

Nº 127 - APRIL 2012

# Assad's fall: how likely, how desirable?

**Barah Mikail**

»» Violence in Syria has entered its second year. The international community agrees that the country needs to put the Bashar al-Assad era behind it, but few actors could enable a peaceful transition. Syrians have paid a high price for struggling against the regime. Up to 10,000 people have been killed. The international community is facing a dilemma. The cost of not intervening in Syria is high, but the cost of external interference in the conflict could be even higher. A year ago, NATO allies decided to intervene in Libya because of a violent clampdown on opposition by Colonel Gaddafi that had at the time not yet reached the scale of the situation in Syria today. But unlike in Libya, the potential consequences of supporting Assad's opponents seem more complicated. The risk of a civil war in the aftermath of toppling the Syrian regime is very tangible. And getting rid of Assad could entail a major shift in the regional geopolitical equation.

A lot has been said about the Assad regime's capacity for survival, and many have either urged the international community to put an end to the violence, or stressed the dangers of engaging militarily in Syria. However, a more balanced look at the pros and cons of Assad's continued rule is needed. Currently, all eyes are set on Kofi Annan's plan for Syria. The Annan plan so far failed to meaningfully advance a solution of the Syrian crisis, but it allowed the Syrian regime to restore some of its international legitimacy. A fall of Assad's regime would supposedly entail great risks for regional security. Assad, it seems, has succeeded in presenting himself to the international community as the only alternative to such risk. But how great is this risk really, what are the underlying dynamics, what are the scenarios for change?

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The main risks of a fall of the Assad regime are sectarian strife, a power vacuum leading to greater involvement of radical groups, and the rise of regional tensions.
- In the absence of an attractive alternative around which to rally, the majority of the Syrian population appears to be identifying with the regime.
- After a year of largely unsuccessful economic and political boycott of the Syrian regime, Western governments must seek more effective means of influence via discrete diplomacy.

»»»»» **ASSAD'S FALL AS A MORAL IMPERATIVE**

Bashar al-Assad's firm grip on power is a paradox. Former leaders Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi had taken less extreme action than Assad when they fell. Yemen's Ali Abdallah Saleh and Bahrain's Hamad Ben Issa al-Khalifa have also been responsible for deaths, but none on a scale comparable to Syria. Syria's current situation is unsustainable. Moral and practical considerations urge the Syrian government to exit the vicious cycle of violence and engage with the opposition to begin a gradual transition towards a new political order. Since they bear responsibility for so many deaths, Assad and his close entourage have long missed their window of opportunity to continue to lead, or even to form part of a Syrian transition to political openness and democratisation. Instead, if they chose not to flee as other leaders have done, they would be held legally accountable for their actions – although, since Syria has not signed up to the International Criminal Court, the jurisdiction for holding a trial against Assad is not clear.

Aside from the violence, the Syrian people's rightful claims to a legitimate, accountable government make a continuation of the Assad regime unthinkable, especially in the light of the new events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011. The electoral victories of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, the continued role of military and old regime actors, and the tensions and polarisation that accompany transitional phases have led to some scepticism about the transitions. But in spite of these reservations, lively debates and growing civil and political societies in these countries give hope for a brighter future. For the first time in Arab politics, governments will be held accountable and political parties will be obliged to live up to people's expectations. The human potential for political empowerment in Syria is great: Syrian citizens are generally well educated and their interest in political affairs is high. Even though Syrian opposition movements have so far failed to efficiently coordinate their efforts, they are capable of organising campaigns, presenting programmes and ideas and gathering voices and support. The

capacity to manage a transition to democracy exists. The lack of economic accountability is another factor that argues for an end to the Assad regime. Bashar's policies of economic liberalisation have seen a massive growth in corruption and nepotism at the top. Rami Makhlouf (also known as 'Mr 10 per cent'), Bashar al-Assad's cousin who controls major sectors of the Syrian economy, is just one representative of a system riddled with cronyism. The gap between poor and rich has widened under Bashar, impoverishing large segments of the population. Inflation has risen consistently and the economy has not grown at a sufficient pace to create enough new jobs. In 2005, 30 per cent of the Syrian population lived in poverty, while 11 per cent lived below the subsistence level, according to the United Nations Development Programme. Assad's rule has been preventing Syria from developing its full economic potential.

Last but not least, from the West's point of view, the possible shift of alliances that could follow a fall of Assad's regime could speak both for and against toppling Assad, depending on who takes his place. Members of the international community have been split on their approach to the Assad regime depending on their different preferences regarding Syria's regional role. The United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been in conflict with Syria because of its relations with radical actors and movements in Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and/or Iraq. Iran benefits from direct access to the Arab world. The material and logistical support organised through the Syrian territory strengthens both Hamas and Hezbollah and backs up their anti-Israeli stances. Syria's active support to the Iraqi resistance harms Western interests. Some of these alliances have recently started to shift: some Iraqi Sunni tribal sheikhs are said to have started to give financial support to Assad's opponents, and the head of Hamas's political bureau has left Damascus. But Syria remains closely linked to Hezbollah and Tehran. Damascus' close relations with Moscow and Beijing have proven extremely important for Syria at the United Nations Security Council, where Russia and China prevented the adoption of a resolution that could have provided the legal basis for a foreign intervention.

---

## A change of regime would likely have a number of negative repercussions

In the best case scenario, a fall of Assad's regime would see Damascus shift from its traditional alliances with adversaries of the West towards more openness to the West. If a genuine democratic transition were initiated, the end of the current regime would constitute a serious blow to Syria's current allies. Syria's inclusion in a global 'refusal front' would be relegated to the past. The way in which a change of regime would influence regional alliances, however, would depend on the political orientations

and preferences of Assad's successors. If it were controlled by Islamists, Syria would become closer to Saudi Arabia, while also developing better relations with Western countries. If liberal and progressive powers manage to succeed Assad, Western countries would

also become privileged partners. In both cases, Syria's relations with Iran and Hezbollah would see a dramatic shift, to these two actors' disadvantage.

Much speaks for a removal of the Assad regime. However, a change of regime would likely have a number of negative repercussions.

### ASSAD'S FALL AS AN INCALCULABLE RISK

For good reasons, the Syrian president has been able to use the West's fears to justify his political choices and his grip on power. Assad is aware that the West fears the regime's fall may provoke a sectarian war extending beyond Syria's borders. So he has been stressing the Islamist nature of the majority of his regime's opponents, allowing him to instrumentalise Western fears to continue his violent clampdown on the uprisings. Similarly, accepting the Annan plan was for Assad a mere strategic step: knowing that the plan would be unable to stop the violence, he hoped to gain new insights on the military strategy of his opponents.

At the time of writing, the prospects for a fall of the Assad regime remain uncertain. Several of Syria's neighbours are waiting impatiently for the end of the Baathist regime. Some of them, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are even pushing for arming the regime's opponents the way they do. For the West, whether a fall of the Assad regime is good or bad news depends on who would take over, and how firmly the successors would be able to resist external attempts to influence them. Among the main risks of a fall of the Assad regime are sectarian strife, a power vacuum leading to greater involvement of foreign radical groups, and destabilisation that could lead to a further rise of regional tensions.

Prospects for sectarian clashes remain high in a country that has several important religious minority groups; Syria's population is made up of Christians, Alawites and Druzes. In a similar vein, ideological divides between faith-based political actors are likely to arise in the transitional order of this so far firmly secular country. If the regime was to fall suddenly, the refusal of Syria's Alawite minorities to support the Sunni majority against Assad could lead to reprisals from opposition groups and/or from individuals who have paid a high price for bringing about change. At the same time, Islamists have worked hard to bring down Assad as they hope to bring Syria closer to its Sunni Islamist neighbouring countries. While the popularity of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) may seem limited, so was the influence of MB offshoots in Tunisia and Libya before leaders were toppled and elections were organised. For sectarianism in a post-Assad transitional order would have significant spoiler potential that would likely go far beyond the political polarisation which can currently be observed in Egypt and, to a lesser degree, Tunisia.

A post-Bashar era could see further interference from foreign groups from one of Syria's five bordering neighbours. This is less likely to occur from the Israeli border, where movements and crossings are tightly controlled. But Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq are hosting groups and individuals keen to take advantage of their proximity to Syria to provoke radical changes. The threat comes from radical Islamist groups, both

»»»»» Salafi and radical Islamist networks presumably funded by Saudi Arabia, who have developed a presence in most of Syria's neighbouring countries. American intelligence sources also believe al-Qaeda has been responsible for some of the attacks in Syria since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011. A sudden fall of the Assad regime with only an ill-prepared opposition to guide the country's path towards transition could lead to a political and security vacuum, allowing radical groups to take hold of Syria, as happened in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The presence of Salafis at the Syrian border after the uprisings of 2011 is one indicator that these groups are prepared to take their opportunity, if one arises. Ideologically opposed to the idea of a secular Syria ruled by a non-Sunni leader, these groups would like to see a Sunni Salafi take power and so push Syrian society towards more conservative values.

The possible reshuffle of Syria's traditional strategic alliances could cause unwelcome consequences for the region's stability. The Syrian regime has been characterised as a regional pyromaniac. But many of its frequent threats to its regional adversaries, such as Israel, Hariri and his allies in Lebanon, the former Western coalition in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and most recently, Qatar, were little more than hot air and did not result in violence. Syria has not attempted any direct attack on Israel since 1973, but it is not clear what part it has played in the Lebanese civil war, in its relations with Hezbollah, or in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and other personalities. For the most part, Syria's rhetoric may be harsh, but its determination to turn rhetoric into action has been less clear. From that point of view, it could be argued that the risks inherent in replacing Assad with an unknown entity could outweigh the advantages of getting rid of a hostile regime whose hostility, for the most part, was mere rhetoric. A regime change in Syria could not only generate domestic instability, but also intensify regional tensions. If both Iran and Hezbollah lose Syria's support, their sudden sense of weakness may translate into greater assertiveness and radicalism towards their own traditional enemies, such as the Gulf countries, including

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the United States and its Western allies. Pushing Iran further towards regional isolation could heighten tensions and increase the risk of violent escalation.

### **THREE SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE**

Just how likely is a fall of the Assad regime, and who would be most likely to succeed it? Three main scenarios are currently most plausible for Syria's future.

Since the start of the 2011 uprisings, many analysts have predicted that the fall of the Syrian regime was unavoidable. One year on, it has yet to happen. Economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure have not had the desired effect. The Syrian government has effectively fought off international attempts to end the violence. In the latest development, the Syrian regime has nominally accepted Kofi Annan's plan to define a solution. But the government and its opponents continue to accuse each other of not fulfilling their commitments. The international community has failed to find efficient means to solve the Syrian crisis, while Qatari and Saudi demands to arm the opposition have been consistently rebuffed. At the same time, most external observers have underestimated the strong rejection of any kind of Western or other foreign role in bringing about change, whether it be from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Turkey. A viable solution to the Syrian crisis remains a distant prospect.

So, the most likely scenario in the short term is the continuation of violence in a context in which the Syrian regime remains the strongest player. The window of opportunity for a process of gradual change led by Assad seems to have passed long ago, and Assad's propositions for reform lack credibility. But the Syrian regime will still try to contend it is leading change. After the approval of a new constitution in a referendum on 26 February 2012, parliamentary elections to the Syrian People's Council are due to be held on 7 May this year. The presidential mandate is said to be limited to a maximum of two terms, of which Assad can still try to avail in order to remain in power.

---

The possibility of a sudden fall of the regime cannot be entirely ruled out. This could be brought about either by a series of defections from its political and diplomatic ranks, or by further and more significant splits at a high level in the army. A serious deterioration of the economic situation could give new impetus to the popular uprisings. That said, Syria currently lacks an opposition force with the broad popular backing needed to fill a sudden power vacuum. Opposition groups such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) do not enjoy huge public support in Syria. Their internal contradictions and divisions, their funding source in Qatar and their subordination to the demands of foreign powers make their domestic credibility limited. Other members of the Syrian opposition, victims of their own diversity, are not doing much better. In the absence of an attractive alternative around which to rally, the majority of the Syrian population appears to be identifying with the regime.

The main option most likely to bring about the sudden collapse of Assad's regime is a foreign-led military intervention. But unless something unexpected happens, the United States' reluctance to add fuel to the Syrian fire given its own upcoming elections, combined with Russian and Chinese opposition to any war scenario, may well allow Bashar al-Assad to remain in power until 2013 and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

The Syrian regime's capacity for resistance can be explained by a series of factors. The violence of the army has dissuaded anti-government protests. The Syrian population is increasingly eager to move on, and the memory of the violent anarchy in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein is still fresh in people's minds. The most visible Syrian regime opponents are based abroad. The international community also has responsibility for Assad's continued hold on power. Thanks to the Russian and Chinese veto, the UN has failed to adopt a resolution that could pave the way for a more forceful international response to the violence in Syria. At the same time, the countries opposing the Syrian regime seek to exert influence

without getting too directly involved. The result of this risk-averse behaviour is condemnation without action and economic sanctions without political outcome – including from the European Union, whose influence in the conflict remains marginal.

After a year of largely unsuccessful economic and political boycott of the Syrian regime, it is time for Western governments to find other, more effective means of influence. Diplomacy remains the best option. The Syrian government will not submit to the West's demands. Damascus has precious allies in Moscow and Beijing, and even if Russia and China were to reverse their position, Syrians would keep on developing their own policies. Finding better ways to deal with the Syrian regime, for example via discrete second track diplomacy, should now become a priority, especially for the EU, whom Syrians do not perceive as a threatening actor. Such an approach would not mean endorsing Assad's actions. On the contrary: new channels of communication would make it easier to denounce his actions, and external actors who care about Syria's future could identify the reformists in the regime and learn how they could be helped to play a constructive role in the future. Catherine Ashton's recent choice to combine further economic sanctions with a change in tone that indicates a certain accommodation with the regime stands as a pragmatic and correct decision, but it is not enough. In parallel to Annan's efforts, the EU should open a channel of dialogue with Syria. While the prospects for European concerns to be taken into account are low, they only stand a chance when voiced discretely.

Assad will not stay in power indefinitely. Having been unable to agree on a way of stopping the violence, the international community must now exploit all available diplomatic options. And, in case Assad does fall suddenly, it must stand prepared to deal with the consequences of the ensuing political vacuum.

*Barah Mikail is a senior researcher at FRIDE.*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
www.[fride.org](http://fride.org)**