

BULLETIN

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Unrest in Syria: Political Forces and Scenarios

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Since 15 March, Syria has become yet another centre of an anti-authoritarian, Arab uprising. However, the small scale of the protests, fragmentation of the opposition, consolidation of the regime's forces, the sectarian character of the society and external actors' interests make it unlikely that the protests will turn into a national rebellion. For that to happen the army would have to switch sides and, even then, sectarian strife similar to that in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon likely would erupt. The most probable outcome in the current circumstances is for the regime to survive, although with a weakened posture.

Political forces in Syria. The Ba'ath party is by constitution the ruling party of Syria and controls state institutions. The president, Bashar al-Assad, his family and close circle are associated with the Alawi religious minority (14% of the population, Sunnis, 72%, and Christians, 12%) that rules the country by presidential decree. The political side of the regime is supported by the army, whose upper echelons also are Alawi. The authoritarian state is policed by an omnipresent and complex security apparatus consisting of more than a dozen institutions. It is believed the protests have been bloodily suppressed not by the regular army but by security forces, namely the Republican Guard and the army's 4th Armoured Division, which is a separate unit initially established to protect the president, his surroundings and Damascus. The Human Rights Council's preliminary report on human rights in Syria estimates the death toll to have exceeded 1,100. While the number of Syrians who have fled over the Turkish border reached 7,000.

The opposition mainly consists of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their supporters, exiled ex-regime officials, Syrian intellectuals inside and outside the country, Kurdish and other minority groups as well as a youthful street movement. The Muslim Brotherhood is the only group to have risen against the regime in the late '70s, only to be bloodily pacified in 1982 in the Hama massacre (again conducted by security forces, not the army). Its leaders are in exile, with many in the United Kingdom, as membership in the organization has been a capital offense since 1980. In 2010, Muhammad Riad Shaqfa became MB's secretary general—a change that signalled a less liberal line in the Brotherhood's policies. Hence, MB largely remained silent at the beginning of the protests in the Arab world. Recently, however, with the help of Turkish activists and together with other opposition figures it joined the Syrian opposition gathering in Antalya, Turkey, so as to capitalize on the anti-regime activities. The Syrian MB, unlike the Egyptian organization, has not operated in Syria for more than 30 years and is therefore much weaker with no structural base apart from a religious society.

Among the former regime officials who are now top opposition figures are Abd al-Halil Khaddam, the former vice president who left the country in 2005 and lives in Paris, and Rifa'at al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's uncle who commanded the regime forces in the Hama massacre, was exiled in 1984 after an attempted coup d'état and now lives in London. Among the groups are also veteran pro-democracy activists in Syria, such as Michel Kilo and Riad Saif, who called for reform in the 2005 Damascus Declaration to the regime. The document briefly united the opposition—MB, intellectuals, Kurds, seculars, socialists and others—but their differences and the regime's response debilitated its appeal. The young activists, such as Suhair al-Attasi, instigated the current anti-regime street movement, though it is still of relatively low intensity. One of the prominent faces of the secular opposition is Burhan Ghalion, the professor of sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris, who put his intellectual

weight behind the protests. The only institutionalized opposition group that includes both young and veteran activists is the newly established National Initiative for Change (NIC).

Scenarios. Although there are some among the opposition who would welcome a Libyan scenario in Syria, it will not happen. It is unlikely that the protests will turn into a civil war. First of all, unlike the situation in Libya, there are no groups apart from the army and security services that have weapons at their disposal. Second, if there were to be a Libyan scenario, senior officers or large numbers of soldiers would have to defect with their weapons, which has not taken place. In Jisr al-Shoughour, a town in Northern Syria, more than 100 rank-and-file security forces were killed, either by their fellow soldiers because they refused to fire at anti-regime forces or by anti-regime forces themselves. Even if they did intend to defect, these were not high-ranking officers. Third, the scale of protests is significantly smaller than that seen in Tunisia or Egypt. At most tens of thousands of people are demonstrating, not hundreds of thousands. Damascus and Aleppo, which together account for eight million people (Syria's population is 21 million), have not seen large-scale protests so far. This may suggest that the security apparatus is preventing such protests, although a more viable explanation would point at significant popular support for the regime.

For the regime to disintegrate, it realistically would require that senior officers and officials defect. Two pro-Western figures who could revolt and change the course of events are professional soldiers: Minister of Defence Ali Habib Mahmoud and Chief of Staff Dawoud Rajiha. Recently, they were put on the list of regime officials under sanctions by the EU and the U.S. The National Initiative for Change has called on the army to side with the protesters, sensing cracks within the regime but the sanctions impede defections. Overall, the army is likely to remain loyal to the regime because of its sectarian nature—its officers are Alawi. Sectarianism is an important element that makes the survival of the regime most likely. Unfortunately, if the opposition is going to be successful it has to exploit sectarianism to make the Sunni population abandon the Alawi regime. That leaves Syria with two negative scenarios: the survival of the regime, albeit in a weaker form (most likely), or sectarian strife (less likely).

The first scenario also is more probable because Western leverage is limited. The sanctions that were recently imposed by the EU and the U.S. have little effect on Syria because it has limited economic relations with the West. It recently managed to improve its relations with the EU—it was close to signing an association agreement—but since 2003 has been under U.S. sanctions under the Syrian Accountability Act and since 1979 has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. A UN SC resolution similar to the 1973 resolution about Libya is not expected. Even the current draft only includes condemnation of the regime's dealings with the protesters and not even an embargo. Syria has support from Russia, China and Lebanon (representing the Arab League at the SC) and possibly would have support from other Arab countries. Trade embargos will be generally unsuccessful as long as Turkey and Iraq—Syria's biggest trade partners—would be unlikely to enforce them and harm relations with Syria even though both may harden the rhetoric.

Furthermore, Syrian sectarian groups may destabilize neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon in the event of an open-ended civil war by sucking them into a sectarian conflict. Both are therefore showing tacit support for Assad. Iran, for which Syria is central in terms of its links to Hezbollah and Hamas, will most likely bolster its support for the regime. Israel also does not want a civil war on its doorstep since for decades Assad's regime has guaranteed stability.

The state of the economy does not immediately point to future difficulties for the regime, either. Oil subsidies have been reintroduced and there have been substantial declines in the tourism industry and private consumption (which may drop even further if a half-million Iraqi refugees decide to return home), but oil fields consistently have been producing what amounts to 15% of the economy, and agriculture (17-20% of economy) has been successful this year after a four-year drought. The agriculture, state and private sectors depend on government-run acquisition companies. The system might be set back a few years to what it was before Bashar al-Assad's reforms, but it will look to the Syrian diaspora and Gulf countries to keep its economy going. Foreign investment, even if it were to quit Syria, is overall insignificant.

The most significant outside leverage lies with the EU, which already has stopped funding development projects (including very important power plants), and the Gulf states, which may stop funding similar projects, though they have not as yet.