

NOREF Policy Brief

The “dark side” of the Syrian transition and its potentially dire regional consequences

Philippe Droz-Vincent

Executive summary

Quite differently from the Egyptian and Tunisian social mobilisations against authoritarian rule, the Syrian uprising is of a more protracted nature. In this uprising peaceful and unarmed societal mobilisations have been followed by increased militarisation, leading to a situation in early 2012 of a painful stalemate that is veering towards civil war.

Quite differently from the Libyan case, which was covered by UN Security Council Resolution 1973, international actors do not hold the decisive key to the Syrian case on their own (because of the Chinese and Russian postures) and therefore cannot give the final push needed to bring down the Assad regime. With international intervention in disarray, the conflict endures in a stalemate between an opposition that remains mobilised and a regime that

keeps using repression in a context of the proliferation of armed groups on the ground not controlled by a political umbrella (as the opposition remains weak and divided) and an increase in confessional fears and incidents.

Hence, the region is playing an increasing role, but with multidirectional interventions/backing playing out without a unified Syrian opposition or a viable alternative to the regime, regional actors risk worsening the internal dangers of a protracted conflict in Syria. All hopes in April 2012 rest on the Annan mission trying to square the circle of external intervention to sort out the conflict without antagonising Russian (and Chinese) interests, with a first step based on a ceasefire. In the meantime, “the state of barbarity” (Michel Seurat) continues.

Philippe Droz-Vincent is an assistant professor of political science in international relations and comparative politics; he is the author of *The Middle East: Authoritarian Regimes and Stalled Societies* (in French, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004) and numerous articles, among them, “Authoritarianism, revolutions, armies and Arab regime transitions” (*The International Spectator*, vol 46, no. 2, June 2011) and “A return of armies to the forefront of Arab politics?” (Working Paper 11/21, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, July 2011).

The Syrian uprising began in ways similar to that of other Arab countries with the crucial role of societal mobilisations in public spaces against authoritarian rule, energised by an imitation/domino effect across the Arab world with the role of satellite TV (initially Al-Jazeera) and new information and communication technologies. But, quite differently from the short Tunisian and Egyptian movements (respectively, 11 and 18 days), the Syrian uprising has endured for more than a year, with the situation remaining completely inconclusive at the time of writing. It has given way to a mutually hurting stalemate between, on the one hand, the opposition, which remains mobilised and whose essential constituencies on the ground do not want to give up because they know that they have seized a chance to change their future in ways that will not be replicated later if they give up now, and, on the other hand, the regime, which remains resilient in its repressive capabilities.

Two trends are prominent in the current Syrian crisis at the time of writing (March 2012). On the one hand, although massive societal mobilisations against authoritarian rule in Syria began with peaceful and unarmed demonstrations (demonstrators recurrently shouted slogans like “*selmiyye, selmiyye*” – peacefully, peacefully – when facing harsh repression), there has been an increased militarisation of the Syrian uprising, moving the situation in the country toward the early stages of a civil war: the death toll is well over the bottom limit of 1,000 required by political science to define an event as a civil war and not just as a series of political disruptions; it is approaching more than 10,000 dead at the time of writing and reaching a stage that in the 1980s led Syria to be dubbed “a state of barbarity” (Michel Seurat). The Syrian uprising has kept some features of its initial developments (the massive pacific mobilisations in public spaces), but it is now veering toward a protracted militarised conflict. On the other hand, there has been an increased internationalisation of the Syrian question; and, with the huge difficulties encountered by potential interveners in any attempt to replicate a Libyan model to help resolve the stalemate between the regime and the opposition through the UN Security Council, regional actors are taking important roles in the Syrian quagmire.

The risks of a new protracted conflict in the Middle East?

Societal mobilisations in Syria have thus given way to an increasing militarisation of the popular uprising, with civil war looming as a possible outcome. Three factors have shaped the shift from a unarmed and peaceful movement towards a militarised uprising.

Firstly, the immediate fate of these societal mobilisations is related to the nature of the armed forces involved. In Syria, when the police are overwhelmed by massive societal mobilisations in public spaces, **the military** (at least its elite – clan-staffed – parts) is much more prone to answer positively to any order by the regime to use extreme violence to suppress the uprising by using harsher means than the usual “insidious” violence displayed by authoritarianism, i.e. the fear of repression, the actual deployment of security forces in civilian clothes in public spaces, arbitrary arrests, torture. Alawite officers close to the Assad regime have staffed the high ranks of the army, with the unwritten rule that every combat unit would be under the command, official or in a more indirect way, of an Alawite, and Alawite soldiers have been recruited disproportionately in some elite units. This results in a fractured military, with well-to-do elite units numbering 40,000 to 70,000 men, as opposed to poorly equipped and trained regular units numbering 300,000 to 350,000 personnel, while the regular military is balanced with heavily armed paramilitary forces. Elite units were quickly called on to carry out repressive tasks after March 2011. Also, the Syrian security apparatus, especially its political branches (*mukhabarat*), is much more “militarised” in Syria than in Egypt or Tunisia, where the Interior Ministry was at the forefront of repression and had a huge and autonomous security apparatus: political security in Syria is a military affair, with the dreaded Air Force security apparatus (*istikhbarat jawiya* and many other units) being a stronghold of the Assad regime since the early 1970s. With the use of the military in repression, the death toll – the UN commissioner for human rights has given up any count – has rapidly risen, shaping the uprising as a militarised conflict.

Secondly, the potential for civil war is high because, quite differently from the harsh repression of earlier localised sectoral movements (the liberals of the Damascus declaration after 2005, the Kurds in the north-east in 2004) or Islamist uprisings (in the 1980s), in 2012 the full might of state repression, including the military, is being exerted against massive, broad-based, non-sectoral, apolitical societal mobilisations, i.e. against large, mobilised sections of society convened around a generic slogan – the overthrow of the regime or *isqat al-nizam* – not just against delimited societal sectors.

The prospect of massive killings of disarmed and peaceful civilians is always problematic for any army. The uneasiness inside the Syrian military has broadened, because the army has become overstretched by its many deployments as a consequence of the regime’s calls for the entry of more and more regular – as opposed to elite – units to face the massive character of the uprising. As the potential for violence grows with the use of the regular military in acts of repression, the potential for **dissidence (*inshiqaq*) within the army**, especially among the rank and file and then increasingly among officers, is also on the rise. There has been increasing dissidence within the army, giving birth to the Syrian Free Officers movement and then the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *Al-jaisch al-suri al-hurr*); thus, after the summer of 2011, the Syrian anti-regime movement became increasingly militarised. However, the true nature and extent of dissent within the army are unknown, because this is a fundamental object of propaganda: for the regime, to preserve the impression that its army remains loyal, and for the opposition, to project the image of an increasing flow of defections that will prod undecided army personal in regular units overwhelmingly staffed by Sunnis to switch sides.

Thirdly, **politicised confessionality** has increasingly tainted the militarised Syrian uprising. Thus, the conflict in Syria has taken on an increasingly sectarian taint, with the multiplication of confessional slaughters with decapitated corpses on public display, targeted killings, and the uncovering of mass graves attributed to one religious grouping or another, which help fuel sectarian fears and are indicative of a deepening of the Syrian crisis.

Ethnic labels and confessional plurality are not ipso facto drivers of conflict unless they are politicised into sectarian exclusivity in times of heightened tensions. Confessionality was historically not a political argument in Syrian politics and is quite different from the geographic divisions and the fragmentation of the Syrian political space between cities and countryside, between classes, and between rival “agrocities” that were essential features of Syrian politics from independence to the 1970s; but, since the 1970s, sectarianism has insinuated itself into political squabbles. The lesson of the 2011 Arab Spring is that societies are active and can empower themselves with democratic demands and engineer “regime change”. But Arab societies have also been enfeebled by decades of authoritarian rule and are more vulnerable to sectarian fears.

Politicised confessionality is also a direct product of the regime’s deliberate (strategic) decision to let the country border on civil war and to present itself as a last recourse to stave off chaos. The regime has openly threatened the opposition with the potential for *fitna*, a heavily loaded term in Arab/Islamic political debates accusing the adversary of breaking ranks with and disrupting the unity of the community. The Assad regime seems to have provoked confessional or tribal infighting in mixed Syrian regions (Lattaquie, Banyas, Homs ...), unleashing rogue militia recruited in the Alawite mountains, the “Chabihha”. Conversely, the FSA is essentially staffed with Sunni Muslims – but is less inspired by Sunni Islamism than some of its counterparts (“revolutionary” brigades) in Libya – and has gained a free hand in numerous Syrian villages or quarters where it can benefit from support, shelters and hideouts (the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni), therefore the conflict tends increasingly to be seen in sectarian terms.

One year after the beginnings of the uprising and with the increasing militarisation of the conflict over the last seven months, Syria has entered a new phase with a growing risk of civil war, or, at least for the moment (March 2012), a **“mutually hurting stalemate” before civil war**. Non-violent or unarmed protest that was previously an asset of the opposition as it faces the “infrastructural” power of the state has been sidelined. Violence has become an argument to delegitimise the other side. The debate over whether the uprising

is peaceful or not has become an object of propaganda as the regime portrays demonstrators as armed gangs and sectarian terrorists, whereas the opposition denies any violence, except when the FSA protects peaceful demonstrations. Bombings in Damascus (December 2011) and Aleppo (February 2012) have been accompanied by the displaying of particularly gruesome and bloody pictures on official Syrian television and websites. Increased militarisation might therefore play to the regime’s advantage.

With such underground forces in motion, Syria might become a dangerous regional hot spot of conflict. Once such a violent conflict is initiated in a volatile regional such as the Middle East, it will not be easy to extinguish, with available flows of arms, transnational groups, jihadists waiting for fertile ground, the dismantling of security forces, the rise of militias and the proliferation of various armed groups (with an interplay of banditry and politics, as exemplified by the rise of abductions for ransom). The dirty games of violent militia-controlled politics in Syria that have begun to entrench themselves in local practices, as shown by numerous gruesome videos aired on the Internet, will have consequences for the future of the country.

And the new nature of the Syrian uprising, reflecting a kind of “dark side” of Arab transitions – the risk of civil war – is a dire omen for the region: the very existence of this kind of conflict in a highly destabilised Middle East is a source of concern. It has had a direct spillover effect in Lebanon, with the FSA establishing bases on the Lebanese-Syrian border and with the flow of Syrian refugees (also in Jordan and Turkey). It might destabilise the complex sectarian political balance in Lebanon, with the complicity of Lebanese politicians, and some localised clashes have already been reported in Tripoli between Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods. It might also have a destabilising effect on Iraq, where Sunni militants, disenchanted with Prime Minister Maliki, might find in Eastern areas no longer controlled by Syria a strategic depth to relaunch their struggle against Shia rulers in Baghdad that was stopped after their allegiance shift during the American “surge” in 2007-10 (the Iraqi government has not enforced the Arab League’s sanctions on Syria and has financially supported the Syrian regime).

What happens when regional politics becomes a factor in the context of unforeseen solutions?

Besides the emergence of a new protracted conflict in the still over-militarised and over-destabilised Middle East, the role that regional actors vying for influence might play is also potentially a dire omen. Quite differently from Egypt and Tunisia, where the engines for change were internal (but regime change in Egypt will have regional consequences with changes in the Egyptian regional posture), or even from Yemen, where regional dynamics offered a way out from conflict, with the Gulf Co-operation Council transition plan supported by Western powers, the regional field might offer **a scale shift towards a protracted conflict** much more than a solution/playground to tip the balance between the regime and the opposition.

Firstly, **negotiations between the regime and the opposition are off the agenda**: the regime has felt heartened by the Russian and Chinese UN vetoes in February 2012 and has continued with its military crackdown on Homs and other cities. Furthermore, the regime no longer has any credibility in the eyes of its various opponents regarding its reform initiatives after a great deal of procrastination on its part since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011; for instance, local elections in December 2011 were held as deadly clashes continued and as the death toll hit 5,000; and the regime held a referendum on constitutional amendments in February 2012 as it was carrying out a violent military operation against some neighbourhoods of Homs and other Syrian cities, displaying a kind of double vision towards its society. The Arab League transition plan of December 2011 is still alive, but without much effect after the suspension of the observer mission in late January 2012. The Kofi Annan plan of March 2012, whose main pillars are “an inclusive Syrian-led political process” with an effective UN-supervised cessation of armed violence and the delivery of humanitarian assistance (the plan does not insist on Assad handing over power to the opposition) does not seem to offer a workable solution unless it manages to offer assurances to Russian (and Chinese) interests that will

allow the Syrian regime to play a double game (accepting the plan but at the same time pursuing repression).

Secondly, international sanctions are in effect and the regime is said to be doomed in numerous international – especially, American, French and Turkish – eyes, but tougher **international action** by the Security Council along the lines of the Libyan model has been blocked by the Russian and Chinese vetoes in February 2012. (This Libyan model would have entailed a “no-fly zone” as an application of “the responsibility to protect” civilians with a shifting agenda that led to an “offshore” war – NATO bombings; special forces from Britain, France, Qatar, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates; funding and arms delivery – against the Qaddafi regime that helped topple it. The question of the eventual deployment of foreign, especially Western, troops on the ground was not on the agenda after Iraq and Afghanistan.) For external powers, pursuing the regime’s controlled collapse with increasing external pressures, but not all-out invasion, holds the key to save a given country from civil war; but, as external pressure is applied, the country can veer increasingly towards such a civil war.

The key to move out of the current situation (and the potential for leverage) is **the military balance between the regime and the FSA** and its eventual shift, with external backers of the Syrian opposition betting on a gradual dismemberment of the Syrian army. This is exemplified by the U.S. position: although the U.S. favours a political solution to the Syrian crisis without Bashar al-Assad and has repeatedly stated that the current Syrian regime is finished, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, stated in a Senate hearing on February 14th 2012 that the FSA was the centerpiece of the opposition. But this strategy is inconclusive at the time of writing. The regime has retained control on the ground, in the sky and on the borders, and there are no real safe havens or “liberated” areas for insurgents to operate from, although this point is very controversial, because opposing claims are impossible to verify. At the same time, the regime is unable to suppress the uprising, and the opposition in the streets remains resilient and mobilised, although its political and military wing(s) are unable to improve their positions and

remain fragmented, between a military and a civilian wing, between the Syrian National Council (SNC) and other groups, between liberals and Islamists, between Arabs and Kurds, etc. The FSA has thus become the centrepiece of the Syrian uprising, for the Syrian opposition as well as international actors, with the possibility of the gradual dismemberment of the regular army as an essential way to move out of the stalemate, but with no conclusive outcome.

Thirdly, with other levels of leverage blocked or in a dead-end situation, **the regional balance of power** holds some part of the key to the dismemberment of the Syrian regime. Regime change in Syria will have long-term consequences (e.g. for Iran, Hizbullah, Hamas), but much more important in the short term (i.e. until the fall of the regime) is the role that regional dynamics will have in the protracted Syrian transition/regime change process.

Turkey is a key player, as it has hardened its rhetoric towards Damascus’s violent crackdown and has openly recognised the legitimacy of the exiled SNC, which is an important part of the civilian opposition. Turkey has the capability to offer a real “plan B” after the failure of “plan A” (a UN Security Council resolution on Syria and international intervention): it supported the organisation of the Syrian opposition and encouraged co-ordination between exiled groups and local co-ordination committees (*lajnat tansiqiyya*) after the summer of 2011. But Turkey remains hesitant to act unilaterally (e.g. by invoking a kind of self-defence process on behalf of the peaceful Syrian opposition to establish a buffer zone) after two parameters that might have triggered military action failed, i.e. the Arab League initiative and a UN Security Council resolution on Syria. Turkey is also hesitant to open the Syrian Pandora’s box, as Syria is a complex country that may be very dangerous in any post-transition phase: from a specifically Turkish point of view, an imploded Syrian state could give birth to a second base for Kurdish autonomy in Qamishli after the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Also, the outcomes of any intervention are completely uncertain, e.g. in terms of the political influence that Turkey might retain in a future Syrian state, and may cause Turkey to be perceived as aiding Israel by destroying a key ally of Iran, at a time when the

drumbeats of war are increasingly being heard with a possible Israeli strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. And it will dramatically contradict Turkish policy of “good neighbourliness” with its Muslim neighbours.

Qatar and the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, have given up on the Assad regime and now advocate a proactive policy towards Syria. **Qatar and Saudi Arabia** have influence, especially with their money and their links to religious networks – the Muslim Brothers, Salafis – but they lack sufficient regional clout and knowledge to engineer a real alternative to the Syrian regime, as Turkey has been able to begin to do.

The efforts of the “Friends of Syria” group in Tunis (February 2012) and Istanbul (April 2012) have been geared towards providing a framework – in the absence of a UN Security Council umbrella – to co-ordinate the efforts of governments seeking to bolster the Syrian opposition, but the opposition remains weak and divided.

Also, the regional factor in the Syrian uprising will be less the incubator for a Syrian alternative to the current Assad regime, based on the unification and co-ordination of the main trends in the opposition, than the area where the Syrian conflict is played out according to a **scale-shift model**. In the absence of an internal or international framework, regional dynamics will insinuate themselves into the Syrian showdown between the regime and the opposition. Hence, the escalation of regional dynamics in various unforeseeable directions without a unified Syrian internal opposition displaying a cohesive alternative, which might be fostered by regional and international backers, may prove to be extremely dangerous. With a regional-level scale shift, much more will be at stake in the Syrian conflict, and such a process will help to crystallise opposing camps (Shia vs. Sunni, “axis of resistance” vs. pro-Western, Israel vs. some Arab states), quite differently from the

initial conflict in Syria, whose tenets are internal, the a regime combating large parts of its own society. A similar process took place in Lebanon after 2005 when the initial societal revolt against the Syrian presence after the assassination of the former prime minister, R. Hariri, fractured into confessionalism backed by regional rivalries.

Regional rivalries can increase the stakes. Syria is at the intersection of every key strategic rivalry in the region, with a strategic position both in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Sunni Arab states’ “cold war” with Shia Iran and its allies (Hizbullah), while its borders touch all the hot spots in the region (Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Turkey). Iran will remain a – or the – last-ditch defender of the Assad regime (with oil deliveries that break international sanctions, perhaps military support, and deliveries of military supplies). Hizbullah has equated the end of the Syrian regime with a global conspiracy/strategy to cripple its position (along with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon).

The potential spillover in so many as-yet-unclear directions will raise the stakes and may lead to a return to a kind of “struggle for Syria” (Patrick Seale) that might be beneficial for the regime (i.e. diplomatic moves by regional actors to influence Syrian politics, as in the 1950–1960s, and until the arrival of General Hafez al-Assad). The problem might worsen in a country prey to “a regional struggle for Syria”, because the basic setting will not be only the weakness of central power in Syria (as in the 1950–60s), but the more dire case of a militarised uprising veering towards civil war. And, last but not least, the Syrian regional setting of an enfeebled or even collapsing central state, a weak and divided opposition, and sectarianism is a perfect recipe for al-Qaeda’s entry into the conflict, as exemplified by Al-Zawahiri’s video aired on February 12th 2012¹ and the alleged flow of al-Qaeda fighters from Iraq to Syria (the flow a few years ago was in the opposite direction).

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npK3Rpk0HMs>.