

Syria's Phase of Radicalisation

I. OVERVIEW

As the 10 April deadline Kofi Annan (the UN and Arab League joint Special Envoy) set for implementation of his peace plan strikes, the conflict's dynamics have taken an ugly and worrying turn. Syrians from all walks of life appear dumbfounded by the horrific levels of violence and hatred generated by the crisis. Regime forces have subjected entire neighbourhoods to intense bombardment, purportedly to crush armed opposition groups yet with no regard for civilians. Within the largest cities, innocent lives have been lost due to massive bomb attacks in the vicinity of key security installations. Perhaps most sickening of all have been pictures displaying the massacre of whole families, including the shattered skulls of young children. The first anniversary of what began as a predominantly peaceful protest movement came and went with only scattered popular demonstrations. Instead, there was immeasurable bloodshed.

Annan's initiative to end the violence and initiate a political transition was greeted with widespread, justifiable scepticism; the Syrian regime's initial acceptance of his plan was met with even broader disbelief. The doubters appear to have been right. A day before it was supposed to have withdrawn its troops from cities and towns, Damascus conditioned that step on written guarantees from opposition groups and hostile foreign states to renounce violence. These dilatory tactics have been facilitated by the international community's divided and hesitant stance, a mix of half-hearted pledges to support armed resistance and pro forma backing of a diplomatic mission it always expected to fail.

Full and timely implementation of Annan's plan almost surely was never in the cards. But that is not a reason to give up on diplomacy in general or the Annan mission in particular. The priority at this stage must be to prevent the conflict's further, dangerous and irreversible deterioration. In the absence of a realistic, workable alternative, the best chance to achieve that is still to build on aspects of the envoy's initiative and achieve broad international consensus around a detailed roadmap.

One of the more disturbing aspects of the recent escalation is that it has not elicited a dramatic response from any key player, making it likely that things will only get worse. The regime has long been locked in a vicious cycle, heightening

repression in response to the radicalisation of the popular movement that regime repression was instrumental in bringing about in the first place. The opposition is deeply polarised, between those who harbour the largely illusory hope that the regime will abandon its elusive quest for a "security solution" and those who – by calling to arm rebels on the ground and lobbying for international military intervention – essentially aspire to a "security solution" of their own.

On the whole, the outside world is caught between four costly postures. The regime's allies, Iran and Hizbollah, have supported it unconditionally and have every incentive to continue doing so. Russia and China put the onus on regime foes at home and abroad to defuse the situation, expecting the former to lay down their arms and join an ill-defined "dialogue", and the latter to cease all forms of pressure. The West remains confused and ambivalent, having exhausted all sources of diplomatic and economic leverage, fearful of the future and tiptoeing around the question of military options. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have spoken loudly of their intention to arm the rebellion but, even assuming they demonstrate the commitment and follow-through necessary to establish meaningful supply lines, it is hard to see how such efforts would bring a well-armed regime to its knees. Hamstrung between these conflicting stances, Annan's mission has yet to achieve much traction other than rhetorical endorsements by all concerned.

As the crossing of ever more alarming thresholds suggests, this is not a static stalemate but a conflict in perpetual motion and moving in ever more dangerous ways. Whether regime elements or armed opposition groups are to blame for any particular bomb attack or civilian massacre is an essentially futile debate. The fact is that the regime's behaviour has fuelled extremists on both sides and, by allowing the country's slide into chaos, provided them space to move in and operate. Its security services are likely to do everything in their power to tarnish and vilify the opposition – and the opposition to do whatever it can to avenge the unbearable violence to which it has been subjected. As a result, conditions have been created in which extreme forms of violence may well become routine. In turn, this will further empower the most radical elements on all sides, justifying the worst forms of regime brutality and prompting appalling retaliation in response. Should such trends continue, the conflict's current death toll – already in the thousands – likely will appear modest in hindsight.

For months, Syrian and foreign commentators have debated whether the country was sliding toward civil war. The answer cannot be clear-cut. Civil wars rarely have a discernible starting point, although conventional wisdom later tends to pinpoint a single, dramatic incident as the moment they broke out. Syria undoubtedly is trapped in a civil war dynamic, and the recently witnessed massacre of entire families may well be viewed sometime in the future as that watershed event. For now, everything must be done to prevent further deterioration.

As Crisis Group previously argued, the regime will genuinely shift its approach if and only if it faces a different balance of power – politically, through a change in Moscow's attitude; or militarily, through a change on the ground. Crisis Group likewise expressed its strong preference for the former and significant disquiet regarding the latter. At this writing, neither seems particularly likely in the foreseeable future.

Given the evolving dynamics, Annan's mission, however frustrating, likely will remain the only available option for some time. That period should not be wasted awaiting its end or banking on its collapse. Without renouncing prospects for a genuine political agreement on a transition, the priority today must be to de-escalate the violence. This should be attempted by focusing on and fleshing out ideas being advocated by Annan and purportedly endorsed by the regime.

Foremost among these is a UN monitoring mission, details of which remain to be agreed. As witnessed during the previous, short-lived Arab League effort, the presence of monitors cannot end the violence – but it can restrain regime actions and provide space for peaceful protests. This time, in order to strengthen the mission and ensure that, if successful, it holds, the monitors' mandate, right of access as well as accompanying steps should be more rigorously defined, with a particular focus on the following:

- ❑ pilot areas where a ceasefire can be reached and a monitoring mission immediately deployed, in order to generate tangible evidence that this approach can produce relief;
- ❑ arrangements under which the regime ultimately would allow virtually all peaceful protests, and the opposition would refrain from organising them in a specified perimeter within Damascus given regime sensitivities;
- ❑ parallel to the above, means of enforcing and verifying a commitment by Syria's neighbours to freeze weapons transfers and smuggling across their borders; and
- ❑ modalities of a credible investigation into the worst acts of violence to minimise risks of recurrence.

Odds of success admittedly are slim. But far worse than giving this a chance would be to repeat the mistake committed during the last diplomatic, Arab League-sponsored initiative, which also included a monitoring mission: to expect its failure; rush to pull the plug on an unsatisfactory policy; wait for the emergence of an alternative that has been neither considered nor agreed. And then watch, as the killing goes on.

II. DANGEROUSLY DETERIORATING DYNAMICS

In Syria's gradual descent toward the abyss, levels of violence recently have crossed three potentially game-changing thresholds.

A. ESCALATING REGIME REPRESSION

First, the regime has dramatically escalated its repression. For the past several weeks, it has undertaken military operations designed to crush armed resistance, which itself had intensified in reaction to the security services' brutal suppression of protesters. It has used heavy weapons against residential areas, trapping civilians in the crossfire. In Baba 'Amro, a tightly-knit conservative district of Homs, a month of relentless bombing forced opposition armed groups to retreat, leaving the area destroyed and deserted; although civilians presumably were not specifically targeted, the regime made no serious effort to spare them, nor has it shown any concern for residents displaced by the confrontation. In many parts of the country over which it recently has regained control, there is evidence of extensive looting by loyalist troops.

Allegations of summary killings, disappearances, arbitrary arrests and other forms of abuse are as rampant as they are difficult to document. But it is even more difficult to identify a single regime measure designed to alleviate the suffering of beleaguered communities; instead, army troops and security services have carried out operations that are tantamount to collective punishment.

Over time, the regime's modus operandi has shifted. In the conflict's early stages, it held back its security forces to some degree, although this was overshadowed by the routine beating of demonstrators, torture of detainees, overreaction to genuine threats and deliberate provocation of incidents in order to justify opening fire. During this period, protests by and large were gaining momentum, questioning the regime's viability and causing considerable anxiety within its ranks.

Mid-summer 2011 marked the transition to what is known as the security solution – namely, the regime's decision to

give security services a freer hand to contain and roll back the popular movement. They attempted to do so by compartmentalising the territory through a network of checkpoints; stimulating sectarianism to strengthen communal divisions; and using scare tactics to reinstate the wall of fear. The tactics largely backfired. Protesters redoubled efforts to bridge geographic, social and confessional boundaries and developed an increasingly sophisticated culture of dissent, in which singing, dancing and political wit were deployed as counterpoints to the regime's crude methods. In tandem, armed opposition groups gradually organised themselves to protect areas in which such irreverent displays could proceed. Fighting back lightly-armed security personnel and their civilian proxies (known as *shabbiha*), these anti-regime neighbourhood vigilantes were joined by a small, steady stream of army defectors.

As they grew in number and confidence, these opposition groups increasingly went on the offensive, weeding out informants, tracking snipers, attacking checkpoints and ambushing busloads of loyalist troops. In central Syria in particular, they also became caught up in communal strife, as predominantly Sunni armed groups faced off with predominantly Alawite security forces, *shabbiha* and their own, pro-regime neighbourhood vigilantes. Tit-for-tat killings ebbed and flowed but progressively became a daily pattern. The criminalisation of elements within both the security services and opposition, searching out and preying on new resources in an emerging "economy of violence", took several forms, notably kidnapping for ransom and carjacking. Contrary to regime claims, religious fundamentalism at this stage, though present, was not a prevalent feature of the opposition.

While activists clung to a virtuous narrative, emphasising peaceful protests and ignoring these more ambiguous trends, the regime did precisely the opposite. The picture it painted had it struggling to restore law and order, and it blamed the deteriorating situation on virtually everything – extremism within society, foreign media fanning the flames and a global conspiracy – save its own security personnel's behaviour.

By early 2012, pressure was building both from within the regime's ranks and from its social base to hit even harder and crush the unrest. Army units carried out military operations, first in the vicinity of the capital then at flashpoints throughout the country in order to reclaim territory that had escaped regime control. By deploying elite units with overwhelming firepower, the regime soon was in a position to declare a string of "victories" against a ragtag, ill-equipped and scattered insurgency. But this apparent success concealed deep-seated problems. The fighting came at a huge cost to civilians and, in its aftermath, security forces engaged in widespread abuse, further radicalising large swathes of society.

Under such conditions, it is highly difficult to imagine a return to normalcy. Residents, viewing the presence of ruthless, sectarian security forces as akin to a foreign occupation, presumably will subject them to sniper attacks and ambushes. In turn, security forces will resort to yet more arrests, disappearances and killings. All of which looks likely to fuel a drawn-out insurgency/counter-insurgency struggle.

In the process, there is reason to believe the armed opposition groups themselves may have begun to change. They initially grew out of a peaceful protest movement that sought protection from the security services; in that sense, their legitimacy derived from a popular mandate of sorts. Although some elements engaged in criminal activity and perpetrated inexcusable acts of violence, their behaviour for the most part was constrained by the need to safeguard civilians, defend the aforementioned "culture of dissent" and assist in the overarching, legitimate goal of toppling the regime by demonstrating its lack of support on the streets. This implicit understanding appears to be coming to an end.

As the regime, feeling emboldened, systematically targets opposition strongholds and suppresses all forms of protest, armed opponents are likely to adopt new methods and increasingly rely on guerrilla warfare. Under this scenario, they will retreat when loyalist troops prove overwhelming, redeploy to other areas and spoil whatever "progress" the regime will claim to be making, following a pattern witnessed in other insurgency/counter-insurgency dynamics. Indeed, even as the regime effectively shrinks the space available for peaceful protests, it will be unable to reduce the armed groups' manoeuvring room as long as it cannot normalise relations with the communities within which they evolve.

The growing disconnect between an insurgency and a popular movement which to date had been deeply intertwined could have serious repercussions, a fear shared by anti-regime activists in Syria and abroad.¹ It could produce an even more scattered armed opposition (in the absence of a clear collective project) with a more pronounced religious ideological underpinning (for lack of an alternative overarching narrative) and resorting to more extreme forms of violence (in light of the failure of all other options and as the image of a peaceful popular uprising gives way to the reality of a ruthless struggle to the bitter end). Should religiously-oriented Gulf states and Islamist networks come to play a predominant role in arming or supporting the opposition, as is very possible,² there is every reason to

¹ Crisis Group interviews and communications, March 2012.
² At the 31 March-1 April Istanbul conference of "Friends of Syria", various nations (notably the U.S.) pledged to provide financial assistance to pay rebel armed forces as well as com-

believe they will play an equivalent role in shaping its ideological outlook as well.

B. BOMB ATTACKS

The second turning point was the mid-March 2012 series of bombings of security installations in Damascus and Aleppo, which resulted in massive destruction and loss of civilian life. Some observers suspect a regime hand in events that served its interests: damaging its foes' image; mobilising and radicalising its own popular base; frightening the many Syrian fence-sitters; and heightening Western reluctance to become involved in a muddled and messy conflict. The blasts almost certainly produced all those effects. Yet it is at least as likely that they were perpetrated by opposition elements, determined to score points in the wake of the regime's recent military victories, knock its security services off balance and, more broadly, seek revenge for the horrific acts of violence to which they have borne witness.

Regardless of who bears responsibility, these operations are wholly consistent with the conflict's new phase and they too risk becoming routine. They will be all the more difficult to prevent now that the security services, once deeply embedded within society, have profoundly antagonised entire communities and consequently have far fewer intelligence-gathering assets. In turn, the regime will invoke increasingly frequent bombings and the "fight against terrorism" to justify its own escalating repression. As actions attributable to real or purported jihadis blur the picture for foreign observers and Syrians alike, authorities likely will feel they enjoy the necessary political cover to intensify their crackdown at the cost of ever-growing daily casualties. Under this scenario, the average monthly death toll – including insurgents, loyalist troops and civilians – soon could reach the low thousands.

C. MASSACRES

The third way in which violence has worsened almost certainly ranks as the most gruesome and tragic of all. Again in mid-March, in the aftermath of military operations in Homs, a traditionally peaceful society was shell-shocked by pictures of the savage massacre of entire families, including young children whose heads appeared to have been crushed with a heavy blunt object – notably in Karam Zeitun, a predominantly Sunni area of Homs. The disbelief and dismay were understandable. The region is accustomed

to violence, albeit typically of a sort driven by political considerations and practical goals, even when underpinned by a religious narrative. In contrast, this expression of pure, wanton hatred stands out as both an exception and dark omen of what might lie ahead.

Although suspicions for the most part have been directed at the *shabbiha*, it remains unclear who exactly the perpetrators were; the regime arguably would not have ordered or carried out such executions, if only out of fear it could prompt a strong international reaction and bolster calls for intervention. Yet, even if the culprits turn out to be rogue elements rather than the regime itself, the authorities would bear responsibility for unleashing such macabre dynamics – and the danger this kind of violence portends would be no less grave.

Indeed, one of the more troubling aspects was that a threshold such as this could be crossed without provoking a correspondingly novel or vigorous response – by anyone. Instead, all reacted predictably, making it the more probable that this tragedy will be the precursor of others just like it. In this sense, it is a symptom of deeper, worrying trends that neither side appears willing to acknowledge. The regime, pointing a quick finger at the opposition, immediately claimed to have arrested the suspects. But its security services – despite hundreds of thousands of personnel, countless checkpoints and relentless pressure – have done little to check the spiralling decline in intercommunal relations. At best they have been indifferent to the phenomenon, focusing attention and resources on crushing challenges to the regime; at worst they have exacerbated it both through their own sectarian behaviour and by provoking incidents designed to play communities one against the other.

In fact, the regime consistently has whipped its Alawite power base into a frenzy, creating a Frankenstein's monster whose existence it will not recognise let alone tackle. Long before the protest movement had turned violent, the authorities sought to convince the Alawite community that it risked slaughter at the hands of an opposition movement depicted simultaneously as a minority of murderous terrorists, a majority of hegemonic Sunni fundamentalists and an alien fifth column working on behalf of a global conspiracy. Security services circulated stories (and even a video) of a woman in Homs who not only drank the blood of Alawites brought to her by armed groups, but also dismembered their bodies and dispersed their parts;³ systematically portrayed protesters as Salafist extremists establishing Islamic emirates in regions of Syria they controlled; and broadcast purported evidence of foreign involvement, such as wads of Israeli shekels found in insurgent hideouts in Baba 'Amro. At the same time, they recruited Alawites

munications equipment but refrained from endorsing the supply of lethal material. *The New York Times*, 2 April 2012. However, the Saudi foreign minister went further, asserting that "arming the opposition is a duty". Sky News, 2 April 2012, <http://news.sky.com/home/world-news/article/16200287>.

³ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, September-October 2011.

into the *shabbiha*, armed them for self-defence and allowed them to form militias.

The graffiti that elite troops, security officers and *shabbiha* typically paint on city walls include slogans such as “God, Syria, Bashar and nothing else”; “This country will be led by Assad or no one”; and “Assad [for president] or we will burn this country”.⁴ They aptly capture these constituencies’ quasi-nihilistic mindset, according to which the current power structure must be preserved at all costs because its downfall would be costlier still. The logic feeds a vicious cycle, for the more one is implicated in worsening regime violence, the greater the price to be paid in the event of its collapse. Some supporters have gone so far as to develop a quasi-mystical cult of Maher Assad, the president’s brother, believed to be the regime strongman and the one capable of unleashing even greater firepower.⁵

In circumstances suffused with communal hatred and civil strife, some of the more die-hard loyalists may well carry out massacres of their own volition, whether their leadership in Damascus wishes them to do so or not. What is more, a taboo having been broken without measurable domestic or international consequence, the regime might not feel obliged to hold them back. More broadly, in the narrative offered by officials as well as their allies and sympathisers, horrors imputed to the enemy eclipse or, worse, justify their own extreme brutality.

For its part, the opposition swiftly announced that the regime alone was capable of such gruesome behaviour. The assertion is both problematic and short-sighted. Atrocities by one side almost certainly have triggered or will trigger atrocities by the other, unleashing a mutually reinforcing dynamic that, if not quickly and actively broken, could prove overwhelming. Already, while authorities undoubtedly have used disproportionate force, resorted to horrendous scare tactics, tolerated abuse by security forces and stoked sectarian tensions, victims of such violence have responded in disturbing ways.

In some parts of the country, protests are taking on a progressively more sectarian tone; a prominent opposition leader in Homs – whose family members reportedly were murdered by the regime in retaliation for his earlier, more moderate stance – was caught on video participating in chants calling to “exterminate the Alawites”. Sectarian intolerance is everywhere on the rise, and civil strife is spreading from central Syria to places like suburban Damascus, where a pattern of communal-based killings has

been noted.⁶ At the same time, fundamentalism is becoming more pervasive, as the conflict turns increasingly desperate and deadly, the outside world passively looks on, and militant Islamist actors abroad play a more central role in abetting the opposition.

Unsurprisingly, such developments alienate many opposition supporters, whether members of the middle class and minority groups or progressive activists. Some of its hard-won achievements in overcoming social, ideological and communal divides have been reversed. The end result could be to undermine the broad-based popular mobilisation whose dignity in the face of repression, restraint in response to abuse and solidarity transcending traditional fault lines so far have been critical in holding society together.

For now, there is little hope that, faced with the prospect of such a dangerous deterioration, the regime will dramatically change course. To the contrary: in the same manner as it adopted a so-called security solution to address shortcomings of its initially more mixed approach, so too is it now resorting to a military solution to redress the damage wrought by its prior security solution. What the leadership studiously has avoided is a genuine, far-reaching *political* solution. Nor is there any reason to believe it will do so now – not at a time when it feels increasingly comfortable, even as it sits atop a country that is crumbling beneath its feet.

III. A REGIME IN ITS COMFORT ZONE?

Viewed objectively, the difficulties faced by the regime appear virtually insurmountable. Internationally, it is more isolated than ever, backed solely by its few traditional allies and Russia, unenthusiastically followed by China. Politically and ideologically, it is bankrupt. Once the self-proclaimed vanguard of resistance to U.S. imperialism and Israeli hegemony, it is clear beyond doubt that its only cause is self-survival, a goal it is prepared to pursue by waging war against its own people and, in the process, exposing the country to foreign interference.

Previously viewed by many citizens as a necessary guarantor of national unity, Bashar Assad has become an intensely polarising figure, adulated by some and reviled by others. Regime ties to large sectors of society are broken, its hold on broad swathes of its territory at best tenuous. Even if it survives the crisis, it likely will not recover the ability to govern effectively and will enjoy few options but to rule through terror. Slowly but surely, its military capacity is eroding, a result of a trickling stream of defections, declining recruitment and plummeting morale. The

⁴ Crisis Group observations, March 2012.

⁵ Videos circulated among sympathisers depict him as a glorious military leader, in an adulating pageantry in which Bashar hardly appears.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents of the capital’s suburbs, Damascus, March 2012.

economy is devastated and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In particular, the agricultural sector has been disrupted by conflict, fuel shortages and the disappearance of state services; by some estimates, the country soon will run out of food.⁷

These realities notwithstanding, the regime has not indicated it intends to shift course. It has scheduled parliamentary elections in May, hoping to sustain the fiction of political reform. It reiterates its offer of dialogue with opponents and can be expected to continue doing so – at the same time as it detains or intimidates even the most moderate among them. All the while, the regime almost certainly will maintain its war of attrition against protesters and armed opposition groups, seek to contain them, roll them back and gradually drain the support they enjoy from a society it intends to push to exhaustion. The human and material toll likely will be immense, though the regime in all probability will seek to avoid the kind of single, large-scale bloodbath that would evoke memories of Hama, 1982, and could prompt international military intervention.

In interviews with Crisis Group conducted over the past several months, officials, pressed on the need for dramatic change, have offered various arguments to explain the regime's steadfastness and intransigence.⁸

To begin, they point out that the ultimate goal of domestic and foreign opponents alike is not to reform the regime but to topple it; as a result, far from quelling the unrest, more far-reaching concessions would only embolden the opposition, weaken the regime and precipitate its demise. They insist additional reforms will come only once the situation improves – however hollow that promise must ring to the large number of Syrians who insist the regime has done nothing in over 40 years except reactively and under pressure. In truth, and in several respects, the regime is partially doing today what it ought to have done a year ago, when popular demands were more moderate and pragmatic: relaxing the Baath party's dominant role; introducing a measure of controlled pluralism; and taking steps toward a slightly more representative government.⁹ Reformists within the system make the case that, modest as they are, these nonetheless are significant concessions that ought to be pocketed and built upon. To no avail: by this point, many Syrians harbour far deeper grievances that such measures cannot come close to satisfying.

Officials likewise contend that the regime never was given a chance. As they see it, Western countries wrote it off

before it could even begin to respond and then did their utmost to exacerbate the crisis. The Arab media distorted the picture, exaggerated wrongdoings and encouraged unreasonable popular demands. By swiftly seeking regime change and rejecting dialogue until violence ceased, they say, the opposition shut the door on a political solution. Some go further, contending that Syrians abused by the security services ought to have shown restraint rather than overreact and aggravate the situation; had they had national interests in mind, the argument goes, they would have known better than to wreak havoc. However mystifying they might seem, such views are widespread among regime officials and supporters whose contempt for their kin's predicament is itself a symptom of deep-seated social and/or sectarian prejudice. No amount of suffering, they believe, can justify destabilising the country. All in all, officials reject any accountability, identifying culprits far and near while absolving themselves of responsibility.

Together with regime sympathisers, they also tend to put a very low ceiling on what one can realistically expect given the nature of the power system. Issues critical to any genuine political solution – those touching upon the president's legitimacy; the ruling family's role; and the security services' behaviour – are defined upfront as off limits, at least until the regime fully restores stability, at which point it is hard to imagine why it would agree to broach them. Even a matter as urgent as the status and conduct of the *shabbiha* is considered taboo, insofar as confronting it would puncture the regime's core narrative – namely that it is seeking to restore law and order, not to divide and rule. Some regime insiders concede the need for a future national reconciliation process, albeit one that would entail the people forgiving the regime (for crimes that ought better be forgotten); the regime forgiving the people (for challenging the system and provoking mayhem); and everyone reverting to normalcy. There is virtually no chance this can work.

Some more pragmatic voices within the power structure complain that the current nature of the uprising – including its calls for toppling the regime and executing its president; invitation of Western pressure; rejection of dialogue; and militarisation – has empowered regime hardliners. It has made life easier, they say, for those within the leadership and security services with a vested interest in escalating repression and who know that any serious political track inevitably would come at their expense.¹⁰

Altogether, according to this logic, the outside world and domestic opposition ought to be more "reasonable", stop pushing for dramatic change and hope to transform the regime over time. In like manner, they insist the regime has learned its lesson and that it cannot continue as before – yet, even as they do, they stress that reforms must take place

⁷ *The National*, 19 March 2012.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, September-March 2012.

⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing N°32, *Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, 5 March 2012.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February-March 2012.

very gradually in a society unprepared for drastic change. In the end, they offer the prospect of a country ruled by the same president, family and security services – a hard sell for the large number of Syrians who believe this ruling class has thoroughly failed, dispossessed, humiliated, tortured and murdered its people in unimaginable ways. In so doing, pragmatic regime elements ironically undermine pragmatic opposition members who, while supportive of a more gradual process of reform, are systematically discredited by such unwillingness to contemplate serious compromise. The net result has been to negate thus far the possibility of a political, negotiated track.

That said, the most fundamental reason for the regime's obstinacy lies in its conviction that the situation is not as dire as may seem.

In the regime's eyes, the international community has remained polarised and powerless even as repression escalated dramatically. Weeks of pounding of Baba 'Amro did not provoke any change. To the contrary, Russian support has proven steadfast, some vocal criticism notwithstanding;¹¹ as seen from Damascus, the U.S. began to soften its position. In a variety of official utterances, it assessed that the regime was gaining ground;¹² expressed concern over the prospect of civil war; pointed to risks associated with military intervention¹³ and arming the opposition;¹⁴ and

highlighted opposition disunity¹⁵ as well as a growing jihadi presence.¹⁶ Again from the regime's perspective, the two gatherings of the "Friends of Syria" – the first in February, in Tunisia; the second in Turkey in April – failed to produce any tangible or concrete results.¹⁷

press-conference-president. A U.S. official explained that, while things could well change in the face of growing violence and a stalled diplomatic effort, "right now, neither Obama nor [Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton is in favour of military action. And the Pentagon is even more adamantly against it, which is why they are putting out all these accounts of how risky a military strike would be and how robust it would have to be. It's not that the president doesn't want to do something; he's been pushing for options for quite a while. But the Pentagon has briefed him on what it would take to implement any of the military options being discussed (safe haven, humanitarian corridor and the like): massive airstrikes to take out Syria's air defences. Those are extraordinary in scope, far beyond even North Korea's. The regime has invested in them for years and has the latest in Russian technology. Of course, we could take [them] out. But according to the Pentagon, "it would take some two months of very intensive airstrikes, which inevitably would cause heavy civilian casualties given where Syria has placed them – in a relatively narrow part of the country, but where it counts. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, March 2012.

¹⁴ General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "I think it's premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point". Yahoo News, 21 February 2012. U.S. officials expressed their concern about arming the opposition, citing their lack of knowledge about who the opposition was; the fear dangerous weapons could fall into dangerous hands; concern about possible inter-opposition strife or that weapons could be used for retaliation against Alawites or others; and anxiety that armed groups might gain access to chemical weapons storage facilities in Syria. In addition, they said, it would take a long time for the opposition to be in a position to challenge Assad's forces, even assuming a considered effort by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In the meantime, regime forces would go after them even more ruthlessly. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, March 2012.

¹⁵ A U.S. official said, "the SNC [Syrian National Council, an opposition umbrella group] had revealed itself to be dysfunctional, with members often more interested in fighting among each other over office space and positions than in putting together a genuine transition plan". Some colleagues were far less severe, though all acknowledged it had been a disappointment so far. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, March 2012.

¹⁶ Dempsey said, "there are indications that al-Qaeda is involved and that they're interested in supporting the opposition And until we're a lot clearer about, you know, who they are and what they are, I think it would be premature to talk about arming them". Yahoo News, 21 February 2012.

¹⁷ Western officials take a different view of the Istanbul conference in particular, which they see as having marked a step in providing material support for the opposition. See below. In the "Chairman's Conclusions of Friends of Syria meeting" (the Istanbul conference), participants called on Annan to develop a

¹¹ On 20 March, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said: "We believe the Syrian leadership reacted wrongly to the first appearance of peaceful protests and, despite making repeated promises in response to our calls, the Syrian leadership is making very many mistakes The things that it is doing in the right direction, it is doing late. This, unfortunately, has in many ways led the conflict to reach such a severe stage". Reuters, 20 March 2012.

¹² General James Mattis, head of U.S. Central Command, said that regime forces were "gaining physical momentum on the battlefield" and assessed that Assad "is going to be there for some time because I think he will continue to employ heavier and heavier weapons on his people". Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2012.

¹³ General Mattis described any U.S. or international air operation against Assad's forces as "challenging", because Russia has provided Syria with "very advanced integrated air defense capabilities – missiles, radars, that sort of thing". Ibid. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff strengthened the point by stressing that the air defence capabilities were located in populous neighbourhoods, thereby increasing the risks of heavy civilian casualties in the event of a U.S. attempt to take them down. Associated Press, 7 March 2012. At a 6 March press conference, President Obama himself weighed in against those urging immediate military action: "For us to take military action unilaterally, as some have suggested, or to think that somehow there is some simple solution, I think is a mistake This is a much more complicated situation [than Libya]". He added: "The notion that the way to solve every one of these problems is to deploy our military, you know, that hasn't been true in the past, and it won't be true now". See www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/

As the regime sees it, Annan's mission, far from presenting a threat, can be a way to drag the process on and shift the focus from regime change to regime concessions – granting humanitarian access, agreeing to a ceasefire and beginning a vaguely defined political dialogue, all of which can be endlessly negotiated and renegotiated. The 21 March UN Security Council Presidential Statement was an indication of international support for the mission; still, from the regime's vantage point, it hardly constituted a genuine shift in the global set up, but instead reflected a stalemate and a license for the regime to do more of the same.

To date, Damascus' reaction has been in line with its traditional posture: it took some time before accepting Annan's six-point plan (including a commitment to political negotiations, a UN-supervised ceasefire, guaranteed humanitarian access, the release of detainees, freedom of movement for foreign media and respect for the right to peaceful demonstrations); is dragging its feet regarding implementation;¹⁸ injecting conditions (such as the end to all opposition violence); and exploiting (if not provoking) spikes in violence to stall the process. Annan appears to be relying heavily on Russian support, which is the right course. However, here too one can anticipate Syria's playbook: it is likely to respond somewhat more positively to Moscow than to others in order to reward it for its support, consolidate the bilateral relationship and demonstrate that, by contrast, Western bullying cannot work, all the while avoiding any significant step. The end result risks being a tedious, superficial process that will require painstaking diplomatic efforts merely to keep it alive.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have pledged to arm the opposition, raising the prospect of a more battle-ready rebel force. Yet, to date, there is scant indication of their having delivered on their promise;¹⁹ nor is there any evidence of impact

on the ground. As the regime sees it, they will face considerable logistical hurdles in transferring weapons, not least the absence of an obvious transit route through neighbouring states.

In Lebanon, all political players appear in agreement that the paramount objective should be to preserve the domestic status quo and that any serious involvement in the conflict next door would produce the exact opposite.

Turkey harbours Syrian military defectors and reportedly tolerates significant arms smuggling; but that is qualitatively different from open partnership with Gulf states with whom Ankara has mixed relations and whose role is marred by perceptions of an overwhelmingly sectarian, fundamentalist and anti-Iranian agenda. As a result, Turkey arguably will prefer a less energetic profile at least in the absence of a far more forward-leaning U.S. posture and will seek to preserve broader appeal among Syrians, avoid participating in a proxy war that could backfire on its own territory – in particular were Syria or Iran to retaliate by arming the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – and keep its rivalry with Tehran within bounds.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appears keen to secure the Syrian border from weapons smuggling, fearful of the consequences of the Sunni-led opposition gaining power in Damascus and – once the Arab League summit in Baghdad was over – prepared to verbally assault Gulf Arab countries over their Syria policy.²⁰

Of all Syria's neighbours, Jordan arguably is the most plausible option. According to media reports, King Abdullah has been pressured by Riyadh to allow his country to serve as a conduit for weapons to reach the opposition, promising substantial economic assistance in return.²¹ Although so far Amman is said to have resisted, fearful of being dragged into a dangerous conflict, it is at least open to

“timeline for next steps, including a return to the UN Security Council, if the killing continues”; “agreed to develop a multilateral initiative to support international and Syrian efforts to document, analyze and store evidence of serious violations of human rights”; and “committed to continue and increase, as a matter of urgency, its assistance, including funding and financial support, to meet the needs of the Syrian people”. The full text of the communiqué is at www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=749074282.

¹⁸ On 2 April, Assad reportedly told Annan he would start implementing the plan; by 10 April, he is supposed to halt troop movement into cities, withdraw heavy weapons from cities and start to pull back troops. Naharnet, 2 April 2012. The Syrian foreign ministry subsequently announced that it would not do so before opposition armed groups pledged in writing to give up their weapons, and before hostile states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar guaranteed that they would discontinue any support extended to them. Syrian Arab News Agency, 8 April 2012.

¹⁹ According to most observers, the rebel's weapons come primarily from Syria itself – from regime depots taken over by the

opposition; from defectors; or from officials willing to make some money. Crisis Group interviews, analysts, U.S. officials, April 2012.

²⁰ In response to Saudi calls for arming the opposition, he said, “we reject any arming [of Syrian rebels] and the process to overthrow the [Assad] regime, because this will leave a greater crisis in the region The stance of these two states [Qatar and Saudi Arabia] is very strange They are calling for sending arms instead of working on putting out the fire, and they will hear our voice, that we are against arming and against foreign interference We are against the interference of some countries in Syria's internal affairs, and those countries that are interfering in Syria's internal affairs will interfere in the internal affairs of any country”. He added: “It has been one year and the regime did not fall, and it will not fall, and why should it fall?”, *The Daily Star*, 1 April 2012.

²¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2012.

question how long this will be so, given the Kingdom's difficult economic and political situation.²²

Yet, even assuming significant quantities of weapons end up in opposition hands, the regime might feel it has little reason to worry. In Libya, the massive NATO air campaign almost certainly did more to defeat Qadhafi's forces than whatever assistance was provided to rebel groups; even then, it took months to achieve victory. Syria's sectarian dimension arguably could speed things up, encouraging ever growing numbers of military personnel to defect once armed opposition groups gain control of territory; but it is as likely to slow things down, bolstering the resolve of well-armed and highly motivated regime supporters. Plus, the regime's allies could be expected to step up their own involvement if the conflict becomes a full-fledged regional proxy war.

The regime initially displayed intense concern regarding the exiled opposition. So far at least, it has not materialised as a serious threat, failing to consolidate as a unified front or secure international intervention. Over time, it has lost support within Syria itself, a result of its inability to produce practical results or develop a coherent political vision. Arguably, and in certain respects, it has become a regime asset, evidence of the absence of a credible alternative.

By the same token, the protest movement early on first presented a genuine challenge, particularly as it expanded across geographic, social and communal lines. Yet, over the past year, the regime essentially has figured out a way to control it. Oblivious to human costs, security forces have acquired considerable expertise and self-confidence in dealing with it. Routine demonstrations throughout the country, flash protests in the capital and occasional large-scale outbursts of popular frustration – as recently occurred in previously quiet areas such as the upscale Damascus neighbourhood of Mezza, central areas of Aleppo and the north-east town of Raqqa – have had no visible impact on the regime's ability to endure. A Tahrir Square-like protest could well shake regime foundations; however, although the potential for such an occurrence exists, the authorities have honed the tools to prevent it.

The emerging insurgency likewise currently is perceived by the regime more as irritant than genuine menace – a point poignantly brought home by the relentless recapture of previously “liberated” territory. In this respect, a profound divide separates the authorities' discourse and its

actual threat perception. Local media endlessly evoke a powerful global conspiracy aiming at Syria's destruction; in private, officials dismiss the opposition armed groups' capabilities, writing them off as community-based vigilantes joined by a relatively small number of defectors and largely devoid of foreign backing. For the regime, heightened criminality and emerging civil war dynamics do not justify a change in approach, insofar as they do not endanger the power structure. Similarly, officials portray bombings as signs of opposition despair, radicalisation and even marginalisation. More than that, such attacks fit comfortably within the regime's overarching narrative and attempt to equate the current uprising with the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency of the 1980s – a conflict it both weathered and survived and as such a precedent very much on ordinary Syrians' minds.

Lastly, it is dubious that the economy's slow collapse will prompt significant concern or recalculations among decision-makers. The Syrian pound's plummeting value paradoxically has reduced the state's foreign currency expenditures, postponing its bankruptcy; indeed, public service salaries have been halved as the dollar's local value doubled. Delays in salary payments, declining basic services, fuel shortages and skyrocketing prices have barely affected the course of events or the opposition's effectiveness. In a highly mobilised society, whoever potentially could be tempted to protest has done so already; economic hardships are unlikely to draw many more to the streets. The near-total breakdown in local administration, education and health care that has affected several areas of the country is of little consequence to a regime that for now appears to have given up on any objective other than survival. As for the ruling family, it can readily shift its business interests from the legal economy to other, equally lucrative black market opportunities.

All of which explains the striking discrepancy between the extreme and growing anxiety expressed by regime sympathisers on the one hand and the increasingly unflappable confidence projected both publicly and privately by their leaders' discourse and body language on the other.²³ The latter tend to inhabit a zone of psychological comfort, readily shifting all blame onto others; perceiving no immediate threats either to them or to their lifestyle within narrow, protected enclaves; bolstered by the blind and adulating backing of hard-core supporters; convinced that the international community will do very little; and persuaded that the balance of power has shifted in their favour over the past several weeks.

None of this means that the outcome of this conflict is clear, the protest movement is defeated, the insurgency will be crushed, the international community will long eschew

²² See Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 118, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan*, 12 March 2012. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, a senior Jordanian official said, “we are a non-interventionist country. But if it becomes force majeure, you have to join – this is the story of Jordan”, 30 March 2012.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, February-March 2012.

direct military intervention or the regime ultimately will prevail. Already, the struggle has evolved through several stages, over the course of which Assad has forfeited virtually all previous assets, save the ability on the one hand to repress and on the other to hold his supporters hostage to the threat of all-out civil war. The regime cannot truly “win”; what it might do is endure, with core structures – family rule and repressive apparatus – basically intact even as all else gives way. From its own perspective, of course, that may well suffice.

For its sympathisers, however, much of what they dread from a transition likely will take place even without one: enduring instability and terror; economic devastation; deepening sectarianism; accelerating Islamisation (as the regime makes concessions to placate the religious establishment); rising fundamentalism; and greater subjection to foreign influence (as the regime becomes increasingly dependent on longstanding allies and ever more vulnerable to traditional foes). Moreover, what liberties they enjoyed before the crisis almost certainly will be curtailed as the security services, empowered by the ongoing confrontation, consolidate their control. Alawite fears of potential violent, sectarian Sunni reprisals might abate, but at the cost of condoning – or actively engaging in – large-scale crimes that will further alienate them from a majority of Syrians and thus further endanger their future.

Still, despite an objectively catastrophic situation, the regime currently feels strong.²⁴ Hardline officials who call the shots are reinforced in their conviction they are on the right track. The prospect that such a path could well lead to a failed state suffering a humanitarian crisis in a dangerously radicalised and polarised society almost certainly will have scant impact on either their thinking or their course of action.

²⁴ Jihad Maqdisi, the Syrian foreign ministry's spokesman, felt confident enough to formally announce that the “battle to tear down the state” was over. Syrian Arab News Agency, 1 April 2012. A sense that the regime has recently regained a stronger foothold is prevalent among sympathisers, allies and opponents alike. Crisis Group interviews and communications, regime supporters and opposition activists, March 2012. This sentiment was reinforced by statements by a key regime ally, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah general secretary. On 30 March, he asserted that prospects of international intervention in Syria had subsided, that arming the opposition was no longer an option and that the forceful overthrow of the regime had failed and no longer was possible. Naharnet, 30 March 2012.

IV. PREVENTING FURTHER DETERIORATION

The prevailing stalemate is rooted in what to date have been largely implausible, unrealistic calculations by all involved. The regime expects its domestic opposition ultimately to surrender. Some Syrians bank on decisive foreign military intervention which, though it could well materialise in the future, is not in the cards today; others on a political rapprochement between the West and Russia that seems equally distant; still others on the protest movement's and insurgency's eradication and ensuing return to normalcy.

Russia and China, driven by their aversion to popular protests, insurgency, instability and Western intervention, have continued to pin their hopes on the regime solving the issue, be it through military or political means – until now oblivious to its repeated failure to do so.²⁵ Moscow in particular appears well aware of the fact that whatever international role it enjoys on this conflict is precisely a function of its current posture; were it to turn against the regime, or were the latter to collapse, it would lose the remarkable attention it has been receiving and the leverage that goes with it.

Beyond its harsh statements and economic sanctions, the West for a long time has appeared content to wait for Syrians to bring this struggle to a close, whether through Tahrir-like demonstrations, snowballing military defections, a palace coup or steady gains by a more unified and visionary exiled opposition. That may have begun to change; the decision made at the April “Friends of Syria” Istanbul conference to provide the opposition with financial and technical support could be the first step toward more robust assistance to its armed element. Describing U.S. policy, Secretary Clinton laid out several elements that point to a division of labour of sorts between Washington and its Arab allies: provision of U.S. intelligence and communications support to the opposition; Gulf Arab states' provision of weapons to the rebels; monetary incentives for defections; and greater accountability for regime perpetrators of violence.²⁶

But this almost certainly will not break the impasse, certainly not in the foreseeable future. As discussed, arming the opposition is not an easy nor risk-free venture: transit routes are uncertain; it will take time to produce a serious fighting force; weapons could end up in the most undesirable of hands; and the regime can be counted on to lash out if it senses the beginning of something serious. What is

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials and analysts, February 2012.

²⁶ See her interview with Fox News, 1 April 2012.

more, Arab states have proved divided and, so far, unable to act consistently – generally eager for someone else to do so.

In the meantime, this dual U.S. and Arab approach – on the one hand, proclaiming support for Annan and for a diplomatic resolution; on the other, toying with greater militarisation of the opposition – arguably is a strategy at war with itself and one that could readily backfire. Some argue that only by dangling the prospect of a stronger rebel force might Assad be persuaded to give in.²⁷ But a different scenario is more likely: the regime will point to any decision to arm the opposition as a breach of the Annan plan and use it as a reason not to comply and to reinvigorate its own offensive; meanwhile, the military half-measures on behalf of the opposition might satisfy the urge to “do something” – but these will be woefully inadequate to beat back a regime offensive. There are good reasons why the U.S. wishes to steer clear of direct military involvement – not least the danger of regional spillover and the outbreak of an even bloodier civil war. But the end result of the mixed approach currently contemplated risks being to both undermine the diplomatic track and expose the opposition to ever harsher retaliation.

Many ordinary Syrians hope for a different path. They long for a more pragmatic, consensual approach, a controlled, negotiated transition that would spare the country additional bloodshed.²⁸ Some opposition elements have come out clearly in favour of such a course. A sizeable number of officials, frustrated with their leadership, have been desperately waiting for events to prove the hardliners wrong and thus give the political pathway a chance.²⁹ Likewise, several important international players potentially might agree on a middle course between chaos without the regime and chaos with it – a controlled transition that preserves state institutions, thoroughly reforms the security services and puts squarely on the table the issue of unaccountable family rule; these potentially include Russia, the U.S., Turkey and Egypt. There are more radical forces bent on backing the regime and the opposition, to be sure, each one strengthening the other, both domestically and on the international scene. If those expressing a more pragmatic vision are to prevail, they need to join around a realistic way forward.

To maximise chance of this occurring, the first, immediate objective must be to arrest the spiralling decline into ever more dangerous forms of violence. Indeed, any political process will remain meaningless to those on the ground if it does not start by offering them tangible protection and relief after a year of escalating repression; this entails not

simply a ceasefire and humanitarian access, but also an effective monitoring and enforcement mechanism.

Some of the ideas sketched out by Annan, and laid out in the Security Council Presidential Statement, should not be prematurely discarded. Rather, they ought to be fleshed out as the basis for a balanced deal. More than the regime's swift ambiguous acceptance of a vaguely defined plan, the aim should be the international community's robust endorsement of a fully fledged one – which is the best way to move toward both regime and opposition acquiescence. Beyond the provisions of the special envoy's six-point plan, the following aspects will be key to eventual success and ought to be developed in greater detail:

- ❑ what would be required for an adequate third-party monitoring presence and mechanism – in terms of numbers, mandate, capacity – to address violations of the desired reciprocal and unconditional ceasefire, without which it almost certainly would quickly collapse?;
 - ❑ might it first be deployed on a smaller scale, in pilot areas where a ceasefire could be immediately reached, as a way of demonstrating its ability to provide rapid, tangible relief?;
 - ❑ what is required to achieve, ensure and verify a credible commitment by Syria's neighbours to freeze weapons transfers and smuggling across their borders?;
 - ❑ how can one precisely define and carry out a regime commitment to tolerate peaceful protests while possibly allowing the authorities to protect some key interests: at a minimum ensuring mass protests do not occur in the heart of the capital (within a specified perimeter the authorities might consider overly sensitive)?; and
 - ❑ initiation of a serious investigation into the worst forms of violence as a critical step toward preventing their recurrence, entailing Syrian cooperation with a team of international experts.
- Of course, in the longer term, the goal must remain a credible political transition. Assuming efforts get under way to achieve it, the following should be borne in mind:
- ❑ people who have risen up will not change course as long as the regime resorts to indiscriminate violence and as long as they are denied any possibility of peacefully expressing their grievances;
 - ❑ the more pragmatic opposition strands will continue to carry little to no weight until a political solution gains sufficient international traction;
 - ❑ any lasting political solution will require negotiating three issues that have come to define this conflict, namely the basis of the president's legitimacy; the ruling family's role within the power structure; and the security forces' sectarian make-up and performance;

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. analysts and officials, Washington DC, April 2012.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February-March 2012.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, February-March 2012.

- ❑ from the regime's viewpoint, any political process will be worthless if it does not address the problem posed to it by armed opposition groups as well as the provision of foreign military support;
- ❑ the regime will not consider any significant adjustment unless Russia withdraws its unconditional support;
- ❑ Russia has few reasons to do so if it would mean losing all leverage over the regime and all relevance to the conflict, thereby quickly being sidelined and barred from playing a central role in the negotiating process;
- ❑ some violence is almost certain to occur even once a political process kicks off, initiated by hardline regime elements, opposition groups or both; and
- ❑ acts of violence, and in particular sectarian killings – which could well occur even in the absence of a clear leadership directive to that effect – must be credibly investigated.

In the absence of immediate de-escalation, and short of progress toward a political solution, Syria will witness an escalating struggle within an increasingly radicalised society. That is the surest way for all to lose.

Damascus/Brussels, 10 April 2012

APPENDIX B

CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SINCE 2009

Israel/Palestine

- Ending the War in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°26, 5 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
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- Israel's Religious Right and the Question of Settlements*, Middle East Report N°89, 20 July 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
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