

How to Solve or Not to Solve the Syrian Crisis¹?

I. Introduction

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 mix up so-called objective thinking with wishful thinking.

On top of that, in the case of present-day Syria, people generally do not want to be seen as providing any analysis which might 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 the earlier stages of the Syrian revolution, suggested that 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, because they thereby would confirm the regime's story of its being attacked by so-called "armed terrorists". This could help shatter the image of the strictly peaceful opposition, a peacefulness that 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 that are spread through the media by both the opposition and the regime? 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 have people inside Syria been seeing and experiencing in, for instance, the biggest cities Damascus and Aleppo? Some individual friends have written to me earlier on that they hardly noticed anything of the bloody events and that "everything appeared to be rather

quiet". But that did not mean that the situation was not extremely serious elsewhere. People in areas like Homs, Hama, Idlib and Deraa certainly had completely different experiences, because of the heavy military sieges they went through. Also in Damascus and Aleppo, however, the situation has gradually changed, as violence has increased there as well. Big demonstrations in these two big cities might profoundly affect the general situation.

One thing is certain: the developments have been extremely bloody, with reportedly more than 14,000 deadly victims among the opposition.² The victims among the regime's security and military forces have, however, generally not been taken that seriously. When taking the relatively high ratio of regime victims into account as compared to the numbers of opposition victims (which at some stage was reportedly as high as about 1:4), 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 various opposition groups, of which the composition was not quite clear, but who may at some stages have included Salafists and members of al-Qa'ida. It should be noted, however, that the opposition was composed of a broad spectrum across the whole of Syrian society, and that Islamist extremists were only a minor part of them. In general the reaction of the regime to peaceful protestors has been disproportionate in every sense. Combatting armed opposition could, however, be seen as quite normal.

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; for instance people belonging to certain minorities, such as the Alawis, Christians and Druze. They are only too aware that change does not always mean that things become better. The situation in Iraq is a clear example of this.

¹ Part of this article was used as a lecture for the panel discussion on the future of Syria, held in Berlin on 23 November 2011, and organized by the German Orient-Institute and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

² The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS) put the death toll between 18 March 2011 and 29 May 2012 at 14,093. For a comprehensive file of the victims see: http://www.syrianhr.org/Attach/ALL_M2.pdf.

II. Three Main Scenarios for Syria's Future

Of course it is not possible to predict the future with any certainty. Nevertheless I have drawn up three main scenarios of what might happen in the future of Syria.

First: a military coup d'état that could 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 that, in the end, could lead to a more democratic Syria.

Such a scenario, in any case, should be expected to imply some serious bloodshed because the al-Asad regime is not going to step down voluntarily. It is only logical to expect that president Bashar al-Asad and the people surrounding him are not going to sign their own death warrants. 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. After all the crimes against humanity committed by the regime it would be quite natural in Syria for the president and many of his military and security supporters to receive the death sentence. This first scenario could be initiated through a military coup coming from Alawi officers from within the regime, who are or have become very critical of the regime's behavior. Nevertheless, I would not expect such a coup to be a real "palace revolt" in the sense that it would be carried out by the most direct entourage of the president and his family or relatives, if only because they are to a great extent co-responsible for everything that has happened during the past period of time, 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 enormous 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 in how to prevent a military coup.

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 es-

sential 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 aside himself, for instance as a result of new elections, or he could, as a result of dialogue, transfer the presidential tasks to someone else who could be expected to be acceptable also to the opposition. Apparently president al-Asad seems to be convinced himself that for the time being he has already started sufficient reform measures³ by having a new constitution, a new party law, parliamentary elections, and other things, and that he can stay on until 2014, when he could have another chance to be re-elected as president. The opposition will, however, certainly disagree with such a vision. For the time being, the opposition only might wish to engage in a kind of dialogue if it would be clear from the outset that the president and his entourage will step down in the end. Any dialogue which would have such a point of departure will in my view however be rejected by the regime. A scenario in which changing presidents at a certain time through elections would be only one of more future options, would have a better chance of being accepted for discussion. Why would the regime negotiate when the outcome would certainly be its own downfall? Why negotiate when it has nothing to win and everything to lose? On the other hand, there is not much reason why the opposition should trust the president and his regime, because it is quite common for dictators to want to stay on indefinitely. Nevertheless, if president Bashar al-Asad would be taken more seriously, chances for success might be better.⁴ The opposition complains, however, that the regime thus far has only taken but not given anything in return. In fact, the willingness of the opposition to still enter into dialogue with the regime about political reform and change, has drastically diminished since the beginning of the revolution, if it has not completely disappeared, because the bloodshed and repression by the regime did not only not stop, but increased. And it would be impossible or unacceptable for any opposition to have a real dialogue with the very regime that at the same time bloodily suppresses them and keeps on killing opponents.

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

³ This is suggested in the speech of president al-Asad of 3 June 2012.

⁴ See also the interview of Barbara Walters with President Bashar al-Asad: <http://www.abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/t/story?id=15099152>.

guarantee not to be prosecuted afterwards, if it were to agree to step down after all. But who could give a reliable guarantee?

A third scenario could be civil war.

This scenario would 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 in 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, first of all Lebanon. A civil war would inevitably obtain a sectarian character, leading to a kind of sectarian polarization between Alawis and Sunnis on a scale and with an intensity the country has not witnessed before. Of course, everyone remembers the massacres of Hama of 1982. 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'".⁵

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 targeted killings of Alawis by the Muslim Brotherhood who at the time tried to provoke a sectarian polarization; but it is about mainly peaceful protestors who have been 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 has already been doing itself for a longer period of time. The sectarian tinted Sunni-Alawi bloodbath that took place in al-Hula and surroundings (Homs province) on 25-26 May 2012, and was strongly condemned throughout the world, as well as by president al-Asad himself, might be a foretaste of further terrible things to come.

Ever since the demonstrations started in March 2011, the regime has more or less pro-

voked the opposition into more and more violence, and this may in the end lead to a situation that nobody can control any longer. At the beginning of the present crisis, president Bashar al-Asad 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 al-Asad did not have his own people under full 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, Bashar has to be considered more and more responsible for it, something that could have been avoided had he resigned at an early stage, which he could not have done of course, without endangering the whole regime, with its network of thousands of supporters, many of them Alawis.

A sectarian tinted civil war could also emanate from within the armed forces, supported by civilians and dissident military units such as those of the (predominantly Sunni) units of the Free Syrian Army, and it could obtain a much wider character by involving the whole of Syrian society. Sunni conscripts constitute a majority within the Syrian army. If they would defect on a large scale, the regime's position might be undermined. Defecting is very dangerous, however, because it could not only lead to the execution of those directly involved, but could also have severe repercussions for their families. As the Syrian army and security apparatus are strongly Alawi-dominated in the sense that Alawis do not only control the most strategic positions, but also are much better and much more heavily armed, it would be extremely difficult for their Sunni opponents to subdue them. Victory for non-Alawi forces should, therefore, not at all be taken for granted that easily.

One could think of other various scenarios and combinations, 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. An internal coup is extremely dangerous and it is difficult to achieve success. Reform through dialogue with the regime with a safe passage out of the country for its hard-core members including Bashar, could therefore be considered as a scenario which deserves to be promoted.

⁵ Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, London, 1989, pp. 100-101.

One might pose the question of whether the demonstrators have at the beginning, but also later on, 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, well known for its totalitarian repression, 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 from the start did not have any well-contemplated detailed plans or strategy, and many still may not have one. There was also no clearly united leadership. Even now, the various opposition groups, such as the foreign based Syrian National Council, the Local Coordination Committees, the Free Syrian Army and various others, are quite strongly divided in their strategies and policies, although the outlines of some commonly adopted political principles are starting to emerge more clearly among each of them.

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 or have not yet provided the coveted results. The demonstrators simply wanted to get rid of the Ba'thist dictatorship that has existed for almost half a century. Large groups of 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. The demonstrators clearly and most courageously broke through the existing wall of fear. 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. Amongst the demonstrators there were, however, also well-known personalities

and many others 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 official Syrian media are strongly censored, whereas at the same time free television channels such as Al-Jazeera are widely available and strongly influence public opinion. Additionally there is the propaganda war going on between the regime and the opposition, in which the latter clearly has the upper hand. As a result it is not always easy to get an objective picture of what happens inside Syria.

III. What can Foreign Countries do to Help Achieve a Solution?

As far as the European Union, the United States of America and a number of other Western countries are concerned, they have called for, and implemented a whole range of sanctions. To my knowledge none of these states has, however, beforehand engaged in any kind of serious political dialogue with the Damascus regime, after the start of what is generally considered as the beginning of the Syrian revolution on 15 March 2011. Western governments have not even seriously tried. It is politically speaking quite understandable that most politicians from the West do not like to be seen having a dialogue with what is quite generally seen as the murderous regime of Bashar al-Asad. In the case of a democracy, it does not make you popular in your own country, particularly amongst your potential electorate. But this lack of contacts also implied excluding the serious possibility of having influence over president Bashar al-Asad and his regime. By only imposing sanctions without at the same time having any kind of parallel political dialogue or discussion with the Syrian regime about possible solutions to the crisis, these Western parties from the very beginning cut themselves off from playing any serious role in helping find a solution. These same states also generally called for Bashar al-Asad's stepping down as president, and they described him quite early on as having lost his legitimacy. This was an additional way in which these states cut themselves off from any serious possibility of helping bring about a solution through dialogue, because there is no real basis for serious dialogue any longer once one of the parties calls the other illegitimate. Severe criticism may be fully justified in itself, but it is not enough to help bringing

about a solution. In any case, President al-Asad did not step down just because foreign leaders urged him to do so, however genuine the worries and arguments of these leaders may have been. Having said something which can be considered as politically fully correct in your own country as part of the almost inevitable dynamics of democracy does, however, not mean that the involved politicians do not carry any co-responsibility for the effect – or rather lack of effect – of their remarks on the ground, and for their indirectly helping perpetuate the conflict, by not really helping to end it. At least as important, if not much more, is whether or not these statements and positions contribute to helping find a solution. Real political responsibility should also imply the responsibility for one's words and positions in reality. It is not enough to just be "politically correct" on paper.

Western declarations criticising the Syrian regime have mainly been made through the media or through international institutions like the United Nations. The imposed sanctions have not achieved their proclaimed aims thus far, except for making the economic situation much more difficult for the regime and the many people dependent upon it. Having an effect on the ground is something different from being effective in the sense of helping achieve the desired results for which the sanctions have been imposed. In the past, sanctions have only rarely led to the desired objectives. 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, only started to "bite" its regime after many years, but in the meantime they reportedly cost more than 300,000 dead. That is many more than the number of the Syrian opposition victims who died since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. It should be stressed that every single victim is one too many. The idea that it is not the Syrian population that is to be negatively affected by the economic sanctions, but rather the regime for which they are intended, is pure fiction and wishful thinking. Something else that has been missing in the whole issue of imposing sanctions is how they should be lifted. It is obvious that it is much easier to come to a common political decision to impose sanctions than it is to lift them. In order for sanctions to have a more effective potential, it would be desirable to clearly and unambiguously indicate from the

very beginning what needs to be done by the party which is hit by the sanctions to bring them to an end. This would provide an extra impetus for the party suffering from the sanctions to make a serious effort to have them lifted.

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).⁶ Dialogue does not guarantee any success. Nevertheless, I think it was a serious omission of the respective Western governments not to have even tried any kind of political dialogue with Damascus. Influencing the regime at an earlier stage would have been less difficult than later on.

By withdrawing their ambassadors and closing their embassies in Damascus, Western and Arab countries have given a strong political signal to the Syrian regime. The same applied to the decision of several countries to expel the Syrian ambassadors and their staff. The ambassador might, however, also have been a kind of last contact through whom an attempt might be made to influence the regime, and this possibility was thereby lost.

The US ambassador already earlier on had lost his role of valuable inter-governmental link (*interlocuteur valable*) by bringing a supportive visit to opposition groups in Hama, in July 2011. It was a nice gesture of solidarity towards the opposition, but also the end of good communication between the US and Syrian governments through the US ambassador in Damascus.

By closing embassies in Damascus, foreign countries have also lost their "eyes and ears" in Syria, as a result of which they have to rely completely on other sources, which do not always excel in reliability, particularly in a situation where a fierce propaganda war is going on between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

IV. United Nations and Arab League Action: Kofi Annan's Mission

In February 2012 the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution backing an Arab League plan to help solve the crisis in Syria, as both Russia and China vetoed it. The Arab League plan, as outlined in the draft, called

⁶ Turkey later on turned away from the Syrian regime and chose the side of the Syrian opposition, for instance by hosting a "Friends of Syria" opposition meeting. Saudi Arabia and Qatar sided with the opposition by expressing their preparedness to support it with weapons.

for “a Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, plural political system, in which citizens are equal regardless of their affiliations or ethnicities or beliefs, including through commencing a serious political dialogue between the Syrian Government and the whole spectrum of the Syrian opposition under the League of Arab States’ auspices, in accordance with the timetable set out by the League of Arab States.”⁷ Russia criticized some Council members who had in its view actively undermined opportunities for a settlement by pressing for regime change. The Russian veto was internationally strongly condemned, suggesting that the situation in Syria would have drastically changed for the better if its veto (and that of China) would not have been there. Whatever the case, the bloodshed continued unabatedly, with or without a Security Council resolution. It would have been an illusion to expect that the internal situation in Syria would suddenly have been much different without a Russian and Chinese veto. Russia, through its political position, remained one of the very few countries which kept being on speaking terms with the regime of President Bashar al-Asad, and thereby maintained possibilities to influence it, also because it had refused to discuss any scenario which would aim for a regime change. Later on, various Western countries needed to use the Russian channel to put pressure on al-Asad, because they themselves had lost most if not all possibilities to do so. Also Syria’s ally Iran might have been a possible channel for influencing Syria’s behaviour and position. Many countries had second thoughts about Iran, however, because of their conflict with Teheran on the nuclear issue, or for other reasons.

In March 2012, the UN Security Council in a presidency statement announced that it gave full support to efforts of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to end violence in Syria.⁸ Annan’s mission was in this stage apparently the only remaining realistic possibility to help solve the crisis through dialogue and by peaceful means. Although Annan’s so-called “Six Point Plan” was strongly criticized by many as being a failure right from the start, it remained at the time of writing “the only game in town” to help bring about a peaceful solution. Therefore it should be considered of the greatest importance.

V. 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 in an orderly manner 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. It may be relevant that there is more than just one option through which a change of president or regime could be contemplated, in order to be also acceptable to the regime during dialogue and negotiations. It would also be preferable to take more time and achieve desirable results than to hurry and slip into even more violence and getting entangled in the trap of civil war. It would also seem wise to make a serious effort to ensure that the Alawi community as such would not be exposed to substantial danger, just like other communities that now appear to support the regime for fear of the alternative. In such a scenario, a lot of bloodshed might be prevented. Insisting on prosecuting the 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 (or less dictatorial) Syria as a result.

The issue of foreign military intervention has often been brought up. Deposing the regime by military means does not at all imply, however, that subsequently a democracy can be installed. Military intervention increases the danger of a ruthless sectarian civil war, the outcome of which is far from certain, let alone attractive. Just imagine if foreign forces help people from the Sunni majority into power, and these subsequently take bloody revenge on the Alawi community, members of which have ruled Syria for almost half a century. Will these same foreign forces then “shift sides” in order to protect the Alawi community, members of which were previously among the suppressors and whose lives have subsequently come under serious threat? In principle such foreign forces would have the responsibility to protect the Alawi community just as well. It

⁷ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41144&Cr=Syria&Cr1>.

⁸ For details of the six point plan concerned see: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10583.doc.htm>.

would also mean that a military force of probably several hundred thousand might have to stay in Syria for an indefinite number of years. After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there will be little international appetite for such a huge and seemingly endless operation. The creation of safe havens has been suggested quite often as well. Creating a safe haven somewhere in a border area would imply occupying Syrian territory and therefore war with the Syrian regime. The result would most probably be to endanger the local habitants even further. Having a safe haven in a border area does not mean however that Syrians far away elsewhere in the country could be linked up with it so as to be protected as well. Having intervals for humanitarian aid in certain areas of need may be a more realistic option.

Simultaneously with engaging the Syrian regime through dialogue, the Syrian opposi-

tion should also be supported; not only the foreign based Syrian National Council, but the Local Coordination Committees and other peaceful opposition groups operating inside the country at least as much. Arming the Free Syrian Army and other armed opposition groups could, on the other hand, contribute to further violent escalation and could endanger the possibility of reaching a peaceful solution.

There is not any guarantee that a peaceful solution can be reached through dialogue, but it is at least very much worth the effort of trying, as there are no clear satisfactory alternatives. In the end it must, of course, be a dialogue among the Syrians themselves that should lead to a solution. 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.