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BOOKS

What next for Syria?

• By [Kevin Perry](#)



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It's hard to react to the news reports coming out of Syria with anything other than horror and bewilderment. According to UN estimates around 9,000 people have been killed in the twelve months since the Arab Spring sparked an uprising across the country, yet there remains widespread confusion throughout the outside world about how to respond. The Syrian authorities have grown increasingly violent and indiscriminate, and the recent death of *Sunday Times* correspondent Marie Colvin during the siege of Homs brought increased international attention

to the bloody realities on the ground. The state's violence has only hardened the resolve of protestors to bring about the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad, whose Ba'ath party has ruled Syria for nearly 50 years. Meanwhile, Syria's location at the heart of the Middle East means that the outbreak of a full scale civil war could drag in Saudi Arabia, Iran and even Russia. Last weekend, al-Assad held a referendum on a new constitution which has been widely decried as a sham, while the UN Human Rights Council is currently debating what role it can play in applying pressure to the Syrian leadership.

GQ.com asked Nikolaos van Dam, a former Dutch ambassador to Iraq and Egypt and the author of *The Struggle For Power In Syria*, for his thoughts on the wisdom of military intervention, the likelihood of real political reform and what the future holds for President al-Assad.

GQ.com: Should there be a military intervention in Syria?

Nikolaos van Dam: Foreign governments should think more than twice before deciding on military intervention in Syria because it is a guaranteed recipe for disaster. It could easily contribute to further stimulating a civil war, the outcome of which is far from certain and which would be extremely damaging for Syrian society for generations to come. Bringing down the present regime is one thing, but who will thereby be helped into power next? In principle, most Syrians would prefer to do the job of deposing the regime themselves, without foreign intervention. Just imagine, however, if foreign forces help people from the Sunni majority into power, and they then subsequently take bloody revenge on the Alawite 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 very people who previously were among the suppressors but whose lives are subsequently under serious threat? Syria is not an "easy" military piece of cake like Libya was. There are also no large Syrian areas under the opposition's military control. The heavily armed elite troops of the regime can be expected to be a dangerous opponent. Besides, much of the violence takes place in cities and villages, which are far from attractive targets to attack from the point of view of foreign intervention.

What is the significance of the city of Homs in the uprising and how organised are the opposition groups?

Homs is centrally located in Syria, and is the third biggest city after Damascus and Aleppo. It has occasionally been called "the capital of the revolution" because of its size and the extent of opposition demonstrations there. Opposition groups are generally not very well organized across Syria, but locally they can coordinate

much better because people know one another and the scale is smaller. There is no civil war yet, but the country is dangerously sliding towards one, irrespective of the fact that nobody wants it. Syrians are very much aware of the negative and potentially disastrous consequences of descending into civil war, but not wanting a civil war does not mean that it is not going to happen.

Is it accurate to describe the fighting as sectarian?

There is opposition against the Ba'th regime among all communities and social groups in Syria. As the Ba'th regime and its oppressive institutions are heavily dominated by members from the Alawite community, the current confrontation is bound to have a strong sectarian dimension. Suppressors from the armed forces and security institutions are often easily recognizable as Alawites. Although it is not correct to say that "the Alawites" rule the country, since there are also many Alawite opponents to the regime, this has not prevented the population in general from perceiving it as Alawite domination and suppression. Whereas president al-Assad and his regime are occasionally described as protectors of minorities, the Alawites in particular, their bloody and suppressive behaviour may turn out to be the biggest threat to those same Alawites and other minorities they are supposed to protect. The Sunni opposition may one day wish to take revenge against them.

Would President al-Assad be giving up any real power under the proposed new constitution?

The new constitution may constitute an important step towards political reform in Syria because it could abolish the power monopoly of the Ba'th Party. The regime seems to have started one-sided reforms, now that dialogue with the opposition has turned out to be impossible for the time being. As there has been so much bloodshed, the opposition no longer wants to cooperate with the regime, with the possible exception of ministers who do not have blood on their hands. Their precondition is, however, that the president and his entourage resign. It is unlikely that Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle will do that because they would effectively be signing their own death warrants. Resignation and free passage at a later stage in a more constitutional way could be a possibility, if the regime perseveres that long.

Will the armed forces continue to support al-Assad?

Various members of the military have been executed on the spot after refusing to fire at civilian demonstrators. Many others have defected. Once defections develop on a very large scale the morale of the army will be undermined even further, and it wasn't high in the first place. The defectors are mainly Sunni military who have not been able to escape with heavy arms and therefore do not

constitute a military threat for the well equipped and armed Alawite dominated military elite units. Potentially the biggest danger for al-Assad comes, however, from within the Alawite circle in the armed forces itself. Many Alawite officers will have become more and more critical of the suppressive actions of the regime, but plotting against it is a highly dangerous activity which can easily lead to death.

How do you expect the situation to unfold over the next six months and what should international governments be doing?

The situation is almost certainly bound to escalate further, unless al-Assad and his inner circle are willing to stop the violence. Maybe the regime will be willing to listen to the outside world more if they get the feeling of being taken more seriously and that communication is not only through sanctions but also through direct personal communication and dialogue. If violence is not stopped from both sides there is the very serious danger of an escalation into sectarian civil war, from which there is no way back. That would have tremendously negative consequences, not only for Syria, but also for other countries in the region. Hopefully, the awareness among Syrians about the serious consequences of such a scenario may prevent them from plunging into it. The soldiers who have deserted, however, have hardly any other choice but to fight. Their authentic and justified feelings for revenge as a reaction to all the brutal repression of the regime may get even more out of hand.

The Struggle For Power In Syria: Politics And Society Under Asad And The Ba'th Party by Nikolaos van Dam is available now, priced £10. nikolaosvandam.com

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