

Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics

I. OVERVIEW

The Syrian crisis may or may not have entered its final phase, but it undoubtedly has entered its most dangerous one to date. The current stage is defined by an explosive mix of heightened strategic stakes tying into a regional and wider international competition on the one hand and emotionally charged attitudes, communal polarisation and political wishful thinking on the other. As dynamics in both Syria and the broader international arena turn squarely against the regime, reactions are ranging from hysterical defiance on the part of its supporters, optimism among protesters that a bloody stalemate finally might end and fears of sectarian retribution or even civil war shared by many, through to triumphalism among those who view the crisis as an historic opportunity to decisively tilt the regional balance of power.

Yet, almost entirely missing is a sober assessment of the challenges provoked by these shifts and the very real risk that they could derail or even foreclose the possibility of a successful transition. In particular, five issues likely to shape events have been absent from the public debate:

- ❑ the fate of the Alawite community;
- ❑ the connection between Syria and Lebanon;
- ❑ the nature and implications of heightened international involvement;
- ❑ the long-term impact of the protest movement's growing militarisation; and
- ❑ the legacy of creeping social, economic and institutional decay.

Many in Syria and abroad are now banking on the regime's imminent collapse and wagering that all then will be for the better. That is a luxury and an optimism they cannot afford. Instead, it is high time to squarely confront and address the difficulties before it is too late. In the "draft political program" it released on 20 November, the Syrian National Council – an opposition umbrella group – presented the image of an entirely peaceful movement enduring savage repression. The regime and its allies regularly describe the crisis solely as the local manifestation of a vicious regional and international struggle. The two black-

and-white narratives are in every way contradictory and mutually exclusive. Both miss a central point: that successful management of this increasingly internationalised crisis depends on a clear-eyed understanding of the grey zone that lies between.

This briefing analyses and in its Conclusion presents recommendations for handling the pivotal issues.

II. A DEEPENING CRISIS

The situation faced by the regime hardly could be more dire. It is more isolated than ever: the Arab League has forged a remarkable consensus against it; support from Arab public opinion has reached an all-time low; the Syrian National Council rapidly is gaining recognition internationally; and a UN General Assembly resolution registering disapproval garnered 122 votes on 22 November. At home, the so-called Free Syrian Army, which purportedly is drawing more and more military defectors to its side, has been claiming increasingly effective attacks against the security services.

From the outset, the regime strove to deny the existence of a deep-seated popular protest movement, choosing instead to reduce the crisis to actions of foreign-backed armed gangs. Paradoxically, now that it faces an emerging insurgency coupled with a broad international coalition bent on its demise, it appears wholly unprepared to cope with the very enemy it initially fantasised and which its short-sighted behaviour largely helped bring to life.

For over eight months, the regime was so obsessed with the desire to contain, defame and quash peaceful demonstrations that it let just about everything else go to waste. It failed to develop any discernible economic strategy to enable it to carry out a sustained struggle; instead, it steadily drew down its reserves, alienated the business establishment and exposed ordinary citizens to worsening hardships. Remarkably, it did nothing to prepare itself for highly predictable sanctions on oil and gas. Electricity cuts have become endemic, even in central Damascus; there are shortages of heating oil and cooking gas; and the price of basic foodstuffs is rising dangerously. The regime invested the bulk of its efforts toward shoring up the Syrian pound, but

as the political crisis deepens, those too sooner or later will prove inadequate, precipitating a much deeper economic crisis.

Politically, the regime made only half-hearted and belated attempts to consolidate its support base. Beyond evoking a nebulous “model democracy” in-the-making, announcing legislative initiatives that were never implemented and undertaking a drawn-out constitutional revision process seemingly designed above all to gain time, President Bashar Assad signally failed to suggest a credible way forward. Instead, the official narrative became locked into the mantra that only a handful of decisive military operations against residual terrorist pockets stood between the crisis and its resolution, all the while denying that peaceful demonstrations were being repressed. This focus on a “security solution” dissipated much of the popular backing the regime initially enjoyed, both at home and throughout the region. Lastly, and perhaps most surprisingly for a regime renowned for its shrewd diplomacy, it created the conditions for its unprecedented international isolation.

Assad has registered only two achievements, albeit highly ambivalent ones. First, the regime in effect took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically, not least in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services which, far from being a privileged, praetorian elite corps, are predominantly composed of underpaid and overworked Alawites hailing from villages the regime has left in a state of abject underdevelopment. As unrest began, the regime staged sectarian incidents in confessionally-mixed areas as a means of bringing to the surface deeply-ingrained feelings of insecurity among Alawites who, in centuries past, had been socially marginalised, economically exploited and targets of religious discrimination. To stoke fear, authorities distributed weapons and bags of sand – designed to erect fortifications – to Alawites living in rural areas long before any objective threat existed; security services and official media spread blood-curdling, often exaggerated and sometimes wholly imaginary stories of the protesters’ alleged sectarian barbarism.

With time, the Alawites’ conspicuous role in putting down protests, disseminating propaganda and staging pro-regime demonstrations transformed anti-Alawite feelings – initially latent and largely repressed – into a perilous reality. The regime’s behaviour conformed to the worst anti-Alawite stereotypes. It revived age-old prejudices about the community’s “savagery”. It exacerbated historic grievances regarding ownership of land, which in some parts of the country had been transferred from Sunni feudal elites to Alawite serfs during the agrarian reform that began in the 1950s. It intensified resentment over the inequitable use of state institutions, which have been a key source of employment for Alawites and, over time, have become an in-

strument with which to plunder the public while serving the ruling family’s interests.

As repression escalated in recent months, many Syrians have shifted from blaming elements of the regime, to blaming the regime as a whole and, finally, to blaming the Alawite community itself. As a result, many Alawites are now in a state of panic, leading them to embrace a regime for which most, at the start of the crisis, evinced little sympathy. Sharing analogous fears born of their minority status, large swathes of the Christian community appear to be following a similar path.

The regime’s second ambiguous success was in compartmentalising its territory. Denied both mobility and control of any symbolically decisive space (notably in the capital, Damascus, and the biggest city, Aleppo), the protest movement failed to reach the critical mass necessary to establish, once and for all, that Assad has lost his legitimacy. Instead, demonstrators doggedly resisted escalating violence on the part of the security services and their civilian proxies in an ever-growing number of hotspots segregated from one another by numerous checkpoints. Within each of these separate locations, security forces turned their firepower against uncomfortably large gatherings, stalked local leadership figures, seized tools used to communicate with the outside world and resorted to collective punishment – in some instances carrying out such gruesome scare tactics as returning victims’ desecrated bodies to their families.

However, the regime has been able to ensure such territorial control largely because the protest movement remained essentially peaceful. This allowed it to rely on numerous but lightly armed security forces and proxies, drawing on military combat troops solely for secondary missions (such as manning checkpoints) or in response to the relatively rare instances when it met organised armed resistance. This was for a reason. Over the years, the regime built up the instruments of a police state while distrusting the army – large but poorly trained, ill-equipped and lacking *esprit de corps*. To minimise the risk of a military coup, Assad made sure the army stayed both weak and divided. The net result is that – save for a few praetorian units – it cannot be depended upon as an instrument of repression.

There are signs the regime’s formula no longer is working. Its failure to shore up its legitimacy coupled with the gap between its narrative (in which the state fights to restore law and order in the face of terrorist attacks) and everyday reality (in which security forces make no distinction between peaceful protesters and armed groups) has produced a growing number of military defectors. Civilians, hungry for protection and eager for revenge, are ever more willing to welcome, support and shelter them, making it virtually impossible for security services to root them out. In short, their brutality has provoked an incipient armed

reaction the security services and proxy forces are not in a position to address. Increasingly exposed, they need the help of combat troops who have not been prepared for the task, feel gradually more alienated from the regime's apparatus of repression and increasingly are drawn toward the protesters. The immediate consequence is that security forces progressively are losing ground in various parts of the country where they can do little more than engage in hit-and-run operations.

By the time its lengthening list of foes was able to begin to move in unison, the regime had squandered virtually every chance to consolidate its domestic front, brought the economy to near breaking point, pushed its own military to defect in small but ever-increasing numbers and lost almost all sympathy from the broader Arab street, whose support historically had been a key source of legitimacy.

III. CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

In several respects, Syria's society is far better prepared for change than at the outset of the uprising. The regime's divide-and-rule tactics have kept most Alawites, many Christians, as well as some Druze and Sunnis on its side, but simultaneously given rise to an unprecedented sense of awareness, solidarity and responsibility among large segments of the population. After decades of suppression, civil society has emerged as a surprisingly enterprising and energised actor, providing support to those targeted by the regime and often bridging communal and geographic divides. Over time, social divisions also gradually have receded. Members of the business community have extended material assistance to protesters, and some within the middle classes belatedly have thrown in their lot with what initially had been a disproportionately working-class, proletarian uprising.

A long-apatetic youth has become politicised and is now actively engaged in the struggle, seeking to push back against some of the more thuggish and sectarian trends among protesters. The latter, through their coordination efforts, have produced incipient, discreet yet increasingly effective local leadership. Through the string of defections, the army itself may be generating the skeleton of a future, more cohesive apparatus.

Finally, a relatively positive relationship has developed between Syrians living in the country and the diaspora. Overseas Syrians have been mobilised, providing considerable logistical support to the protest movement; they have given rise to an opposition in exile that has acquired real, if fragile credibility both on the ground and internationally. They also possess significant resources that could prove crucial to a political transition.

But that is only the brightest part of a canvas of shadows. Prospects for a successful transition are clouded by five critical issues that largely have been left unaddressed.

A. THE ALAWITE QUESTION

Rather than abruptly fall, the regime could well endure for a considerable time even as it continues to both erode and mutate, spawning die-hard, nihilist militias. In several recent interviews, Assad essentially pledged to go down fighting. He will not do so alone. Military defections aside, and notwithstanding significant discontent within the security services and the power structure itself, the regime retains considerable manpower. That support base is being radicalised even as it narrows. It is being reorganised around a hard-core composed of ruling family members and loyalists whose determination to fight has only heightened as their involvement in months of gruesome repression has grown, diminishing chances of a palace coup. The most extreme elements among the regime's civilian proxies – disparagingly referred to as *shabbiha* – reportedly have been creating their own battalions, whose fanaticism instils fear in less committed troops.¹

More generally, many regime supporters are terrified about their future and thus liable to resist till the bitter end. A majority of Alawite officials, security officers and ordinary citizens, along with segments of the Christian community and some secularists, have become convinced that their fate is either to kill or be killed.

Alawites at least are not entirely mistaken. Although the regime has been infinitely more sectarian than the protest movement, and although it clearly bears responsibility for exacerbating and exploiting sectarian feelings, reality gradually has been catching up with fiction. There is every reason to fear that, regardless of how the situation unfolds, Alawite villages whose residents have been most actively involved in repressing demonstrators – such as Rabi'a on the outskirts of Hama and Qabu in the hills overlooking Homs – could well witness large-scale retribution.

Many other Alawite villages have sought to keep their distance from the confrontation, either because they are located far from confessional fault lines or because they have retained a rural identity largely independent from the regime. But even they will not be immune from strife,

¹ The word *shabbiha* is a reference to an essentially unrelated phenomenon, namely criminal gangs with ties to the ruling family that terrorised people on the Syrian coast and drove around in a kind of Mercedes dubbed *shabah* (ghost). They were rooted out by the regime in the 1980s, but the expression stuck, in a very liberal acceptance, to describe a wide array of behaviours seen either as supportive of the regime or as an expression of its deeper-self.

for these are the home villages of the urbanised Alawites who are being radicalised by events and feel almost entirely beholden to Assad – virtually incapable of imagining a future without him. Were the regime to lose control of the capital, these diehard loyalists could well retreat to their villages in order to defend the wives, children and elderly whom they long ago dispatched to the countryside for protection. Should they choose to make a last stand in defence of their strongholds, any distinction between regime stalwarts and ordinary Alawites could well be erased. As witnessed in Libya, attempts to eradicate the last pockets of loyalists could trigger civilian massacres.

Some entertain the hope that Assad will be killed and that this would prompt the rapid collapse of what remains of the power structure, paving the way for a smooth transition. There is little chance of such a scenario and high probability that his death would produce the opposite effect. By now, given the extent to which Alawites have come to equate their fate with his, they likely would see in it a harbinger of their own.

B. THE QUESTION OF LEBANON

The connection between what happens in Syria and Lebanon seldom has been so stark and so perilous. Over the past several months, the Lebanese political scene has been eerily quiet even as it remained deeply polarised. Hizbollah, the Shiite resistance movement, has offered the Assad regime all-out political support. Al-Manar, its television station, readily embraced the official narrative of a foreign-sponsored, Sunni-Islamist insurgency; its secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, in effect labelled any Syrian who expressed dissatisfaction with Assad's meagre package of reforms an Israel supporter and enemy. For Hizbollah, the core issue remains the regional balance of power and the struggle against Israel; for its Shiite rank-and-file, sectarian anxiety looms large: should Sunnis dominate a new Syrian regime, they fear being caught between it and Lebanon's own Sunni community.

Paradoxically, many Lebanese Sunnis share their Shiite counterparts' sectarian interpretation, viewing their coreligionists eventual victory in Damascus as both historical revenge and an opportunity to shift the local and regional balance of power at Hizbollah's expense. Still, despite occasional pro- and anti-regime demonstrations, as well as the periodic arrest or disappearance of Syrian dissident activists, the country appeared suspended in time, pending clarification of where the crisis next door was heading.

This has begun to change. The increasingly evident weakness of the Syrian regime has altered domestic calculations. Even as it struggled to find home-grown spokespersons willing to defend it on Arabic satellite television channels, the regime could count on an army of Lebanese volunteers

to fill the vacuum. Echoing Assad's apocalyptic vow to destabilise the entire region rather than step down, Hizbollah and its Lebanese partners are now issuing the most alarmist pronouncements on the Syrian president's behalf. Solidarity with an embattled ally is not their sole motivation. They also are driven by the strongly-held conviction that events in Syria are part and parcel of a broader international conspiracy to deal a decisive blow against what they consider the axis of resistance to Israeli and U.S. domination of the Middle East.

They have grounds to be worried. International pressure for the regime's demise is not simply a matter of humanitarian concern at mounting loss of life. In more than one country – notably the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia – toppling Assad is seen as a critical step toward crippling Hizbollah and isolating Iran. Escalating pressure on Tehran – manifested by growing talk of a possible Israeli strike against its nuclear facilities – coupled with intensifying efforts to ensure Beirut continues to fund the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (which has accused Hizbollah of involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri), further fuels belief that popular protests in Syria have morphed into an existential tug-of-war over the region's fate.

Nor has Hizbollah helped its case. By offering blind support to the Syrian regime while championing the largely Shiite uprising in Bahrain, it has come across as deeply sectarian and squandered much of the sympathy it once enjoyed among Arab public opinion. And, by placing the practical exigencies of resistance over its purported ethical foundations, it has forfeited its moral standing.

This presents significant threats both to Syria and Lebanon. It could push Hizbollah to step up its assistance to its Syrian ally in concrete ways. Now that failure of the recent Arab League initiative appears to have closed the door on a negotiated solution, and now that Turkey has hinted it could establish a buffer zone on Syrian soil and implicitly recognised the legitimacy of armed struggle against the regime, Hizbollah could conclude that the conflict's patently international character justifies its own direct involvement on the ground. This would mark a sea change; periodic accusations to the contrary notwithstanding, to date no hard evidence has surfaced of the Shiite movement's military role in suppressing the uprising.

Likewise, should the situation reach the point where Assad's ouster appears imminent, Hizbollah potentially could be drawn to launch attacks against Israel in an attempt to radically alter the focus of attention. At this point, there is little indication the movement will take this course, which would present major risks for the Shiite movement. Its motivations would be transparent, and it would subject itself to massive Israeli retaliation at a time when it no longer could safely bank on physical protection and mili-

tary resupply from Syria. By the same token, Iran might prefer to keep Hizbollah's powder dry in anticipation of – and in order to deter – a possible Israeli strike. Still, the more Hizbollah and Tehran perceive the Syrian crisis as an existential struggle designed to deal them a decisive blow, the greater the risk that they would choose to go for broke. At a minimum, it is a prospect not to be entirely discounted.

Nor would Lebanon itself necessarily be unscathed. If and when the Syrian regime collapses, anything Hizbollah views as an effort to undermine its position could reignite a bloody domestic conflict. For now, Lebanon's emboldened Sunnis have shown no appetite for military confrontation with their nemesis. Rather than arming themselves, they are investing their hopes in the Syrian protest movement and opposition to whom they reportedly have been extending logistical and material assistance. The Shiite movement undoubtedly would be weakened by the loss of its ally, but nonetheless would remain by far the most powerful Lebanese actor, with strong popular support among Shiites and Christians and an unmatched military arsenal.

For Hizbollah's opponents to use this opportunity to press their advantage would be to play with fire. All would likely lose – the Lebanese people, of course, but also Syria's own transition, which inevitably would be disrupted by a violent crisis at its border. In short, given the current balance of power and the Sunnis' realistic reluctance to turn to a military option, the odds of this scenario remain low. But circumstances and calculations could change. The Syrian crisis might serve as a turning point, leading outside actors to step up their efforts on behalf of their Lebanese Sunni allies.

C. THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONALISATION

For protesters relentlessly subjected to harsh repression, the shift toward greater international involvement almost certainly comes as welcome news. Support within Syria for such intervention has grown, a development all the more remarkable given its people's legendary suspicion of outside meddling. It also is a development that speaks volumes – not about the breadth of the purported foreign conspiracy, as the regime and its allies would have it, but rather about the depth of the people's despair. Yet, a short-term remedy for their suffering could spell long-term trouble and complicate a political transition. Among Arab nations that have experienced popular uprisings, Syria arguably is the most vulnerable to disruptive foreign involvement, a reflection of its long conflict with Israel; intense security ties to Iran and Hizbollah; frail institutions; complex ethnic and confessional makeup; and deep interconnection with Arab neighbours, Turkey and the Gulf states, where many of its citizens have found work and been exposed to militant forms

of Islamism that are unlikely to sit well with their nation's pluralistic society.

It is not difficult to imagine where all this could be headed in the context of a transition. The U.S. and Israel likely would seek to shape Syria's foreign policy. Turkey would strive to contain Kurdish autonomist aspirations and could choose to promote the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia might back Salafi-inspired currents. Iran, but also Iraq, would want to thwart emergence of a Sunni-dominated polity and could be tempted to play the Alawite card; Tehran in particular might sponsor remnants of the former security services. The more Syria is exposed to external interference before the transition takes place, the more likely that it will become an arena for foreign intrusion after it has occurred. In short, the challenge is less to draw in outside actors than to keep them at bay.

At this point, the trend toward internationalisation may well be impossible to stop. The regime wasted months during which the outside world essentially remained passive; rather than acknowledge, let alone address its domestic crisis, it chose instead to shift the focus to an imaginary international conspiracy. Today, it faces both a deepening internal crisis and escalating foreign intervention. But for the international community to up the level of such intervention, and in particular for it to resort to military means of any kind, would provide the regime's allies with the necessary justification to step up their own involvement. The outcome could well be a catastrophic escalation for which none of the regime's foes appears prepared and that would both distract from the protest movement's goals and diminish its chances of success.

D. THE OPPOSITION'S MILITARISATION

The security services and their proxies are subjected to ever-increasing attacks, in particular targeting their means of transportation. As a result, regime forces run the risk of progressively losing their mobility as well as control over portions of the country, thus forcing them to retreat. By now, there no longer is a permanent loyalist military presence in parts of Idlib, Hama and Homs governorates, a situation that enables the armed opposition to further regroup and organise. The governorates of Dayr Zor and Deraa appear on the verge of following a similar path. As defections mount and the army is under ever greater stress, there is reason to doubt that the regime can muster sufficient military resources to reverse the trend. Talk about creating safe-havens on the Turkish and Jordanian borders could soon be moot; in many ways, Syrians appear on their way to doing that on their own.

But what is emerging in those areas free of regime control? For now, both the Syrian opposition and much of the mainstream international media paint a reassuring picture:

an army of devoted patriots backed by civilians in need of self-defence gradually is asserting itself wherever regime forces retreat. There is truth to the narrative. But there also is a more disquieting underside, as evidence mounts of spreading chaos, sectarian retribution and criminal activity, notably in central Syria. In the ensuing vacuum, fundamentalist fighters and proxies reporting directly to foreign parties may join the fray. In self-serving fashion, the regime long has claimed that such forms of violence were the crux of the matter, when in reality they were at most a sideshow. That does not mean one ought to dismiss the possibility that they could assume a more central role as the conflict pivots from one pitting a ruthless police state against a predominantly peaceful movement to a far more fragmented confrontation in which all sides wield arms.

The Free Syrian Army itself is more a wild card than a known entity. Does it serve as an umbrella for essentially self-directed armed groups that could morph into disorderly militias? Or is it integrating defectors into a hierarchical, disciplined structure? In the latter case, will its leadership agree to political oversight, for instance by the National Council, or will it endeavour to steer its own course and act autonomously in the aftermath of the regime's fall? Will it stand for national unity or fall prey to sectarian polarisation? Can it refrain from mimicking the murderous behaviour of the regime against which it is fighting but from which it springs? The Free Army's posting of forced confessions by captured security officers – who, in at least one instance, showed obvious signs of torture – stands as a first, cautionary tale.

E. THE STATE'S DECAY

The regime endlessly claims to represent and defend the "state", defined as the embodiment of national unity, guarantor of law and order and ultimate source of legitimacy. In reality, it has done nothing of the sort. Instead, it has manipulated social fault lines and used divisive tactics to frighten Syrians into accepting its rule as a lesser evil. It has endangered the Alawite community for the sake of holding on to its power; sought to play minorities off against the Sunni Arab majority; unleashed its security forces against unarmed protesters and covered up for their sectarian behaviour; and hired criminals to do its dirty work, while turning a blind eye to the criminalisation of its own regular forces – elements of which have resorted to theft, kidnapping and weapons smuggling. High-level corruption, malfeasance and incompetence occur with impunity whenever the ruling family's interests are involved. All in all, the regime has encouraged – if not rewarded – the most destructive forms of social behaviour.

The impact of this deliberate corrosion of state and social institutions – which were weak to begin with – could prove devastating. By now deeply entrenched, mutual mistrust

and resentment have come to define relations between members of opposing camps. In schools and universities, tensions frequently reach boiling point, provoking clashes, at times encouraged by the regime itself. Communal instincts and, in certain instances, genuine threats, are inducing citizens to resettle in like-minded areas, producing a worrying pattern of sectarian segregation. In a country long known for its safety, some areas are witnessing rampant criminality. The regime's extensive use of civilian proxies almost certainly will further fuel this development.

A major economic crisis also is looming, with ruinous consequences for the future. The regime almost certainly will empty state coffers in order to hold on to power as long as possible. Meanwhile, international sanctions are bringing business to a virtual standstill, generating growing unemployment. As the price of imports rises and local production is disrupted, Syrians find it harder to obtain commodities, including medicine and milk powder. As businessmen and citizens scramble to protect their assets, banks are being weakened. Sanctions, however narrowly focused, inexorably contribute to a vast economic downturn. Even assuming a quick resolution of the political crisis, a socio-economic one almost certainly will take centre stage.

The Syrian National Council's draft political program appears premised on the notion that, when the regime ultimately falls, the opposition will inherit a functioning state capable of holding the country together while a democratic political process unfolds. That view is far too rosy. Syrians might well display remarkable patience and restraint during the trying transitional period, but the challenges they will face likely will be far more daunting than those encountered by Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans before them. Wishful thinking is a poor substitute for forward thinking.

IV. CONCLUSION

That the current crisis and future transition present enormous risks is not a reason to defend a regime that offers no solution and whose sole strategy appears to be to create greater hazards still. Optimally, this would be the time for third-party mediation leading to a negotiated transition. Yet, there is little sign of that either. The recent Arab League initiative rightly insisted that the regime end its attacks against peaceful protesters. But popular demonstrations are precisely what the regime fears most, making such an undertaking virtually unthinkable. The League has demanded – and the regime in principle accepted – the dispatch of foreign observers. But the authorities have far more to hide than to put on display; they will acquiesce only to the extent outsiders corroborate the existence of armed groups and only insofar as they are prevented from

documenting security forces' crimes. The regime also has pledged to hold municipal elections and reform the constitution, but neither step comes close to matching the depth of the crisis.

Even rhetorically, the regime is not suggesting willingness to compromise. Al-Dunia, its semi-official television station, is more belligerent than ever. In his latest interview, Assad flatly denied that civilians had been shot by the security services; by his count, the sum total of 619 victims comprised protesters accidentally killed in cross-fire with armed gangs; individuals targeted by sectarian attacks; and loyalists. Meanwhile, conservative estimates put the number of fatalities at 3,500 (excluding members of the security services and army), most as a result of regime violence.

The choice offered by the regime appears clear-cut: preservation of Assad's rule or collective destruction. In this nihilistic view, citizens are admonished to rally around the old socio-political pact, while the international community is expected to retreat out of fear of the chaos that might otherwise ensue. As its supporters abroad – and notably Hizbollah – see it, the regional struggle must trump all else; protesters are either witting or unwitting foreign agents who have brought the current devastation upon themselves. Such narratives almost by definition rule out the possibility of a workable compromise.

Under the circumstances, the international community should neither surrender to the regime's cynical blackmail nor respond to Damascus's brinkmanship with injudiciousness or imprudence of its own. Rather than head straight toward direct confrontation, it ought to carefully weigh its options.

Negotiations. However unlikely they are to succeed, mediation efforts ought to be encouraged in principle, and none should be automatically dismissed. The focus should remain for now on the Arab League initiative, the most promising proposal currently on the table. For international actors or the opposition to rule out dialogue or negotiations with the regime would be to validate its argument that nothing short of its immediate fall will be deemed satisfactory. At the same time, Damascus should not be given an opportunity to gain time, nor should it be offered concessions in the absence of tangible signs that it is acting in good faith. Should the regime present a genuine, detailed proposal backed by immediate, concrete steps on the ground – again, an implausible scenario – mediated talks with the opposition should swiftly begin.

Military action. Threat of military action in any form – including imposition of a “no-fly-zone” or establishment of foreign-backed buffer zones in Syrian territory – is naive, counterproductive and irresponsible. It would not deter a regime that, more than ever, appears indifferent to pres-

sure; it would provide cover for its allies to intensify their own support; and it would not meaningfully alter the situation on the ground insofar as defectors already enjoy greater freedom of manoeuvre in central and northern Syria.

Economic sanctions. There is little doubt that the sanctions are having a significant economic impact, but it remains unclear whether they are having a political one – and whether whatever political benefits might accrue outweigh the inevitable socio-economic costs. For now, no further sanctions should be considered without first assessing both the immediate implications of those already in place and the longer-term burden they would impose on Syria's economic and social recovery. At the same time, Syria's opposition and the international community should begin planning on how to rebuild the economy in the context of a transition.

Regional implications. The international community ought to realise the dangers of overreach – and in particular the dangers posed by cornering Hizbollah and heightening pressure on Iran (notably by raising the spectre of a military attack against its nuclear facilities) at a time when both fear the loss of a critical ally. The greatest risk arguably lies in Lebanon, where an effort ought to be made by all sides to defuse confessional tensions and regional actors should avoid meddling. Diplomacy in Lebanon traditionally kicks in only after simmering hostilities break into the open. Such a reactive approach would be too costly now given the stakes; instead, an urgent effort is needed to reassure rival parties and thus seek to insulate Lebanon from its neighbour's conflict to the extent possible.

UN resolution. There is every indication that the regime remains sensitive to its growing isolation. Its acceptance (however perfunctory) of the Arab League initiative came about only as a result of Russian and Chinese pressure and fear it would lose their support. But its back-peddling on the Arab League initiative just days later may have helped erode Russian and Chinese support: both abstained on the UN General Assembly Resolution. That resolution, which condemned the violence, obtained wide support, garnering 122 votes in favour, thirteen against and 41 abstentions; notably, six Arab countries co-sponsored the resolution, and none voted against it. Passage of a Security Council resolution demanding a cessation of violence and the immediate deployment of monitors on the ground would be an important next step, albeit a difficult one.

Accountability. The international community ought to lay down clear markers to the regime but also to its opponents (notably if and when they come to power) that all who engage in human rights violations, and notably war crimes and crimes against humanity will be held accountable, including, if necessary, before the International Criminal Court.

Protection. Ironically, and however difficult it may be to admit, the Alawite community ultimately might need the kind of protection the protest movement long has strived to obtain for itself. As seen, risks of massacres in the early stages of a transition are very real; should they occur, chances of success could be fatally imperilled. It is not too soon for the opposition to address these fears head on; it might consider possible mechanisms – for example coordinating the swift dispatch, once the regime falls, of observers from local and perhaps international human rights organisations – to minimise this risk.

Fate of regime officials. Assuming the regime is overthrown, every effort should be made by the Syrian opposition and international community to treat its leadership with the fairness it denied its own people – they should be detained, protected and tried. A repeat of Gaddafi's macabre killing would only further inflame sectarian passions in a country where they represent the greatest threat to any potential transition.

Damascus/Brussels, 24 November 2011

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SYRIA



APPENDIX B

CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE 2008

Arab-Israeli Conflict

Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas, Middle East Report N°73, 19 March 2008 (also available in Arabic).

Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward, Middle East Briefing N°23, 15 May 2008 (also available in Arabic).

The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role, Middle East Report N°78, 15 July 2008 (also available in French).

Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?, Middle East Report N°79, 17 July 2008 (also available in Arabic).

Round Two in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°24, 11 September 2008 (also available in Arabic).

Palestine Divided, Middle East Briefing N°25, 17 December 2008 (also available in Arabic).

Ending the War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°26, 5 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience, Middle East Briefing N°27, 15 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and French).

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