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After months of unrest, still no light at the end of Syria's tunnel

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By **Lauren Williams**

The Daily Star

BEIRUT: In March, with the Arab Spring rolling across Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia and Libya, speculation that the uprisings could reach Syria was met with incredulity mixed with dread.

The regime was largely popular, its control and propensity toward brutal force entrenched and demographic and geopolitical complications seen as too difficult to reconcile. Civil war was the largely unspoken but ominously feared worst case scenario.

As an example of what was then a fixed disbelief that a popular movement could ever succeed in Syria, in late February, a rumor spread that a young man had tried to self-immolate— Bouazizi style — outside the general security headquarters in Merjeh Square, Damascus. The security forces, so the story went, extinguished the man, then beat him to a pulp for his efforts. Like many developments in the evolution of the Syrian uprising, the incident could not be independently verified.

In fact, the writing was on the wall. A youth bulge, high unemployment and a stagnating economy had already prompted the Syrian government to commission a study in to the likelihood of unrest in response to new liberalizing economic measures in October 2010. The arrest of 13 school children in Deraa for the spraying of anti-government graffiti in March ignited the tinderbox of dissent. Now, with protests spread across the country, each month heralding a new level of crisis, Syria appears to be torpedoing toward the worst case scenario.

Analysts watching the Syrian crisis unfold largely agree on three things: First, that the Syrian regime, having committed to the security option from the outset, will not stand down; second, that the Syrian regime cannot possibly remain in power; and third, the protest movement is not going to stop. These three broadly incompatible propositions are what lead them to agree on a fourth — that the regime will cling to power over a long and protracted bloody conflict that more and more resembles civil

war.

“I don’t think there is any scenario that sees the regime stay in power. It’s not ever going to be alright again, whatever happens,” said Rime Allaf, a Syrian research fellow at London think tank, Chatham House.

Where analysts and opposition are divided is on the ingredients required to stave off such a scenario. Debate has centered on whether a political solution or forced regime change is the answer – how and who could sufficiently challenge the regime to relinquish power voluntarily, take it by force, or provide the right combination of circumstances for an erosion of the state from within, paving the way to an eventual power transition acceptable to the Syrian street.

Syria specialist, former Netherlands Ambassador to Iraq, Turkey and Egypt and author of “*The Struggle for Power in Syria*,” Nikolaos Van Dam, outlined three possible scenarios for Syria: a military coup, slow reform leading to regime change, and a sectarian tinted civil war.

He says despite increasing reports of defections, a military coup is unlikely as long as defections remain largely limited to lower-ranking officers.

“It’s mainly foot soldiers who are defecting – the elite are staying intact,” he told The Daily Star via telephone from the Netherlands.

“More defections could weaken the resolve of the regime, but as long as it is not on a wide scale, that’s about it. It doesn’t mean an end to the regime.”

“It could come from within the armed forces but for such a military coup to be successful, it would have to come from the top,” he said, noting the careful positioning of loyal Alawite commanders in a military apparatus.

“There would be more chance of a military coup if Alawites also defected,” he added.

But, he said, while those close to the regime may become critical of its methods, it will be highly risky for them to engage in a coup. Anyone contemplating such an idea and sharing it with others runs the risk of immediate execution, making such a scenario difficult, if not impossible.

“The regime has decades of experience by now in how to prevent a military coup,” he said during a lecture presented to a panel discussion on

Syria in Berlin in November.

The presence of a growing armed opposition, notable in central Homs and northwestern Idlib on the Turkish-Syrian border has changed the game. The revolutionary movement, while still largely committed to nonviolence, can no longer claim to be a solely peaceful uprising.

Some, like the defected Syrian Army colonel, Riad al-Asaad, commander of the disparate and largely disorganized Free Syrian Army, suggest armed resistance is the legitimate response to excessive force on the part of Syrian security forces. Others voice fears that a militarized opposition plays into a regime narrative that contends armed terror cells working toward a foreign-backed agenda have now killed over 1,000 security personnel and hundreds of civilians. They say armed opposition risks alienating, rather than galvanizing, the opposition movement. Armed conflict igniting latent or stimulated sectarian violence has already been documented in Homs.

“I’m not pro-regime, but when I see what the people who say they are the Free Syria Army and some Sunni groups are doing in Homs, I don’t feel like I can say I am with these people,” one resident of Homs told The Daily Star this week.

Whether armed opposition, like in the form of the so-called Free Syrian Army could even pose a real military challenge to the regime, is also viewed with pessimism by analysts.

“I think it’s still too early to call it an insurgency. I think the armed rebellion is still relatively small,” said Van Dam.

“It certainly takes a lot of energy from the armed forces, but even if more and more are deserting, without heavy weapons there is not a lot they can do.”

Worryingly, he predicted violence had gained irreversible momentum.

“Even if the regime stopped the violence now, I’m not sure anymore whether the armed opposition would stop,” he said.

“There are about 4:1 protesters to armed forces killed. Now if you have only peaceful protests you don’t get those kinds of numbers.”

“The only hope you have [of] stopping the crisis is if the regime is going

to stop using violence, which it doesn't look like it is willing to do.

“And in that case there will be justified feelings of revenge.”

Another prominent Syrian analyst said the regime has “chosen the security option to squash dissent and shows no signs of retreat.”

With an internal coup unlikely and a real military threat a long way off, analysts have assessed the role of foreign intervention in the country through economic, diplomatic and even military pressure.

Almost all agree that a Libya-style intervention is impossible logistically given the lack of a unified opposition and the lack of appetite on the part of military powers such as France, the United States and Turkey, due to the risk of drawing in Syria's jittery neighbors and sparking an all out regional war.

Despite an increase in rhetoric, especially from an increasingly hostile Turkey, hosting over 8,000 refugees and facing an increasing security threat, it is generally felt that foreign military intervention – even in the form of humanitarian corridors, as have been called for by the Paris-based opposition Syrian National Council – is unpalatable to the Syrian public and logistically difficult to implement.

“Turkey will not intervene militarily. We see sanctions as the means for forcing the regime to implement genuinely democratic change,” a senior Turkish diplomat told The Daily Star recently.

Crippling sanctions imposed through the European Union, United States and most recently the Arab League aimed at peeling away support from traditional loyalist merchant classes in Damascus and the second city of Aleppo are having limited effect. Power shortages and the closure of some businesses have been reported, but so far, few of Syria's loyal business elite show signs of churn.

Van Dam says sanctions are overestimated: “Sanctions hurt, but as rich businessmen suffer, that doesn't necessarily mean [they] turn away from the regime. If they choose to turn away from the regime that just means they are disloyal and will face difficulties and persecution.

“Sanctions are a very simplistic way of looking at things that don't have the intended result.”

Chatham House's Allaf says sanctions alone cannot bring about regime

change, especially while main trading partners Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan refuse to sign on.

“If you cut the finances of the regime, you cut the money to finance the repression.

“But they have the support of the people who support them,” she said, also pointing to Russia and China, who vetoed an October U.N. Security Council resolution that would have seen unprecedented sanctions stem their arms exports to Syria.

“The regime is still not dramatically isolated. It can survive if only Lebanon and Iraq don’t sustain sanctions. These are powerful economic supports,” Allaf added.

Threats of prosecution at the International Criminal Court, perhaps via a draft resolution recently adopted by the U.N. Human Rights council, are equally ineffective and may even prompt the regime to dig in its heels, Van Dam said.

“From a moral point of view, it might be a good option but from a political point of view – the ICC is not of any help in resolving the political crisis,” he said.

“If [the regime] were court-martialed inside, then that means the death sentence, and if they were tried outside, then that means certain life. What’s the use of it?

“The ICC [will] not help the conflict, it might just prolong it.”

This week the Arab League followed through on a deal to install monitors on the ground in Syria to oversee the implementation of a Nov 2. initiative to stop the bloodshed. The results of the monitoring mission are yet to be seen. While initial responses from the team’s head have been positive, skeptics have been quick to brand the visit a whitewash.

“The Arab League initiative is just another means for the regime to buy time,” said Allaf.

Alongside demands to remove the army from civilian neighborhoods, release political prisoners and allow international observers and journalists into the country, the initiative called for dialogue with opposition groups.

Dialogue has proven the most divisive concept for opposition camps still struggling to unite. Proponents of dialogue, like the opposition group the National Coordination Council, argue it is the only means to create a crack in the regime structure, allowing for scheduled political reforms that will inevitably lead to a transfer of power.

“The regime is not going to pack up and leave just like [Tunisian former President Zine al-Abidine] Ben Ali ... and there is not going to be a NATO strike. That leaves us with one option, a political solution,” argued a prominent Syrian commentator recently.

For others, dialogue is synonymous with treachery.

“How can we talk to a regime that kills and tortures its own people? There’s nothing to discuss,” said one SNC member.

The regime, argues Allaf, has proven it is not interested in real reform time and time again. She fears those calling for reform are a chip off the same block, interested only in securing power.

“They are putting a foot in each camp,” she said.

However, Van Dam says there may not be any other option.

“There is really not that much alternative to dialogue except for bloody confrontation.

“In my opinion, serious reform means the end of the regime, with proper parties and elections.”

But he said the window of opportunity for such negotiation may now have closed: “There are very few in the opposition who would have the political courage to say we want dialogue, so it sounds less and less realistic.

“Moreover, what astonished me about the [Barabara Walters ABC] interview with Assad was how out of touch with reality he seemed,” he said.

“The regime is less and less in touch with reality. Taking such a mental disposition as a point of departure it means any serious dialogue is unlikely.”

“Maybe, if the regime stopped the violence and if there were a well-

known political figure or technocrat that could start talking with the regime, that could be the least bad scenario, but it would be extraordinary if they managed to do it.”

Allaf and others agree that the least bad scenario would be to impose adequate pressure for the regime to conclude that it has no option but to step down. However, for now, observers agree that the Assad government believes that time is still a long way off.

“The regime is not capable of talking calmly about the end of their existence,” she said. “We need a credible threat from regime powers. As long as Damascus and Aleppo remain relatively untouched, it gives them the illusion that they still have more time.

“The regime is convinced that if the other factors remain – the Arab and international reluctance, the Russian support, trade with Lebanon and Iraq – then they can ride this out.”

For now, however, most feel pessimistic about the outlook.

“I don’t know how long this can go on for, but it’s not going to be pretty,” Allaf said. “Unfortunately all I see is a protracted period of misery for the Syrian people.”

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