Political Opposition

Fifty years of repressive measures, of subjecting the opposition to mutual mistrust, forced silence, exile and discredit have resulted in a fragmented opposition.

Omar Dahi classified it into five groups on the *Syria Comment Blog*: supporters of the traditional opposition (socialists, Nasserists and communists); dissident intellectuals; youth movements (including the Local Coordination Committees that have served as engines of the revolution and which other sectors have joined); a disperse group of conservative Muslims; and finally, armed Salafist groups that represent a minority but whose presence has given rise to enormous reticence among the international community. The differences lie in such fundamental matters as recourse to armed struggle, the acceptance of foreign intervention or a predisposition towards dialogue or making a pact with certain sectors of the regime. There are, however, no clear dividing lines and within a single group positions have veered.

The foundation of the opposition consists of the *tansiqiya*, coordination groups comprised of young activists that spread information (some 400 groups) and meet as Local Coordination Committees. They are the spinal column of the revolution. These groups include representatives of a wide variety of citizen tendencies, and although the activists assert that protests are spontaneous and not directed, there is a certain organisational structure.

The National Coordination Committee (NCC), created in mid-September 2011 and based in Damascus, is a coalition including political parties, youth movements, Kurdish parties and independent activists. Opposed to foreign intervention and more inclined towards dialogue, it has insurmountable differences and a declared rivalry with the Syrian National Council, the other political opposition organisation. The Syrian National Council (SNC), established in

October 2011, is the most internationally-recognised opposition group. It includes members of the Damascus Declaration group, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Local Coordination Committees, the National Bloc, the Kurdish Bloc (many of whom eventually left the Council), the Assyrian Bloc and independent activists. Although when it was established, it was committed to the non-violent nature of the revolution, the SNC eventually created a military command in supposed coordination with the FSA and calling for international intervention. In-fighting and rivalries have considerably undermined its power base and capacity, and disagreements and desertions have been constant.

Another cause of discrepancy between opposition groups are international affinities. Foreign support can influence the results of the conflict and could eventually determine the international alignment of a post-Assad Syria. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, USA, France, Iran and Russia are deeply involved in the struggle for the future of Syria, not to mention Lebanese factions, Kurdish militia and Islamist groups of all sorts.

In the words of certain activists not allied with the SNC, the latter has clearly accommodated itself to this proxy war by accepting the backing of the West, Turkey and the Gulf States.

Despite expressed intentions, international support has acted as a factor of dissent rather than cohesion among the Syrian opposition.

### **An Inoperative International Community and the Risk of a Proxy War**

Over the past year, the most recent regional and international conflicts have found echoes in Syria: the rivalry between Sunnis (Saudi Arabia) and Shiites (Iran) and the risk of sectarian war and its possible spread to other countries in the region. To explain what has been happening there, terms such as “Lebanisation” or “Iraqisation” have been used, and the situation has even been compared to the Balkan Wars or the Cold War.

Action by the International Community has alternated between sanctions and diplomacy. Sanctions have primarily come from the EU and the US, and have served to put pressure and an economic stranglehold on the regime, although they also end up having an impact on the civilian population. Diplomatic gestures – removal of ambassadors, expulsion of Syrian diplomatic missions or the suspension of membership in the Arab League in November 2011

– have been slow measures of pressure, generally in reaction to a sense of international indignation requiring a response.

The United Nations and the Arab League issued their first statement of condemnation in August 2011, but it was not until November that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) made its first attempt at a condemnatory resolution, vetoed by Russia and China. In the face of this failure, the Arab League reached an agreement with the Syrian regime for it to end repression, release political prisoners, allow journalists access and enter into dialogue with the opposition. The agreement established an observer mission that was to monitor the ceasing of repression during the month of December. In January 2012, the mission began to crumble as some of its members left, considering it a “farce.” The Arab League’s action plan then went to the hands of the UNSC, which attempted to pass a toned-down, negotiated resolution that was finally not approved due to Russia and China’s vetoes.

The following step arrived through the meetings of the so-called “Friends of Syria” in Tunis, then Istanbul and Paris, in which Syrian allies such as Russia did not participate. Symbolic but not very effective, they accentuated the recognition of the SNC as the legitimate opposition and approved the appointment of Kofi Annan as UN and Arab League envoy to mediate in the conflict.

Annan first focused on achieving a ceasing of violence and not a political solution to the conflict. He thus presented his six-point plan: ceasefire; a political process to meet the people’s “aspirations”; release of prisoners; the sending of aid; free movement for journalists; and the right to protest. The international community supports the initiative, although it was born amid scepticism, since the Syrian regime does not seem eager for military withdrawal. It has, however, lent the regime time to pursue its strategy of repression.

Despite the deployment of 300 observers, failure is becoming more and more patent with every passing day. The military repression continues, the massacres confirm the trend towards greater violence and de-legitimise Annan’s initiative. In late July, Geneva hosted a meeting where world powers agreed on the formation of a transition government, although what Assad’s future was to be was not clear. Faced with this situation of helplessness, various countries have admitted that they are aiding the rebel army, some with arms, others with funding and yet others

with communications tools, while Russia continues to send arms to the regime.

The repressive tactic has been closely linked with the regime's sense of immunity, for at no time has foreign military intervention like the one in Libya appeared plausible. No international actor seems willing to have a new Iraq, aware that Syria is not Libya and the implications of intervention are unforeseeable.

In any case, Assad could not have withstood so many months of revolt or international pressure without the help of steadfast allies. Ferocious detractors of international interference in a country's internal affairs, neither Russia nor China are satisfied with the results of the intervention in Libya. Moreover, Russia is not willing to lose its positions in the region, whether in the form of business and arms contracts, or its naval port enclave of Tartus – its foothold in the Mediterranean. Iran has reached Hezbollah through Syria, influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and deepened its confrontation with Israel. Indeed, it is no small matter that over the preceding few months, the Iranian nuclear issue has re-emerged, or even that the war drums were beating between Israel and Iran at some point. Losing Syria would only make Iran weaker and more vulnerable in a hostile regional setting.

Turkey has been obliged to give up its zero problems policy and has had to deal with the Syrian quagmire. Being the great victor of the so-called "Arab revolution" and presented as a model of Islamic democracy, the crisis in Syria has put Turkey in a complex dilemma as it pressures the government, supports the rebels, responds to the refugee crisis, organises the opposition and at the same time, attempts to prevent Syria from becoming a new Iraq and the Kurdish question from implicating Turkey.

The Syrian crisis is certainly a playing field in which the different actors are vying for their interests, and the fall of the Assad regime could bring drastic change to the regional balance of power. All regional and international actors have, in one way or another, attempted to maintain their positions, strengthen their alliances and ensure themselves a beneficial relationship with Syria, whether with the current regime or a future government.

### **The Regime Begins to Fissure in the Face of an Uncertain, Fearful Future**

The beginning of Ramadan coincided with a rebel offensive that has put the regime against the ropes

at its political and economic heartland. Assad has responded by deploying military fighter planes to bombard neighbourhoods and territories taken by the rebels and assuring that he will not hesitate to use his arsenal of chemical and biological weapons against any external aggression. The presence of these weapons increases the danger of escalation into large-scale regional conflict, especially now that opinions in favour of international intervention are again being heard, an intervention that is, however, unlikely to occur.

Even so, the regime is beginning to crumble. Desertions among loyalists and the security forces and the seizure of border control points by the rebels are factors that are beginning to be felt. It is impossible to predict when the regime will fall, since Assad's army is powerful and it has not yet deployed its full potential for firepower, which means that the humanitarian crisis can grow much worse.

At this stage, although international powers managed to agree to a consensual transition, the "Yemen-style" solution or "soft landing" could arrive too late: the opposition does not seem willing to accept a solution involving continuity, even if Assad does leave. The future is being played out on the military flank – the end of the regime will come if it loses the trust of the loyal forces through which it can retain power and protect its clientelist privileges.

The issue is to avoid an institutional vacuum, territorial fragmentation and the thirst for revenge, and control the armed militias that are acting with no control. We shall see whether the opposition, so disparate to date, will be able to unite to form a political front, whether regional and international powers are capable of playing a positive role for once and for all, and whether a social consensus can be reached to avoid civil confrontation and bring together the wills to build a new order protecting the rights of the entire Syrian population. In his column, Thomas L. Friedman has recently mentioned the need for a "Syrian Mandela." He may possibly exist – there are politicians, activists and other personalities of great value and integrity among the opposition. This person must simply be able to garner the necessary support and – a factor with is extremely complex considering the political experience in the region – be able to act free of foreign intervention that would distort the construction of a democratic future for all Syrians.