

Syria Comment, 27 November 2011

SYRIAN FUTURE SCENARIOS

Lecture by Dr Nikolaos van Dam for the panel discussion on the future of Syria, Berlin, Akademie der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 23 November 2011

People in general are quite limited in their capabilities when it comes to thinking out or developing scenarios for the future. One of the reasons for this is the quite common lack of imagination. Only when a certain stage of developments has been reached or surpassed, people are able to envisage much better what might come next; but generally not before.

Another point is that many people have a tendency to mixing up so-called objective thinking with wishful thinking.

On top of that, at least in the case of present-day Syria, people generally do not want to be seen as providing any analysis which might perhaps be interpreted as being against, or critical, of those courageous Syrians who have good and peaceful intentions and who are opposing the al-Asad dictatorship, but have not yet succeeded in achieving their aim of a more democratic and free Syria. Academics who, for instance, during an earlier stage this year observed that during the bloody events of the past eight months, the opposition was not only peaceful but also used violence and attacked the army and security forces with arms, were strongly criticized by the opposition and others, if only because that might confirm the regime's story of its being attacked by so-called "armed terrorists" and could help

shattering the image of the strictly peaceful opposition, a peacefulness which provided the opposition with such a strong kind of moral legitimacy.

How are we to realistically evaluate the situation in Syria from the outside? Is it possible to get an objective picture through the various reports which are spread by both the opposition and the regime through the media? Do we have to take the declarations of the Syrian regime seriously when they talk about the so-called “armed terrorist gangs” or their efforts or intentions of political reform? What are people inside Syria seeing and experiencing in, for instance, the biggest cities Damascus and Aleppo? Some individual friends have written to me that they hardly noticed anything from the bloody events and that “everything appeared to be rather quiet”. But that did not mean that the situation was and is not extremely serious elsewhere. People in Homs, Hama and Deraa will certainly have completely different experiences, because of the heavy military sieges they have experienced.

One thing is certain: the developments have been extremely bloody, with more than 3,500 deadly victims among the opposition. The victims among the regime’s security and military forces, however, have generally not been taken that seriously yet, because people in general did not want to believe that there was also armed opposition from the early beginnings of what can be called the “popular revolution”. When taking the relatively high ratio of regime victims into account as compared to the numbers of opposition victims, however, (which is about 1:4, meaning that for every four opposition victims there was one victim on the side of the regime), there must already have been a substantial amount of armed anti-regime violence during the earlier stages of this revolution, probably committed from the

"side lines" by Salafists and others, branded by the regime as "armed gangs". In general the reaction of the regime to peaceful protestors has been disproportionate in every sense. But combatting armed opposition could be seen as quite normal. The regime has, however, never clearly given any clear explanation of these "armed gangs", which might have helped defending its position.

Besides, but nonetheless of essential importance, one should not forget that the regime has not only many opponents, but also many supporters. Next to those who support the regime out of full conviction, there are also those who support it for fear of what might come as an alternative. Change does not always mean that things become better. The situation in Iraq is a clear example of that.

Of course it is not possible for any human being to predict the future with full certainty, me included. Nevertheless I have drawn up a few scenarios of what *might* happen in the future of Syria.

I would like to single out three main scenarios:

1. *A military coup d'état* which would pave the way for a transformation of the present Alawi-dominated Syrian Ba'thist dictatorship into another, somewhat more widely based dictatorship, which would at least be willing to implement drastic political reforms which, in the end, could lead to a more democratic Syria. Such a scenario, in any case, should be expected to imply some bloodshed because the al-Asad regime is not going to step down voluntarily. It is only logical to expect that al-Asad and the people surrounding him are not going to

sign their own death-warrants. This is because they have nothing positive to expect for themselves from stepping down, except, in the more positive case, to be imprisoned, and in the less positive, but more likely case, to be executed.

Extraditing the present Syrian leadership to the International Criminal Court would not satisfy the general demands of the Syrian demonstrators, if only because they have frequently expressed the slogan that they want the president to be executed (whereas the ICC does not have the death penalty). After all the crimes against humanity committed by the regime it would be quite natural for the president and many of his direct military and security supporters to receive the death sentence.

This first scenario could be initiated through a military coup coming from within the regime by those who are or have become very critical of the regime's behavior. Nevertheless, I would not expect it to be a real "palace revolt" in the sense that it would be carried out by the most direct entourage of the president, if only because they are co-responsible for everything that has happened during the past year, but a little further from the center, but nevertheless rather close to it. The likelihood for such a coup to succeed is not very high, however, because of the direct dangers involved. Anyone even contemplating such an idea and sharing it with others would run the risk of immediate execution. And the Syrian regime has decades of experience by now in how to prevent a military coup.

2. *A second scenario could be the continuation of the present regime for another undefined period, with some slow but steady reform measures which could in the end lead to a more peaceful regime change.* In this

scenario the present hard-core political leadership could introduce and effectuate essential political reform, leading the country to a less dictatorial, more democratic regime, which in the end would lead to a substitution of Syrian Ba’thist dictatorial rule. The president might later on step down himself, and he could delegate this transitional task to someone else who could be expected to be acceptable, also to the opposition, but as a transitional figure only.

As the Ba’thist political leadership, just like in the first scenario, does not want to sign its own death-warrant, it would need to receive safe passage to another country with the guarantee not to be prosecuted afterwards. Such a scenario would prevent a lot of bloodshed, but at the same time would not be easy to realize, because once a transfer of power comes realistically in sight, the willingness of the opposition of accepting such a compromise would strongly decrease (if it would be politically possible at all) and many Syrians would spontaneously or emotionally prefer to seek full justice, combined in practice with an unpredictable amount of bloodshed, rather than not seeking justice against the leadership and having less bloodshed. Spontaneous feelings combined with more bloodshed might prevail over pragmatism combined with less bloodshed, and this in turn would diminish the chances of such a scenario to be “successful”. In fact, the willingness of “the opposition” to still enter into dialogue with the regime about political reform and change, has drastically diminished during the past year, if it has not completely disappeared, because the bloodshed and repression by the regime did not only not stop, but just increased. And it would be impossible or unacceptable for any

opposition to have a real dialogue with the very regime which at the same time bloodily suppresses them.

3. *A third scenario could be civil war.* This scenario would probably be the most disastrous, bloody and destructive of all scenarios because it would lead to an uncontrollable situation. Moreover it would turn out to be into nobody's interest. Very many people would be harmed by it, and Syria would undergo an enormous setback the damage of which could be felt for several generations. Also neighboring countries could well be affected. A civil war would inevitably obtain a sectarian character, leading to a kind of sectarian polarization which the country has not witnessed before. Of course, everyone remembers the massacres of Hama of 1982. And these massacres may well have sown the seeds of future strife and revenge, which in such a civil war might bear "full fruit". Thomas Friedman at the time (in 1989) wrote, with some hindsight, that "*if someone had been able to take an objective opinion poll in Syria after the Hama massacre, [Hafiz al-] Assad's treatment of the rebellion probably would have won substantial approval, even among many Sunni Muslims. They might have said, "Better one month of Hama than fourteen years of civil war like Lebanon"*". (Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, London, 1989, pp. 100-101).

Today, however, things are completely different (if the rational analysis of Friedman was already correct in the first place, which I doubt, also with some hindsight). This time it is not about the murder of Alawis by the Muslim Brotherhood who try to provoke a sectarian polarization; but it is about peaceful protestors who are bloodily suppressed by Alawi-dominated security and army forces as well as

by Alawi gangs (the *Shabbihah*) who in fact provoke a sectarian confrontation, but by way of intimidation warn others against doing what the regime is doing itself already for more than eight months. Former Ba’thist leader Dr Munif al-Razzaz wrote in this respect about similar developments in the 1960s: “*I do not know which of the two is the more serious crime: causing sectarianism or exposing it.*” (*al-Tajribah al-Murrah*, Beirut, 1967, p. 160).

During the past year, ever since the demonstrations started in March, the regime has more or less provoked the opposition into more and more violence, and this may in the end lead to a situation which nobody can control any longer. In the beginning of the present crisis Bashar *might* still have saved the situation by implementing drastic political changes, and - at least as important - by having his security and army people stop the violence. In the course of developments it became clear, however, that even Bashar did not have his own people under control, if, at least, it had been his intention to stop the violence (as was announced at the time by his spokeswoman Buthayna Sha’ban). As the violence has continued unabatedly, however, Bashar has become more and more responsible for it, except if he would have resigned, which he could not do, of course, without endangering the whole regime.

A sectarian tinted civil war could start within the armed forces, supported by civilians and dissident military units, and it could obtain a much wider character by involving the whole of Syrian society. As the Syrian army and security apparatus is strongly Alawi-dominated in the sense that Alawis do not only dominate the most strategic positions, but also are much better and much more heavily armed, it

would be extremely difficult for their opponents to subdue them.

Victory for non-Alawi forces should, therefore, not at all be taken for granted that easily.

One could think of several more scenarios, but when taking the three I just mentioned, the last one of a sectarian civil war is the worst of all and should be avoided at all costs. That leaves the options of an internal coup which is extremely dangerous and difficult to be successful, and reform through dialogue with the regime with a safe passage out of the country for its hard-core members including Bashar, just before power is handed over to other personalities and forces who are not only willing, but also can be considered as capable of carrying out reform.

One might pose the question of whether the demonstrators have at the beginning, but also later really been so naïve as to expect the regime to make any drastic political reforms leading to a more democratic political system and to freedom of expression? Did they really believe that the regime would peacefully give in to their demands, or even that peaceful demonstrations could cause its fall? It would be an insult to consider the courageous demonstrators as being naïve. Moreover, given the circumstances, they did not have much of an alternative to demonstrating peacefully. Violent efforts to oppose the regime were bound to lead to even more violence between the two completely unequally equipped sides. Most of the demonstrators did not have any well-contemplated plan or strategy at the beginning, and many still may not have one yet. There also was no clear leadership. Even now, the various opposition groups are quite divided in their strategies and policies, although after eight months the outlines of commonly adopted political

principles finally start to emerge more clearly. The peaceful demonstrations were rather a spontaneous reaction to the violence and repressive actions of the regime, first in Deraa province, and later elsewhere, all over Syria. Syrian demonstrators were clearly inspired by developments and demonstrations in other countries like, for instance, Tunisia and Egypt, even if these had and have not yet provided the coveted results. The demonstrators simply wanted to get rid of the Ba'thist dictatorship which has existed for almost half a century. The youth - and older people as well - were fed up with always living under dictatorship, having no freedom of expression, and, most particularly, not having any prospects for positive change in their often miserable lives. Particularly those who only had read or heard about the regime's violence and repression, but had not experienced it themselves at first hand, were under the perceived new circumstances prepared to take immense risks, without having the slightest guarantee of success. But amongst the demonstrators there were also well-known personalities who had earlier been imprisoned by the Ba'th regime, and had experienced the horrors of imprisonment at first hand. There was and is also this strange combination that the Syrian media are strongly censored, whereas at the same time free television channels such as *Al-Jazeera* are widely available and influence public opinion.

What can we, or our governments, do to help achieve a solution?

Thus far the European Union and the United States have only called for, and implemented a whole range of sanctions. To my knowledge none of these states has beforehand engaged in any kind of real dialogue with the Damascus regime. They have not even tried. Most politicians from the West apparently do not like to be seen having a dialogue with what is generally

seen as the murderous regime of Bashar al-Asad. It does not make you popular in your own country. But this lack of contacts also implied excluding any possibility of having influence over president Bashar. Declarations have only been made through the media; and the imposed sanctions have not achieved anything yet, except for making the economic situation much more difficult for the regime and the many people dependent upon it. Historically, sanctions have only rarely been effective. On the contrary: they more often than not have caused a lot of damage without ever achieving the desired results. The sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s, for instance, reportedly cost more than 300,000 dead. That is almost a hundred times as many as the number of the Syrian opposition victims who died this year. It should be stressed that every single victim is one too many. The idea that the people are not really affected by economic sanctions is pure fiction and wishful thinking.

It should be added that countries which *did* seriously try to help find a solution through dialogue, like Turkey, Saudi Arabia or the Arab League, have not been successful either (yet). Being isolated by its Arab brothers and sisters is much more painful for an Arab nationalist country like Syria, than being sanctioned by the European Union and the United States, because relations with the latter were already rather cool anyhow, if not hostile. Personally, I think it was a serious omission not to have even tried any kind of political dialogue with Damascus. Once Western countries had declared the Syrian regime and its president to be illegitimate, possibilities for dialogue were also cut off. One might even question the usefulness of embassies in Damascus of countries which have declared the regime to be illegitimate. On the other hand, what is the additional value of withdrawing

your ambassador if you already do not have any or hardly any direct contact with the regime? The ambassador might be a kind of last contact through whom an attempt might be made to influence the regime. Withdrawing ambassadors is largely a symbolic act, but the more painful for Syria as an Arab nationalist country when it applies to friendly countries in the Arab world. The US ambassador lost his role of valuable inter-governmental link (*interlocuteur valable*) by bringing a supportive visit to the opposition groups in Hama. It was perhaps a nice gesture towards the opposition, but also the end of any good communication between the US and Syrian governments through their ambassador in Damascus.

What is the best or “least bad” option?

Having given a survey of some possibilities for future scenarios in Syria, I come to the conclusion that the best, or “least bad”, option would be to help achieve a situation in which the present dictatorship would come to the conclusion that it is better to relinquish power to others who could subsequently lead the country further through political reform towards more democracy, while at the same time being given the opportunity to leave the country with a guarantee of not being prosecuted. Such a scenario might prevent a lot of bloodshed, but perhaps it is just too much wishful thinking. Insisting on prosecuting the hard-core of the al-Asad regime and having real justice done, will only further increase their perseverance to survive, and will increase the possibility of a destructive sectarian war, which will cost many more lives without any certainty at all of achieving a better and more democratic Syria as a result. Of course, as part of day-to-day politics it is easier for foreign politicians to increase sanctions and to ask for justice to be done. This will give them more popularity in the short run, but they also

carry the co-responsibility for further bloodshed with all its victims, if they would not at least try to help find a solution more constructively.

The key question remains: how to end dictatorship so as to help Syria obtaining the better future it deserves, while at the same time saving as many Syrian lives as possible.
