

Wimmen, Heiko; Asseburg, Muriel

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The Violent Power Struggle in Syria

Scenarios and Policy Options for the International Community

Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen

The violence in Syria continues to escalate. Propaganda-serving reforms devoid of substance and credibility, like the constitutional amendments of February 2012, have done nothing to de-escalate the situation. A return to the status quo ante appears just as implausible as a negotiated settlement. There is now an acute danger of full-blown civil war with the fighting between regime and insurgents spilling over into sectarian bloodshed. Although pressure is growing for the international community to intervene militarily, the foremost goal must be to avoid an uncontrolled escalation of violence and to press for humanitarian organisations to be granted access.

For a different perspective on this issue see:
SWP Comments No. 11
(March 2012) of Markus Kaim:
»Crisis in Syria:
Possibilities and Limits of
Military Intervention«

The violence in Syria has dramatically increased since the failure of the Arab League observer mission at the end of January, with Syrian armed forces increasingly deploying artillery to shell residential areas where insurgents are hiding. In March three districts of the central Syrian city of Homs that had been under siege and bombardment for weeks were invaded by ground troops and the rebels driven out – with large-scale destruction and devastating consequences for the civilian population.

Although the army has suffered increasing desertions from the lower ranks, the top leadership and most of the still fearsome and effective security apparatus remain loyal to the regime. The rebels of the so-called Free Syrian Army carry out attacks on the state security forces, regular army and intelligence services and prevent

them from entering resistance strongholds, thus fulfilling a certain protective function for the protests but at the same time provoking more violence on the part of the regime. The Free Syrian Army is poorly equipped, has attracted criminal elements and is fragmented into local groups. In spite of the Syrian National Council's efforts to establish control over rebel forces, with a military bureau opening in early March 2012, they are to date neither under civilian control nor do they follow a central command. Altogether the Free Syrian Army does not currently present a serious challenge to the army and security forces.

Religiously motivated violence is on the rise in mixed residential areas, especially between Sunnis and Alawites. At the same time, anti-regime protests continue to grow even in areas hitherto regarded as loyal, especially the two commercial centres

Damascus and Aleppo. While there is no hard data on the mood within the population, observation of internet forums indicates that many Syrians who had long remained neutral are now openly taking a stance against the regime.

The constitutional amendments presented in a referendum on 26 February 2012 must be seen in the first place as evidence that the willingness to introduce reforms asserted by representatives of the regime is utterly lacking in credibility. Although the amendments abolish the leading role of the Baath Party in state and society and introduce a multi-party system – with parliamentary elections to be held within three months – power still remains concentrated in the hands of the president, while the other constitutional organs amount to little more than window-dressing. As such, the new constitution formally cements the monopolisation of state and politics that the Assad family has long asserted in reality. The provision restricting the president to two seven-year terms only comes into force after the end of Bashar al-Assad's current term in 2014 and would thus permit him to remain in office until 2028.

In the meantime, the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, Turkey and most Arab states are beginning to bite, especially the European sanctions against the Syrian oil industry. The population is hit by shortages of petrol, heating oil and butane gas, while extended electricity blackouts now occur on a daily basis even in the capital. Since the beginning of the crisis the black market exchange rate of the Syrian currency has fallen by about 50 percent against the US dollar. Imported goods like wheat are running low, leading to bread shortages, and prices for local staples such as milk products are rising noticeably. But there is still no sign of the posited political effects of the sanctions. Top leaders have not changed their stance, nor has the business elite turned its back on the regime.

The Syrian opposition remains divided

into a spectrum of ideological currents and is incapable of acting unitedly. The Syrian National Council, which the Friends of the Syrian People group recognised as a legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition at its meeting on 24 February, is riven by internal tensions and only enjoys the support of part of the Syrian population. The greatest obstacle to joint action by the different opposition alliances turns out to be their differences over the question of foreign intervention, which many Syrians categorically reject. This controversy produces fundamental differences about the way forward whose resolution, in contrast to many other questions, cannot be postponed to the time after Assad.

Scenarios

After a year of increasingly violent power struggle a return to the status quo ante appears just as unrealistic as a transition negotiated between regime and opposition. The regime plainly still believes it holds a position of strength. At the same time, the entanglement of most of the power elite in corruption, violence and massive human rights violations make it virtually unthinkable that any significant section of this group would survive a system change unscathed. Thus, the implications for all higher-ranking officers and civil servants of abandoning the absolute monopoly of power militate strongly against this happening.

Four future scenarios emerge. In the **regime survival** scenario, continuing repression gradually wears down the popular uprising, with the regime surviving but largely isolated internationally and a population sinking into abject poverty because of the sanctions. Representatives of the protest movement suffer vicious repression, while whatever is left of the opposition radicalises, possibly towards Islamist extremism, and continues the struggle by means of terrorism.

Implosion. Increasing desertions, internal sectarian tensions and a lack of re-

sources cause the progressive disintegration of the armed forces. The regime resorts increasingly to paramilitary forces which operate more and more outside its control. In expectation of imminent collapse of the regime, loyalty erodes within the state apparatus and the middle layers, especially, jump ship. The inner circle finally recognises the hopelessness of its situation and chooses exile.

If that sequence of events was accompanied by a split in the armed forces and security apparatus it could easily lead to a massive escalation of armed clashes and the scenario of **full-blown civil war**. This would in all likelihood be fought along sectarian lines as most of the troops are Sunni whereas military leaders are overwhelmingly Alawi. Only the elite units commanded by the president's brother (Fourth Division and Republican Guard) are made up almost entirely of Alawites.

This escalating scenario also contains the danger of war by proxy where actors with regional ambitions (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) each lend logistical and financial support to their preferred Syrian faction. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are already pressing for military equipment to be supplied to the rebels. The conflict could also spill over to neighbouring countries, for example with tribes living along the Iraq/Syria border becoming tangled up in the fighting. Confrontations could also escalate in Lebanon between supporters of Hezbollah, which is allied with the Syrian regime, and Sunnis who mostly support the Syrian opposition. Refugee movements would have repercussions on neighbouring states, especially Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Military intervention. So far the international community has been cautious where military intervention is concerned. This is by no means only because of the negative stance of Russia and China, but stems above all from worries about becoming dragged into a long civil war and possibly a regional conflict. If, however, fighting escalates and the humanitarian crisis comes to head, the international

community will come under growing pressure to intervene militarily, even without a Security Council mandate. The justification would be to treat the situation as genocide or as an immediate threat to regional stability or to the territorial integrity of neighbouring Turkey.

Implosion currently appears the most probable of the outlined scenarios. Growing numbers of high-ranking officials are apparently leaving Syria and signs are growing that an increasing proportion of those whose support for the regime was largely rooted in fear for national stability are rethinking their position. However, the process might drag on for quite some time and the regime's behaviour to date gives grounds to fear that its response to increasing isolation will be to inflict even harsher repression and whip up communal resentments among the Alawi community. Growing numbers of Sunni Syrians already hold their Alawi compatriots collectively responsible for the crimes of the regime, while the government systematically widens the rift by sowing fear with strategically placed propaganda. If the state were to collapse there is therefore a danger of retribution that could initiate an uncontrollable spiral of sectarian violence.

Options for the International Community

Implosion would also be the preferred scenario as long as an outbreak of uncontrolled violence can be prevented. Given that such a development is best promoted by broad sections of the population, as well as civil servants and officials, coming to the conclusion that Assad's days in power are numbered, the decisive pressure point is tightening the international isolation of the Syrian regime. Alongside ramping up and strict reinforcement of existing sanctions, a change of position by Russia would send the right message. For that to happen the conflict needs to be taken out of the current Cold War mould – Moscow standing against the West – to seek solutions

jointly with Russia as well as with the Arab League.

Prevent further escalation of violence.

In order to minimise transitional violence *after* a regime collapse, a post-Assad leadership will have to assert control as quickly as possible over the security apparatus, the paramilitaries and the insurgents. In order to prepare for this, international support for the Syrian opposition should concentrate on concrete planning to enhance its capabilities for the day after Assad, including the preparation of a coordinated security strategy that also addresses questions of transitional justice.

In contrast, supplying arms to the Free Syrian Army would be highly inadvisable. Europeans should firmly oppose the clamour for such a course of action and convince their Arab partners not to go down this path. Further militarisation of the uprising would do little to change the military balance of power, but it would further increase the toll among the civilian population. Also, a growing volume and firepower of weapons in circulation would worsen the prospects of quickly stabilising the security situation after the fall of the regime.

Approaches that instrumentalise humanitarian aid and support for the opposition for the sake of geostrategic goals (for example in connection with the nuclear conflict with Iran) must be rejected out of hand. As well as undermining declared humanitarian principles, such an approach cynically sacrifices the liberty-seeking Syrian population on the altar of geopolitics.

Improve the humanitarian situation.

International organisations already assess the situation as a humanitarian crisis and are preparing to care for large numbers of refugees across the border in neighbouring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. These efforts will increasingly need international support. Europe should strongly support the efforts of UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan to exert pressure for humanitarian organisations to be granted access to the worst-affected regions and cities.

On the other hand, humanitarian organisations currently reject out of hand the idea of individual states establishing so-called humanitarian corridors or protection zones. Without a Security Council mandate this would lack legitimation and without a major military intervention with ground forces it would be impossible to impose such areas against the will of the regime. The involved states would become warring parties.

Nonetheless, there is a danger of the humanitarian situation assuming such catastrophic proportions that neighbouring states, like NATO member Turkey, and thus ultimately the alliance as a whole, would come under immense moral pressure to put an end to the killing. NATO should therefore work with Turkey, the states of the Arab League and humanitarian organisations to urgently prepare contingency plans for such an eventuality. At that point of time it will be crucial not only to have the military means ready, but also agreement about the concrete steps and strategic goals of intervention.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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