

Supporting the Syrian Summer: Dynamics of the Uprising and Considerations for International Engagement

The Syrian crisis has entered its sixth month. The uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime continues, as does the extreme violence by Syrian security forces against the protesters. To effectively support the uprising, the international community should engage with the Syrian opposition in preparation for a post-Assad polity. To that end, unity among domestic Syrian opposition and opposition members in exile should be promoted. Cautiousness in supporting projects aimed to form a Syrian "government in exile" is required; the international response needs to be based on a comprehensive picture of Syrian opposition, and as such should include both domestic opposition and activists based abroad. At this point, political discussions should not be about content (is the future Syria going to be an "Arab" republic, and what will be the position of Islam?), but about form (how is the future political system going to represent and safeguard the interests of Syria's multiple social groups?). Consensus on political guidelines for a post-Assad Syria should be established through an inclusive political dialogue, including Syria's various minority groups and Islamist movements.

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The impact of the current Syrian crisis is hard to overstate. Since the uprising started in March 2011, the Syrian regime has reacted with increasing brutality against the opposition movement that demands democratic reform and, more recently, regime change. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, approximately 2,600 Syrians had lost their lives by 12 September 2011.¹ International condemnation has steadily grown throughout the crisis, with the United States and the European Union recently demanding an end to President Bashar al-Assad's rule, stating that Assad has lost all legitimacy and should step aside.

Syrian protesters have shown great resilience, and continue to flock to the streets in the thousands. Syrians outside the country have also come out to support the uprising. Exiled politicians, activists and traders have organized an increasing amount of

conferences and councils to prepare for a post-Assad polity.

The nature and extent of the crackdown, like the reaction of Syrians both in Syria and abroad, are contingent upon particular characteristics of Syrian society, politics and historic developments. To understand the current crisis and recognize its main actors, this policy brief provides an introduction to the Syrian case, an overview of key players and an analysis of the dynamics of the uprising.² Although a transitional context calls for a number of issues to be addressed – for example, reform of the security sector and state institutions – this policy brief focuses on possibilities for a constructive engagement with the Syrian opposition. A number of considerations are provided for the international community to support the call for a democratic Syria, voiced by both domestic protesters and activists based abroad.

The Struggle for Stability

One of Syria's important features is the existence of multiple religious sects and cultural groups within its borders. Kurds in the North, a large minority of Palestinian and Armenian refugees, in addition to Christians of all denominations, all reside in Syria. Other social groups include the Druze, Sunni's, Shiite's, Alawis, Ismaelites (the latter two are officially Shiite denominations) and a few small communities of Jews. In addition, clan and family ties are strong and loyalty within these groups is important.

The current political leadership emerged after a 1967 coup, through which the socialist Ba'ath party came to power. This was followed by a 1970 coup, in which the Ba'athist Hafez al-Assad personally took charge. Coming from the relatively small Alawi community, and having fought off various sections within the army, the initial power base of Hafez al-Assad was extremely narrow. Hafez al-Assad used personal relations to bring vital security and army institutions under his direct control. This resulted in a political regime in which Alawis (especially from the President's extended family) were strongly over-represented. Despite his narrow power base, the rule of Hafez al-Assad was initially welcomed by the general population for bringing stability to the country after a democratic but increasingly unstable post-independence period.

This stability would not last. In response to increasing authoritarian tendencies and a failing economy, an opposition emerged that would grow into a full scale uprising in the late 1970s. The protests gradually became more Islamic and were increasingly aimed against the "apostate regime", with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as the main opponent. Radical Islamist fringe groups waged a sniper campaign against regime loyalists and Alawis. Because of its radical and sectarian rhetoric, which did not resonate well with other Syrian sects and social groups, the opposition became increasingly isolated from the general public.

The radicalization of the protests provided Hafez al-Assad with the opportunity to localize and effectively repress the uprisings. The Sunni elites in Damascus, for instance, pledged their allegiance to the President, not to the uprising. A few cities remained thoroughly defiant: Homs, Hama, Aleppo. In 1982, the final standoff between Islamists and the Syrian regime

took place in Hama. Between 5,000 and 20,000³ people died as the regime crushed the uprising. From then on, Assad's rule was built on fear – with Hama as a frightening example of what would happen if people attempted to defy the regime.

Defining the rules of power

After the uprising, the regime developed multiple strategies to ensure large scale protests would not recur. First, Hafez al-Assad set out to integrate more non-Alawis in the top echelons of power and create close relations to elites within all Syrian social groups. Second, a classic policy of divide-and-rule emerged, nurturing differences between various sects. Third, any form of politicized Islam was strictly forbidden; membership of the Muslim Brotherhood became punishable by death.

To this day, the regime's official line is that it provides stability to a country that would otherwise succumb to inter-sectarian chaos and radical Islamist domination. Having effectively entrenched itself in all layers of Syrian society, concurrently nurturing social divisions, the regime can claim with some credibility that inter-sectarian strife will follow its collapse. It has, thereby, become dependent on the existence of inter-sectarian tensions as a source for its survival.

The roots of the uprising

The 1980s and '90s were marked by *infitah* (economic liberalization) policies, as a response to an economic downturn and the withdrawal of support by the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Aimed at liberalizing state-led socialist economies, these policies in fact strengthened the economic position of political elites, who were able to use their positions to obtain exclusive economic deals. This put tension on state-society relations, as the state became increasingly viewed as a mechanism for institutionalized corruption.

In July 2000, Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as President of Syria. His first ten years in power have been marked by a number of crises. Shortly after his ascent, increased opposition surfaced in direct response to democratic reforms in the so-called "Damascus Spring". After effectively repressing and co-opting these opposition voices, in 2003 the Iraq war broke out, and in 2005 Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Beirut.⁴ Despite their destabilizing effect on the region, these crises seemed to prove that the combination of severe repression, nationalism and clientelism was sufficient to preserve the regime's

long-term stability. That is, until March 2011, when social discontent developed into the current crisis.

The Syrian Summer

“As-sha’ab yurid isqat an-nizam” (the people want the fall of the regime) – was what a group of youngsters wrote on a wall in the Southern town of Daraa’ on 6 March 2011. None older than 15, they were arrested and tortured by the secret services. Their families took to the streets demanding their release – and were met with bullets. More protests were the result. Via cities like Banyas, Homs and Hama, the protests spread to almost every city in Syria. The protesters initially demanded reforms, specifically within Syria’s security services, which are known to be extremely brutal. In response to the government’s deadly repression, however, the protester’s call grew into a demand for regime change.

Main actors

Throughout the six months of upheaval, various actors have arisen within the ranks of the opposition:⁵

- *Syrian youth.* These constitute the “masses” that flock to the streets and are almost exclusively male. Protest organizers are comfortable with modern communication techniques. They often do not have prior experience in politics or activism.
- *The coordination committees.* These are domestic committees that coordinate protests. They are mainly structured around cities and neighborhoods, with one national umbrella organization providing a loose unifying body. All sects and social groups are represented in these committees. Born out of a need for communication between activists, they have remained effective under the continuing, severe repression.
- *The “old guard” opposition.* Political and cultural activists that were active before the uprising. As the protest movement grew, a split has emerged between those supportive of the uprising and those pushing for reform within the existing regime. Secular opposition groups, opposed to the Islamist “old guard” opposition groups, are comparatively (very) weak.
- *The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.* This is the main Syrian Islamist political party. Members have been

exiled for almost 30 years now. Over time, their discourse has grown more democratic and they publicly favor political pluralism. Estimates of their domestic power vary widely. It is likely they will play an important role if the regime falls, as they are the only political party with both a remaining institutional structure and a clear political ideology.

- *Salafists.* Groups that wish to establish political rule by realizing an Islamic ideal. Salafi movements are well represented in Syrian society. They are supported by Syrian Salafi shaykhs living abroad (mostly in Saudi Arabia), who broadcast their sermons and ideas via satellite channels and websites. Their actual strength is hard to ascertain, but is probably not enough to overshadow other religious movements.
- *Religious scholars.* Syria has a strong religious sphere with world-renowned religious scholars who have considerable authority as religious elites in society. It is a multi-faceted group: they range from politically quiescent to active, and from liberal to conservative. It is noteworthy that the more conservative Islamic shaykhs tend to support the idea of a civil democratic state, with an “Islamic source”.⁶
- *Opposition groups abroad.* These groups comprise a variety of activists who have been exiled throughout the last decades: leftists, Kurds, liberals, ex-Ba’athists and Islamists. They are easily approachable to foreign actors. These opposition groups have become more visible during recent months. This has been mainly through a string of conferences, held in various countries, aimed at building international support for the uprising and, in some cases, creating “viable alternatives” to Assad’s rule. Though aimed at unifying the opposition, the increasing number of meetings has exposed the fragmentation among traditional opposition groups.

Dynamics of the protests

Throughout the uprising, protesters have emphasized their peaceful methods and the non-sectarian nature of their protests. Despite violent repression, the protesters explicitly reject a “Libyan option”, thus rejecting both the use of violence in protests and any foreign military intervention. The uprising of the late 1970s has convinced many that armed struggle is not

a viable strategy in Syria. It showed the imbalance of power between the regime and the protesters, and exemplified the loss of social legitimacy should the uprising turn violent.⁷ Additionally, protesters have taken great care not to fall into the “sectarian trap” that doomed the previous uprising.

Despite the protester’s attempt to maintain a unified front, a number of schisms can be observed. First, sectarian boundaries do appear in the initial protests. Mostly Kurdish and Sunni areas were the first ones to rise up; Christians and Alawis have remained largely silent - as have many young (secularized, modern and apolitical) Sunnis in the capital, Damascus.⁸ The historic allegiance of the Sunni elites in the capital to the Syrian regime seems to be holding. Islamist discourse has featured prominently in certain protests, fueling fears of an “Islamist take-over” among secular Assad supporters.

Second, there is a schism between domestic opposition and opposition abroad. Domestic activists are sometimes frustrated, wary and outright hostile to foreign initiatives that seem to act independently from the domestic uprising. Feeling outflanked, this fuels perceptions of foreign involvement. After an August meeting of exiled opposition members aimed to found a government in exile, the reaction was swift:

“The number conferences and invitations to other conferences, some of which call for the formation of a transitional council or government of Syrians in exile, has had a negative influence on the revolution. [...] We] support any genuine effort to unite the efforts of the Syrian opposition domestically and abroad. [...] But we] desire to delay any project representing the Syrian people [because of] the national interest and the Syrian revolution.”⁹

International Response

Within the Arab world, Syria is of strategic, political importance – a position that has informed and influenced Syria’s relations with its neighbors and main international powers. It can be argued that Syria’s international leverage is, in large part, derived from its involvement in ongoing crises. It is allowing regional conflicts to simmer, enabling its involvement, but preventing them from getting out of hand, as escalation would threaten to destabilize Syria itself.

Syria allowed Jihadists to travel to Iraq after 2003, but withdrew support after United States pressure mounted. It is involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through its support for Hamas, but never incites full-out war. Syria also influences Lebanese politics via Hezbollah¹⁰, but it withdrew its military from Lebanon when instability loomed. The result is that Syria is deeply involved in these drawn-out, low-intensity conflicts. Despite occasional talk of “isolating the Syrian regime” by regional and international players, Syria has remained a key regional power broker.

Given its role in regional crises, it is clear that, for many foreign powers, Syria’s stability is of great importance. A regime collapse would probably have far-reaching effects on the level of stability in the region. It is possible that Bashar al-Assad’s downfall would unleash inter-sectarian conflict amongst Syria’s social groups, which could subsequently influence crises in other multi-sectarian countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. Additionally, the collapse of Assad’s regime would end the regime’s “management” of Islamist activities in Syria; opening up space for various Islamist groups to claim their role in regional politics. For Israel, and for Western powers alike, this is an undesirable scenario.

Such strategic considerations translated into the rather cautious initial international response to the Syrian uprising. The world waited and watched, giving Bashar al-Assad a chance to impose reforms and satisfy the opposition’s demands. With the increasing brutality of the regime’s crackdown however, international outcry intensified.

Concerning policies, the international reaction to the Syrian crisis is currently aimed at isolating the Syrian regime politically and strangling it economically.¹¹ Despite initial cautiousness, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, and later Saudi Arabia went so far as to call the Assad regime “illegitimate”. For Turkey, one of Syria’s main regional allies, expressing such positions towards Syria is a clear policy reversal, encouraged by the escalation of violence against the protesters. Other nations, including Russia and China, have urged Assad to immediately stop the violence, but refuse to call for a regime change.¹² Until now, international disagreement has prevented the United Nations Security Council from adopting a resolution that condemns Bashar al-Assad’s regime as a whole.

The importance of stability in the region, and the interests of various regional powers, will probably result in attempts to create a clear image of “what comes after Assad” and to draft a road map to avoid a political vacuum. More practically, the international community might be attracted to the option of encouraging exiled Syrian activists to form a government in exile, with close contacts to domestic Syrian activists. Reportedly, some foreign actors are aiming to do exactly this. For reasons discussed below, it is questionable whether this would be a positive development.

What Happens Next?

Taking the above into consideration, we provide three possible future scenarios:

First: *Regime survival*. Mobilization of Syrian protesters subsides, and the regime is able to repress the (remaining) uprisings effectively. For this scenario to take place, the regime needs to preserve a level of legitimacy among substantial parts of society, notably among various minorities and the Syrian business elite. This, in turn, is dependent upon the inability of the protest movement to gain broad-based national support. If the movement becomes localized in specific (notably Sunni) regions, the regime will be able to repress the movement under the pretext of restoring stability to the country.

The result will be that the regime will take pains to show everything is back to “business as usual”. At the same time, the “wall of fear” will have to be recreated, to prevent collective movement from re-emerging. This reassertion of repressive order will result in continued (random) mass arrests, mostly among the Sunni population.

Second: *Regime-supervised reforms*. This entails political liberalization under the auspices of the Assad regime. Reforms would include drafting a new party law, holding free(er) and fair(er) elections than previously, and granting more press freedom. The regime could, in an attempt to defuse contention, opt for this scenario by yielding to some of the demonstrator’s demands; while retaining authority.

The result will be, as we have witnessed, announcements and the (partial) implementation of reforms – for example, lifting the emergency status. However, reforms

will likely prove meaningless on the ground. History has taught the Syrian regime that real political liberation does not come in gradation: hence the debacle of the Damascus Spring. For the Syrian regime, *talking* about reforms is safe, but the actual *implementation* of reforms is far too much of a political risk.

Third: *Regime collapse*. The protest movement is successful in destabilizing the regime to such an extent that the regime implodes. In Syria, the regime will probably fall when Assad’s powerful backers conclude that the President has become a liability, instead of a source of stability. As a result, the implicit agreement that exists between economic-political elites and the regime will fail. The prerequisite is that the uprising is broad-based, and that it becomes clear that the President has lost legitimacy among the general Syrian population.

Consequences of regime collapse¹³

With a collapse of the Assad regime, its (in)formal rules structuring state-society interactions and inter-sectarian relations, will probably implode as well. The immediate result could be mounting tensions along the various social cleavages present in Syria: between different majority and minority sects; between former supporters and opponents of the regime; and between the domestic and (re-immigrated) exiled opposition. Severe internal strife could follow a downfall of the political system.

The extent of these tensions, and the possibility of internal strife, depends on the level of consensus among various groups on a basic set of rules guiding Syria’s future politics. Establishing such a framework first could forestall discussions about content (what will a future Syria look like?). If a broad-based consensus exists on a basic set of political rules delineating how the interests of various social groups can be represented and safeguarded after a revolution, post-revolution struggles will still be severe. But these struggles would take place within a predefined political framework, thereby reducing the risk that they will turn violent. Initiating discussions on content, without a clear set of political rules in place, might result in civil strife.

Secondly, in the longer term, a new social and political landscape will emerge. The majority of exiled opposition members will return to Syria and the weakness of secular opposition will likely become apparent. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and a variety of other

(domestic) Islamist movements are likely to (re)appear. Religious scholars will have to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the political sphere; a wide range of opinions among these scholars can be expected. Concerning the Syrian youth behind the uprising today, it is unlikely that they will be able to transform into a viable political force in the future. The lack of a political program among most young protesters will probably result in a disintegration of the movement after their primary demand, regime change, has been met.

It is unlikely that the fall of the Assad regime will result in the creation of an “Iranian style Islamic state”. First, the Islamist revolutionary ideology has been severely weakened over the past decade. The large majority of Islamist activists, including conservative ones, demands the creation of a civil democratic state with an “Islamic source”.¹⁴ Second, the religious sphere is both strong and widely diverse, rendering a take-over by one religious current unlikely. Additionally, there are no signs that, in a post-Assad context, one of Syria’s other (religious) minority groups will be able to take power and possibly re-establish an authoritarian-style regime.

Considerations for Foreign Political Engagement

International engagement towards the crisis should be first and foremost demand-driven, hence, taking demands made by domestic Syrian opposition as a starting point. In practice, this could mean acceding to potential requests for sending international Human Rights observers, made by Syrian coordination committees. More generally, there are a number of priorities that should form the basis of any international policy made vis-à-vis Syria at the moment, including the following:

First, *encourage unity among domestic Syrian opposition, and Syrian opposition abroad*. Fragmentation among the traditional, and exiled, opposition has weakened the opposition's resolve and strengthens fears that a Syrian revolution will result in civil war. Domestic coordination committees, in contrast, have tried to strengthen their national umbrella organization and continue to involve domestic actors in these processes.

The international community should continue its call for a unified opposition, and encourage initiatives strengthening the domestic coordination committees.

Second, with calls for unity among Syrian opposition, there is a danger of (implicitly) requesting a viable alternative to Assad’s rule before the international pressure on the regime is maximized. The perception that international actors are encouraging the formation of a Syrian “government in exile” is creating tensions between the domestic opposition and opposition based abroad. Domestic actors feel outflanked, which is weakening the resolve of the opposition as a whole.

Foreign actors should be cautious in responding to developments that occur among Syria’s opposition abroad, without taking into account demands of the domestic opposition. The international community needs to closely monitor the situation in Syria, in order to base its response on a comprehensive picture of Syrian opposition.

Third, *preparing for a post-Assad transition period should not move beyond anything more than a basic set of (political) rules* on how the interests of Syrians, and their various social groups, are represented and safeguarded. Discussing practical political content now could incite extreme internal strife, as no proper channels exist to structure these political discussions. The current scope of political discussion should be limited to reaching consensus on a basic set of political rules for a post-Assad political arena. Political discussions at this point should not be about content (is the future Syria going to be an “Arab” republic? What will be the position of Islam?), but about form (how is the future political system going to represent and safeguard the interests of Syria’s multiple social groups?). The practical form and content of this should be decided by Syrian opposition.¹⁵

This limited scope of current political discussions should be encouraged by the international community. If the basic rules of the game have been agreed upon, post-revolution struggles will still be fierce but will stand a better chance of following set conduits. This may result in a constructive dialogue, whereas otherwise civil strife could erupt.

Fourth, *encourage an inclusive political dialogue, including Syria’s minorities and various Islamist groups*. It is clear that the political and social playing field will change considerably after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. As mentioned, religious and minority actors, of all currents and ideologies, will probably have an important position in a post-Assad era. Such a political dialogue would however also mean involving Syria’s

non-oppositional social groups, including Alawis and Sunni elites.

The international community should focus on creating an inclusive dialogue with, and encourage an inclusive dialogue between, all stakeholders in the Syrian uprising. It is important, for future dialogue and influence on Syria, to maintain contacts now and encourage engagement with the widest possible set of actors – and to exclude none.

Conclusion

Inevitably, a post-revolutionary situation will bring uncertainty – not just for Syrians themselves, but also for the international community. This apprehension has translated into a certain level of cautiousness in foreign policy. This policy brief argues that effective policy vis-à-vis the Syrian uprising does not have to be guided by a clear vision of what should “come next” and who should lead a possible transition. Rather, international engagement should be aimed at creating consensus on political guidelines for a post-Assad Syria, and a context in which a stable and peaceful Syria can emerge.

Recommended Reading

- Dam, Nikolaos van. 2011. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party*. Revised and Updated. I. B. Tauris, June 15.
- International Crisis Group. 2011. *Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-motion Suicide*. July 13.
- Macleod, Hugh. 2011. “Inside Deraa.” *al-Jazeera*, April 19.
- Perthes, Volker. 2004. *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*. Routledge.
- Seale. 1988. *Asad: the Struggle for the Middle East*. University of California Press.

- ¹ “UN Human Rights Council appoints experts to probe Syrian violence”, United Nations News Centre, 12 September 2011
- ² This policy brief is based, apart from written sources, on interviews with Syrian activists, both longtime exiles and recent refugees, in Jordan and Turkey.
- ³ These figures represent an estimate, as it is not possible to determine the exact number of casualties. Estimates are based on various media and Human Rights reports.
- ⁴ Rafiq Hariri was a Lebanese politician and former Prime Minister, who was assassinated in 2005. Suspected Syrian involvement in the attack incited large protests against the Syrian presence in Lebanon and a subsequent retreat of Syrian military forces from Lebanese territory. Rafiq Hariri had close ties with the Syrians, but in the years before his death had become increasingly critical towards his former Syrian patrons. The investigation into Syrian involvement in Hariri’s assassination by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is currently ongoing.
- ⁵ This list is incomplete. Other actors who play a role, but are not strictly relevant in the framework of this policy brief, are the Kurds, Syrian tribes, and other minority groups (Christians, Shiites, Ismaelis, etc.).
- ⁶ What this “Islamic source” actually is, or – practically – what the influence of Islam will be in a future Syria, both remain undefined, and will be one of the topics of future political debates.
- ⁷ In the context of severe repression, the non-violent nature of the protests does not come naturally. Along with the thousand of civilian casualties are also hundreds of soldiers. Many of these soldiers have died in clashes with defecting soldiers, but stories abound of civilians taking up arms in the face of heavy-handed repression. The local coordination committees have always opposed this option. To their credit, it seems that the use of arms by protesters is (still) very limited.
- ⁸ Though sectarian differences influence the make-up of the protests, they do not define them completely – as the recent uprising in Latakia, a strongly multi-sectarian coastal city, showed.
- ⁹ As cited by *all4syria.com*, a Syrian opposition website. Translated from Arabic by the authors.
- ¹⁰ Hezbollah benefits from the alliance between Syria and Iran. The organization is supplied by Iran through Syria. In return, Syria receives technical support and military back-up from Iran.
- ¹¹ This policy brief does not focus on economic measures against the Syrian regime, nor will it discuss the consequences of intensifying economic sanctions against Syria. It should be noted, however, that at the time of writing, economic sanctions are the most viable tool in the hands of the international community to exert pressure on Syria’s regime.
- ¹² Russia has an intensive military cooperation with Syria, whilst China has a close economic relationship with the Assad regime.
- ¹³ We elaborate here mostly on the consequences of the third scenario sketched above (the fall of the Assad regime) as it would necessitate the most extensive policy reassessment by the international community.
- ¹⁴ One possibility is that a parliamentary system will be introduced (out of fear of an authoritarian president), which frees the religious sphere from (financial and political) state involvement.
- ¹⁵ Discussions could for instance focus on the introduction of a parliamentary bicameral system, with a general congress (majority rule) in addition to a senate (with sectarian, tribal, and Kurdish representation) with some level of veto power.

ABOUT ...

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The Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’ is a training and research organization on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team, focusing on conflict-related issues in developing countries.

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