

## **SYRIA'S MUTATING CONFLICT**

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## SYRIA'S MUTATING CONFLICT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a distance, Syria's conflict can resemble a slow, painful slog, punctuated by intermittent accelerations and apparent tipping points, influenced by international activity. Zoom in, and one can cast such impressions aside. Diplomatic manoeuvrings have ended up being little more than inertia masquerading as motion. The West used them to pretend it was doing more than it was; Russia exploited them to feign it backed the Syrian regime less than it actually did. Meanwhile, in Syria, one sees neither deadlock nor abrupt transformation; virtually everything has been changing but at a steady pace: the shape of the conflict; civil society dynamics; sectarian relations; and the very nature of the regime the opposition seeks to depose.

Not all is heading in the wrong direction; some developments have been surprisingly uplifting. But there are more than enough ominous trends, none more alarming than these: a regime seemingly morphing into a formidable militia engaged in a desperate fight for survival; an Alawite community increasingly embattled and persuaded its fate hinges entirely on the regime's; and an opposition that, despite sometimes heroic efforts to contain them, is threatened by its own forms of radicalisation. Together, this could portend a prolonged, ever more polarised, destructive civil war.

The regime almost certainly will not change its ways, and so the burden must fall on the opposition to do what – given the immensity of its suffering – must seem an improbable undertaking: seriously address the phenomena of retaliatory violence, sectarian killings and creeping fundamentalism within its ranks; rethink its goal of total regime eradication and instead focus on rehabilitating existing institutions; profoundly reassess relations with the Alawite community; and come up with forward looking proposals on transitional justice, accountability and amnesty.

First things first: Syria indeed has become an arena for outside meddling, but the meddling has been far more effective at sustaining the fighting than ending it. The joint UN/Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, sought to mediate, but Syrians and non-Syrians alike backed him for opposite reasons and in entirely self-serving ways. Because the mission's success was predicated on finding middle ground when most parties yearned for a knockout punch, few truly

wished it well, even as no one wanted to be caught burying it.

International attitudes might yet change: an especially large-scale massacre or, more likely, regime use or loss of control of chemical weapons could trigger Western military action; Turkey or Jordan, alarmed at the rate of refugee inflows, could establish a safe-haven in Syrian territory; in the event of Western intervention, Iran or Hizbollah could reciprocate on the regime's behalf. For now, such scenarios are entirely hypothetical. The bottom line at this stage is that the conflict will be sustained and influenced by outside parties but not determined by them. That unenviable role will fall on Syrians.

That is why by far the more significant dynamics are those unfurling on the ground. One is tempted to say that the regime has been uniformly cold-blooded and indiscriminate from the start, but that is not so. The conflict experienced several phases: from the regime's political concessions, both half-hearted (which prompted stronger popular demands) and coupled with brutal repression (which further undermined their credibility); to its so-called security solution (which, by seeking to force entire communities into submission further energised the opposition and pushed it toward armed resistance); and, finally, to its so-called military solution (a scorched earth policy of rampant destruction and looting that turned what once was viewed as a national army into a broadly reviled occupation force).

With each stage, the regime burned yet another bridge, leaving it with neither way back nor way out. Just as the political solution undermined those involved in politics and the security situation wrecked the security services' ability to operate, so did the military solution eviscerate the army's credibility.

Social dynamics have evolved as well, a case of what one might call the good, the bad and the ugly. The good was better than anticipated: a remarkably vibrant, courageous and resilient civil society that has mobilised networks of assistance and kept in check some of the worst forms of violence to which any armed opposition operating in a poisonous environment might have resorted. Intensified regime brutality failed to subdue popular protests; if any-

thing, it gave them a shot in the arm. Surprising none more than itself, Syria's opposition rediscovered a sense of solidarity, community and national pride.

The bad involves those features (sectarianism, fundamentalism, jihadi and foreign fighters) that a prolonged battle virtually was bound to unearth and attract and that the regime did its utmost to exacerbate. Several opposition groups have adopted an increasingly fundamentalist discourse and demeanour, a trajectory that mirrors the conflict's gradually deadlier and more confessional turn; popular loss of faith in the West; as well as mounting pledges of support from Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. All this could be – and, looking back, was predicted to be – far worse. In the tug of war between society's demons and its ability to resist them, the most encouraging aspect has been Syrians' at times striking self-awareness, grasp of dangers ahead and attempts at course correction. Yet, this hardly justifies complacency.

That is because the ugly is truly alarming. From the start of the crisis, the gulf between pro-opposition and pro-regime constituencies has grown exponentially. As if living in parallel worlds, each ostracises the other, meeting almost only in battle. Among armed rebels, activists and protesters, deeply-rooted, atavistic anti-Alawite (and anti-Shiite) prejudice resurfaces more intensely as time goes by: the minority community's ways are alien, their mores primitive, their presence unnatural. Likewise, when evoking the fate of their foes, even mainstream Alawites can resort to bloodcurdling language.

Whether it be their perceptions of past, present or future, the two sides stand poles apart. Opposition circles tend to focus on the injustices perpetrated by a minority, Alawite-dominated regime; identify their current oppressors as mostly Alawite security forces; celebrate a newly discovered culture of solidarity and social cohesion; and look forward to the day the present power structure will be undone.

Alawites for the most part recall centuries of discrimination and persecution at the hands of distant rulers and urban elites, often drawn from the surrounding Sunni majority. They can see nothing of the revived sense of camaraderie from which, their own tremendous losses and pain notwithstanding, they have been excluded. They experience solely the darkest side of a merciless conflict. And, whether or not they took part in regime brutality, they expect to pay a heavy price should President Bashar Assad be toppled: the existing security services will be wiped out; the Baath party probably will be outlawed; and bureaucratic purges likely will occur. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Syria's is not an Alawite regime, and that community hardly lives in opulence. But it is a regime thanks to which the Alawites overcame their second-class status and escaped a history of harassment and massacres. Members of the opposition

might contemplate triumphant success. Alawites worry about collective eradication.

Of all the ongoing changes, perhaps the most significant and least appreciated is what, over time, has become of the regime. The one that existed at the outset of the conflict almost certainly could not have survived the spectacular killing of top officials in the heart of its traditional stronghold; street combat in Damascus, Aleppo and a string of other towns; the loss of important border crossings with Turkey and Iraq; all amid near-total economic devastation and diplomatic opprobrium. That, a year and a half later, its new incarnation not only withstood those blows but vigorously counterpunched sends a message worthy of reflection.

As its political backbone disintegrates, the regime is being reduced to its repressive apparatus, while the latter itself gradually morphs into an entity more akin to a militia than an army in both make-up and ethos. The regime essentially has been stripped down to a broadly cohesive, hardcore faction fighting an increasingly bitter, fierce and naked struggle for collective survival. It is mutating in ways that make it impervious to political and military setbacks, indifferent to pressure and unable to negotiate. Opposition gains terrify Alawites, who stand more firmly by the regime's side. Defections solidify the ranks of those who remain loyal. Territorial losses can be dismissed for the sake of concentrating on "useful" geographic areas. Sanctions give rise to an economy of violence wherein pillaging, looting and smuggling ensure self-sufficiency and over which punitive measures have virtually no bearing. That the regime has been weakened is incontrovertible. But it has been weakened in ways that strengthen its staying power.

These multiple mutations carry practical implications. First, from a military standpoint, it is becoming clearer by the day that the outcome will be much messier than either party to the conflict once hoped. The regime will not succeed in suppressing the armed groups; if anything, its ruthless practices have guaranteed a virtually limitless pool of recruits prepared to fight with the opposition at any cost. Conversely, both the regime – by design – and its opponents – through negligence – appear to have ensured that a large portion of the Alawite community now feels it has no option but to kill or be killed.

Secondly, there can be nothing more to expect from a regime that, by its very nature – never much of an institutionalised state, no longer genuinely a political entity – has ceased being in a position to compromise, respond to pressure or inducement or offer a viable solution. Which means that the traditional international panoply of actions, from public blandishments to condemnation, from threats to sanctions, is not about to work. And that, while one still can hold out hope for a "clean break", that moment

when the regime neatly collapses or surrenders, it hardly warrants holding one's breath.

Thirdly, the opposition should rethink how it deals with pro-regime constituencies in general and Alawites in particular – how it acts, speaks and plans. No single indiscriminate massacre of Alawites has yet to be documented, but given current dynamics one almost assuredly lies around the corner. The opposition has tended to downplay its less attractive characteristics: it blames rising sectarianism solely on the regime's divisive tactics; dismisses increasingly religious, if not fundamentalist, overtones as reversible side-effects of the crisis; attributes armed groups' alleged crimes to mere indiscipline; and shrugs off the still-limited but increasingly visible presence of jihadis and foreign fighters. There are logical reasons for all these tendencies to appear. There is no justification for belittling them. Failing to seriously address them now could haunt all Syrians later. The danger of widespread sectarian reprisals, indiscriminate killings and large-scale displacement is frighteningly real.

Rhetoric also matters, as does the content of transition plans. When the opposition says it will topple the regime, what Alawites hear is that their source of income, employment, and physical protection will be eliminated. When it evokes the undoing of the system and all its institutions, they hear a return to second-class citizenry. When it speaks of justice and accountability, they hear the threat of collective retribution. On all these issues, the opposition should engage in intensive efforts to clarify its meaning, reassure minorities and reassess the scope and speed of the changes it intends to introduce.

For those Syrians who have endured seventeen months of repression at the hands of a ruthless regime, for whom the instinct of revenge, understandably, must be hard to suppress, these must seem callous, inappropriate, perhaps even offensive questions. Yet raising them is a necessity if the transition for which they are struggling is to be worthy of the sacrifices they will have endured getting there.

**Damascus/Brussels, 1 August 2012**

## SYRIA'S MUTATING CONFLICT

### I. INTRODUCTION

At times described as being at a stalemate, Syria's raging conflict has been akin to a game of chess. From afar, the chessboard can appear largely static. In fact, over the past seventeen months both regime and opposition have made small yet significant moves, at a tempo that can seem as unhurried as it is unremitting. The two sides are driven, single-mindedly, by the same goal: clear, unmitigated victory.

In the past several months, violence has taken on new forms as both sides have adjusted tactics. Civil strife has intensified in the centre of the country. Damascus and Aleppo – the capital and largest city, respectively – no longer sanctuaries of relative calm, have been engulfed in the surrounding conflict. In the spring the regime's power structure appeared as strong as ever, bolstered by the dual Russian/Chinese veto of a critical UN Security Council resolution in February.<sup>1</sup> But by late May, a series of events punctured this impression and revived doubts as to the regime's resilience. First, rumours spread concerning the murder of key ruling family members; while these were unconfirmed and several turned out to be false, that so many Syrians believed what long would have been unthinkable suggested a heightened sense of regime vulnerability.<sup>2</sup>

Defections, which had been occurring at a trickle, both accelerated and assumed greater symbolic importance as units<sup>3</sup> and high-profile officials – including Manaf Tlass, a commander in the Republican Guard,<sup>4</sup> and Nawaf al-Shaykh Faris, ambassador to Iraq – switched sides.<sup>5</sup> Then, on 18 July, as intense fighting broke out in various parts of Damascus, at least four senior officials were killed in what appeared to be an opposition attack – Daoud Rajha, the defence minister; Asef Shawkat, the deputy defence minister and Bashar's brother-in-law; Hassan Turkmani, the assistant vice president; and Hisham Ikhtiar, the head of the national security bureau (a coordination structure devoid of any independent operational capability).

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the regime's sense of vindication and confidence following the veto, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, 10 April 2012.

<sup>2</sup> President Bashar Assad's brother-in-law, General Assef Shawkat, was said to have been poisoned, along with fellow members of a task force set up to manage the crisis. See *The New York Times*, 24 May 2012. The assassination attempt reportedly took place but failed. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian and Western security officials, June 2012. A few days prior to that incident, Syrian opposition community networks had been awash with reports (later invalidated) that Maher Assad, the president's brother and key Republican Guard commander, had died after being rushed to a hospital with gunshot wounds. That same month, opposition fighters told Crisis Group Hafez Makhlouf, a cousin and dominant figure in the security services, also had been assassinated. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. That also turned out to be unfounded; a Syrian said he subsequently had had dinner with him. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Sebnem Arsu and Rick Gladstone, "Eighty-Five Syrian Soldiers, Including a General, Defect en Masse to Turkey", *The New York Times*, 2 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Manaf Tlass, a senior officer in the Republican Guard and personal friend of Bashar Assad, defected in early July 2012. In the first stages of the conflict, he had worked in various parts of the country to defuse the uprising by negotiating local deals but was undercut by other regime elements. His refusal to take part in the "security solution" adopted in July 2011 led to his marginalisation. Crisis Group interviews, officials and opposition figures with knowledge, Damascus, March 2011-June 2012. Although he no longer carried any weight within the system, his defection has symbolic significance. The Tlass – a Sunni family from Rastan in central Syria – had long been a central piece in the ruling web of communal alliances. Moreover, in a power structure where one's exclusion for the most part is temporary and in which officials who are ostracised tend to wait a crisis out and then work to regain favour, his defection suggested that this crisis had crossed the point of no return, even in the eyes of former allies, and that the regime would never be able to restore normalcy.

<sup>5</sup> Although a majority of Syrian ambassadors are both mediocre and hardly influential – bilateral relations being micromanaged directly from Damascus – Nawaf Faris was an exception. Originally a police officer, he assumed important roles within the security services and Baath party and as governor of several provinces. A tribal figure from Dayr Zor, he was a central actor in the regime's strategy of developing allies and relays in the north east. His defection may have been at least partially prompted by the fierce crackdown to which his tribe recently was subjected. See *al-Qabas*, 12 July 2012.

On a social level, dynamics have been pushing in two seemingly contradictory directions. Predictably,<sup>6</sup> as the conflict escalated and dragged on, one witnessed greater sectarianism and radicalisation. Simultaneously, and more unexpectedly, those trends did not drown out peaceful protests, non-violent activism or civil society initiatives; rather, these were reinvigorated. As society inches toward collapse, collective self-defence mechanisms appear to be kicking in to prevent – or, at a minimum, contain and postpone – the looming prospect of all-out civil strife.

If standstill there is, it is to be found in the political and diplomatic arenas. Neither the regime nor the opposition appears willing to take any genuine, meaningful political initiative. Their foreign backers, meanwhile, pay lip service to the notion of compromise but, fundamentally at odds as to what that would entail, seem content to bank on their respective allies' military victory.

That has left the joint UN/Arab League peacemaking mission, led by Kofi Annan and perfunctorily endorsed by all concerned,<sup>7</sup> stranded on the diplomatic and military battlefield. Those who have supported it do so almost entirely for the wrong reasons and in ways that ultimately undermined its ability to function effectively. Syrian and foreign parties backed Annan only to the extent that his efforts could promote their respective goals (defeating the regime for some, preserving it for others), thereby making his attempts to find a middle ground akin to squaring a circle. By its mere existence, the mission, however ineffective, gave key players useful ancillary benefits: the West a convenient justification to avoid confronting the prospect of military intervention for which there is no appetite; Russia a way to conceal backing for the regime under support for diplomacy. As survival of the process has appeared an end in itself, a means of evading both serious compromise and risky intervention, the mission increasingly has become irrelevant, both criticised and ignored by the opposition on the ground.

As with all chess games, the layout at any given point does not necessarily provide firm clues as to how it might end.

Discrete, disjointed moves suddenly expose a more systematic, irresistible drive. Even then, one cannot exclude a later reversal. As of now, the conflict's evolving dynamics do not suggest a quick denouement. Instead, they point to a slow, gradual tilt against the regime at best or, at worst, a drift toward a far murkier, deadlier and unpredictable civil war. Outside players help both sides stay afloat even as they seem unable or unwilling to offer either a decisive advantage.

Syrian society is highly mobilised, yet it also is deeply torn – not just between supporters and opponents of the regime but also, and on both sides, between moderate instincts and the temptations of radicalism. Armed opposition groups slowly are building up their strength, gaining volunteers, experience and territory. They believe more and better weapons will give them the upper hand. That hope overlooks the lopsided military situation and the fact that loyalist forces are far from having reached the ceiling of their violence. Should they feel compelled to, they can escalate it to yet more horrifying levels.

That hope also overlooks the regime's significant metamorphosis. As the outer political layers that gave it much of its legitimacy and capacity to govern disintegrate, it increasingly is being trimmed down to its repressive apparatus, while the latter itself gradually morphs into an entity more akin to a militia than an army in both make-up and ethos. What remains is a broadly cohesive, hard-core faction fighting an increasingly bitter, fierce and naked struggle for collective survival. Such a regime will find it hard to rule but, impervious to political and military setbacks, it also will be hard to dislodge. In the absence of a dramatic and presently improbable development – Bashar's departure; the loss of the capital; a Russian volte-face; or a U.S. military intervention – the surviving, diehard component of this eroding power structure risks ensuring that the opposition's efforts to prevail militarily will be as protracted, destabilising and costly as possible.

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<sup>6</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> On 23 February 2012, following the Russian and Chinese vetoes, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was appointed Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States on the Syrian crisis, with a view to bridging the gaps between the various parties, both within Syria and in the international arena. He devised a six-point plan providing for a Syrian-led political process, a ceasefire, humanitarian access, the release of political prisoners, freedom of movement for journalists and the right to demonstrate peacefully ([www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six\\_point\\_proposal.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf)). On 21 April, Security Council Resolution 2043 established the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) to monitor and support its full implementation.

## II. THE PROBLEM WITH THE REGIME'S MILITARY SOLUTION

In its attempt to manage the crisis, the regime has been plagued by a tendency to carry out solutions that ultimately create more problems than they solve. In the early stages, Bashar's belated, half-hearted political concessions led to broader popular demands even as the security services' routine misconduct undercut the credibility of whatever measures were taken. At the same time, by seeking to restrain the security services' behaviour, the president generated a level of concern and frustration within regime ranks and supporters that was all the greater, inasmuch as the official narrative already was denouncing the opposition as a frightening blend of criminals, Islamist fundamentalists and foreign-backed plotters.<sup>8</sup> As demonstrations snowballed, slogans radicalised, opposition violence intensified and even the modest reforms that were undertaken threatened entrenched interests, pressure swiftly grew for a more "decisive" regime crackdown.

This, in a nutshell, forms the backdrop to the subsequent, so-called security solution set in motion in late July 2011. It grew from a conviction that the chief problem was excessive leniency; tougher measures alone would enable the regime to regain the initiative and restore law and order. Then, but only then, could long-promised reforms be implemented. That was the theory. In practice, the security services' oftentimes brutal, unlawful and disorderly conduct made a bad situation far worse.<sup>9</sup> By seeking to force entire communities into submission, they pushed them toward armed resistance; the protest movement's militarisation was a logical by-product of heightened repression. In turn, this generated a number of new challenges: growing casualties in regime ranks coupled with the emergence of territorial enclaves evading its control and defying its claim to sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, spreading chaos and the security services' single-minded focus on suppressing political dissent created space for a surge in criminal activity, including in areas where effective policing would not have been difficult.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°109, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, 13 July 2011.

<sup>9</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°31, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, 24 November 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most vexing example was the small town of Zabadani, close to Damascus, where in mid-January 2012 armed locals were said to have successfully pushed back against army efforts to retake the area. "It looks like civil war. Syrian rebels buying arms and fighting closer to the capital", *The Economist*, 28 January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> An illustration is Salamiya, whose inhabitants are predominantly Ismailis. Despite numerous checkpoints and security nearby deployments, carjackings and kidnappings for ransom be-

Internationally, the situation likewise deteriorated. The more the regime resorted to brutality in dealing with the protest movement, the harsher the response by its longstanding foes in the West and the Arab world. Together, these internal and external developments undercut the authorities' oft-repeated promise of an imminent return to normalcy. For months, officials and sympathisers clung to the idea that victory against residual pockets of troublemakers was around the corner, and a few more decisive operations would make the difference. As that illusion crumbled, so did faith in the "security solution". Instead, the regime saw a "military" solution as the obvious successor to its failed predecessor.

By early 2012, regime supporters and, more broadly, Syrians who had lost faith in both the security services and the increasingly militarised opposition, pinned their hopes on what they still wished to see as the "national army".<sup>12</sup> Unlike the ubiquitous security services, the military had not been highly exposed and thus was largely unknown to the public;<sup>13</sup> its purported professionalism, balanced sectarian makeup<sup>14</sup> and relatively unscathed popular legitimacy led many to imagine it as the backbone of the state – a respected, effective institution that could finally take over from overly sectarian, incompetent security services, regain control of the situation and (depending on one's viewpoint) either create space for a serious political process or restore the regime's uncontested rule.<sup>15</sup>

For regime supporters, deploying the military was seen as a masterstroke – one so self-evident that they conjured up

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came pervasive. Crisis Group interviews and communications, residents of Salamiya or relatives, September 2011-May 2012. Many residents believe the security services to be at least complicit. An Ismaili activist from Salamiya recounted an incident that echoed broadly throughout his community: "On 1 May, a person was about to be kidnapped when a neighbour, a member of the [pro-regime] popular committee, shot at the kidnappers, killing one and wounding another. They both turned out to be off-duty air force security officers". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrians of various political, social and communal backgrounds, Damascus, January-February 2012.

<sup>13</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°108, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Although some units as well as the command structure are said to be dominated by Alawites, the rank and file tends to be representative of the country's underclass irrespective of communal affiliations.

<sup>15</sup> In recent months, this vision has inspired the regime's own narrative, which has celebrated the heroism of a "national army" bravely fighting to wrest the country from traitors, spies and terrorists. A statue representing "the Syrian soldier" has been erected on the capital's main square. A resident commented: "The regime made a big fuss around this statue ... to honour our dishonourable army. And they even advertised that it cost a million pounds". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.



various reasons as to why Assad had not resorted to it sooner: to give the opposition time to expose itself and thus uncover its true nature; out of fear of a spike in civilian casualties; because of the temporary presence of the Arab League-sponsored observers mission;<sup>16</sup> or out of concern that it might tilt the international balance in favour of military intervention.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, however, the assumed masterstroke failed as well, essentially for the very reasons the regime resorted to it in the first place: when the guns fall silent, the president and his regime are utterly bereft of the means to re-engage and normalise relations with entire swathes of society.

## A. THE FAILED SECURITY SOLUTION

Just as the “security solution” grew naturally from the regime’s evolving relationship with society, so too were its limitations inherent in the nature of the security services themselves. Although they have occupied a central position within the power structure since the 1970s, in more recent years their role had grown as they assumed ever greater responsibilities. More so even than his father, Hafez, from whom he inherited the country’s leadership in 2000, Bashar chose to overinvest in the “police state”, which he trusted more than the military. In an effort to impose his control and style upon the security services, he removed old figures, broke up their personal fiefdoms and promoted an entirely new and less experienced generation, while seeking to install greater discipline and more red tape.<sup>18</sup>

Bashar’s decisions aside, the security services also had to adapt to social changes and evolving threats. Political dissent had become a marginal phenomenon even as new challenges arose: the Baath party crumbled, various government branches decayed and social problems multiplied.<sup>19</sup> The crisis of state institutions was key in this respect. By early 2011, representative structures such as the people’s assembly (parliament), municipal councils and the Baath party itself had become little more than instruments of patronage. On the executive level, the state facilitated individual predatory tactics far more than it engaged in col-

lective policymaking.<sup>20</sup> The media played virtually no role in raising issues needing urgent attention. Bashar, who liked to pride himself on knowing his people better than they did, in fact lived in an ivory tower, oblivious to basic needs and banking almost entirely on his conduct of foreign policy as the source of his legitimacy and popularity. All in all, as state institutions became increasingly dysfunctional and discredited, the security services took on their tasks.

In a sense, the security services alone had their fingers on the pulse – and, as it were, the purse – of society.<sup>21</sup> They were at once very familiar with it and tarnished by this virtually constant interaction. Tasked with containing the impact of systemic ill-governance and unrestrained high-level corruption rather than with addressing their roots, the security apparatus essentially shielded the ruling family, relieving it of any sense of urgency let alone accountability. Unsurprisingly, Bashar’s slow-paced reform program was grinding to a halt on the eve of the uprising, even though the socio-political context made it both feasible and necessary.<sup>22</sup>

From the outset, the uprising thus presented the regime with a fundamental, virtually unsolvable riddle: the security services were the principal cause of its problems with the general population but they also were the regime’s principal – if not exclusive – means of dealing with it. As protests spread in the provinces, not least because the state and Party largely were absent security services quickly became the only visible official presence – a predominantly Alawite, thuggish, arrogant, rigid force that confirmed the very worst stereotypes about the regime.<sup>23</sup> As the power structure was stripped to its (essentially security-

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<sup>16</sup> On 2 November 2011, the Arab League announced a peace plan that required the regime to pull its troops out of urban areas, engage in an Arab League-mediated dialogue with the opposition, allow peaceful demonstrations, release prisoners and grant access to foreign media. Damascus agreed that day and on 19 December authorised deployment of an Arab League monitoring mission. The latter operated from 26 December to 28 January, when it was terminated due to lack of progress on the ground and a Saudi and Qatari push to take the issue to the UN.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, January 2012.

<sup>18</sup> For details, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People’s Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>20</sup> Unqualified individuals oftentimes would bribe their way into ill-paid jobs that offered the prospect of increased earnings through corruption. Many in the system followed a practice of deliberate obstructionism, compelling citizens to pay for what in principle were free services, enticing businessmen to routinely bribe low-ranking as well as senior officials. Security services were involved in all significant appointments, decisions and transactions. The judiciary was also riddled with corruption; legal actions too often closely resembled auctions. Crisis Group interview and observations, Damascus, 2005-2011.

<sup>21</sup> Strikingly, in the weeks preceding the uprising in March 2011, interviews with officials from a range of institutions – the presidential palace, government, Baath party leadership and security services – suggested that only members of the latter were taking the full measure of the simmering popular unrest, though they remained confused as to how to deal with it. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, January-March 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People’s Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? Syria’s Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People’s Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

driven) bone, pledges of reforms lacked all credibility insofar as the state lacked the institutional means to carry them out.

Making matters worse, the uprising profoundly affected the security services' relationship to society. First came the collapse of what Syrians dubbed the "wall of fear" – a barrier decades in the making that served as the foundation for the security services' authority and efficiency. In turn, this led them to further escalate violence in an effort to rebuild it that was as brutal as it was vain.<sup>24</sup> To this day, many security officers remain convinced that repression is the key and that the reason it has been ineffective is not that the remedy was wrong but the dosage insufficient.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, and as a consequence, actions taken by the security forces routinely prompted forms of popular reaction, given an environment that was no longer passive or subdued. As a result, these forces become less a regulator than a catalyst for change they could not control.

Thirdly, mounting reliance on sheer force further disconnected the security services from a society with which they had enjoyed an undeniably tense but also complex and nuanced relationship. Their mostly Alawite make-up and frequently sectarian behaviour deepened the divide by imparting it with a clear confessional character.<sup>26</sup> As these relations deteriorated, replaced by sentiments of mutual prejudice and fear, security forces appeared increasingly alien, so their grasp and knowledge of society significantly declined. In a sense, this is precisely what the regime's narrative intended: by depicting the popular uprising in ways that played to existential Alawite fears, it consolidated the power structure around a collective self-defence reflex.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> A member of the opposition expressed a widely held view corroborated by events on the ground: "People reached the point at which they preferred death to humiliation. The only thing the regime can do is kill us". Crisis Group interview, Muadhmiya, May 2012.

<sup>25</sup> An official said, "officers reacted aggressively whenever pressed about the shortcomings of the security solution. They repeat that they can finish all this within two days, if only they were given a free hand. They complain that they are still operating with too many constraints. True, the orders have been to avoid large-scale operations that could provide the West with an excuse to intervene". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2012. That the regime could "finish this within two days" or "two weeks" remained a leitmotiv in later months, even as repression exponentially escalated to no avail. Crisis Group interviews, security officers, central Syria and Damascus, April-June 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Among standard practices have been forcing detainees to glorify Bashar and pray to his picture; discriminating against Sunnis at checkpoints; and using derogatory language against them.

<sup>27</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit. The regime had every reason to intensify such fears as a means of shoring up its rank and file's loyalty. Alawites, even within the

But by further deepening the communitarian divide, this approach set Alawites clearly apart, highlighted the regime's sectarian fabric and made it harder for the security services to penetrate society.

Paradoxically, a security apparatus that assumed it was opaque and that the general public was transparent found itself operating in a reverse universe: it gradually became blind to what was happening on the street, while the street was increasingly aware of what the security apparatus was up to. As it were, the balance of intelligence progressively tipped in society's favour. Since the onset of the crisis, Syrians of diverse backgrounds have exhibited unprecedented interest in and knowledge of the regime's inner and most sensitive workings – aware of whom to blame for any given predicament and no longer fearful of pointing an accusatory finger.

Fourthly, the conflict reversed what (modest) steps had been taken under Bashar toward more institutionalised, "civilised" security services.<sup>28</sup> Abusive practices became pervasive: arbitrary detention, torture, summary executions and the wholesale destruction and theft of private property. Nor could one discern clear policy guidance. In some areas, the most vicious units were removed, replaced by more worthy ones; in others, the exact opposite held true. Day-to-day adjustments seemed to be the rule in an increasingly chaotic environment where central command was dissipating, offering considerable leeway to those operating on the ground. As all instructions reportedly were

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security services, initially were highly critical of a leadership that traditionally had treated them less as a privileged elite than as an army of slaves. Young members of the community for the most part joined the security apparatus solely because the regime offered them no other prospects. "Most of us don't benefit from clout or privileges [*wasta*] within the state so we cannot become regular employees [*muwazzafin*]. We go to the security or army instead". Crisis Group interview, security officer, central Syria, May 2012. Today, many such officers tend to express bitterness at the people who have risen up, claiming they enjoyed greater opportunities. Crisis Group interviews, central Syria and Damascus, May 2012. For details on conditions within the security services at the outset of the conflict, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Although officials claim efforts were made during the uprising to impose discipline and sanction misconduct, the record suggests otherwise. "There were abuses [committed by the security services], but we fought against them, and most of this is over now. We have 80 officers and non-commissioned officers currently in prison for mistakes they made, and at least ten of them are getting fifteen years in jail". Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Damascus, April 2012. "State security in Homs used to be like a mafia until strict disciplinary measures were imposed to clean it up and fire people". Crisis Group interview, security officer, coastal Syria, April 2012.

conveyed orally – presumably to avoid a paper trail – their latitude was greater still.<sup>29</sup>

What is more, the privatisation of violence initiated by the security services laid waste to whatever remained of their claim to institutional legitimacy. The large-scale empowerment of civilian militias – popularly known as *shabbiha*<sup>30</sup> – came to symbolise the regime's violence, equating it precisely with what it purported to be fighting: lawlessness and, all too often, sectarian savagery.

The *shabbiha* – whether they comprise mercenaries hired by the security services or self-defence “popular committees” (*lijan shaabiya*) which they allowed – are not necessarily all Alawites. Rather, they tend to come from social segments most inclined to do the regime's bidding as a means of social advancement through formal remuneration, acquisition of the spoils of civil strife or achievement of the status associated with bearing a weapon. But the bottom line is that their ubiquitous presence has shaped popular perceptions of what the security services and, increasingly, the regime itself, have become: a large network of armed militias. Even many Syrians who support the regime for fear of the alternative privately describe it that way. An insider blamed the West for making matters worse by failing to recognise the regime's true nature:

It makes no sense to pretend that this leadership can even start solving the problem. This is a regime that speaks like a state but acts like a militia. You have to see it for what it is and start looking for a way forward. If the international community just waits for the regime to fall or to find a solution, the country will turn to rubble.<sup>31</sup>

Fifthly and finally, violence became highly personalised, inflicted principally in the name of Bashar, who has been

the object of an unprecedented cult-like pageantry.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, and in the eyes of the opposition, it turned him from president to warlord.

By bringing the security services centre stage, the “security solution” catalysed these various, interrelated and deeply problematic trends. Lacking alternative instruments to deal with a restless society, the regime overused the principal tool at its disposal, in the process both irreparably damaging it and further emptying all other levers of power of meaning and relevance. This self-created impasse unavoidably led to the next – and current – stage: a scorched-earth policy premised on denial of the need or even desire to restore ties with large parts of society.

## B. SCORCHED EARTH COUNTER-INSURGENCY?

The shift from a security to a military solution occurred in late January 2012, when the armed forces staged a series of operations in the capital's vicinity, notably in the nearby town of Zabadani and the large suburb of Duma. By early February, the focus turned to Homs, the country's third largest city and self-proclaimed capital of the revolution; more specifically, it turned to the tightly-knit, conservative, impoverished and unruly district of Baba Amro, where armed opposition had been particularly vigorous and deeply entrenched.

Homs long had been a thorn in the regime's side. Its size and location – in the middle of the country, at the intersection of its key axes – gave it strategic prominence; its popular movement arguably was among the most intense and socially diverse, drawing from both an underclass of rural migrants and long-established urban elites; its militarisation began sooner and developed further than in most places,<sup>33</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, the city's varied sectarian fabric set Alawites against Sunnis more starkly than virtually anywhere else.

In response to this challenge, the regime's approach initially resembled classic counter-insurgency warfare. Baba Amro was cordoned off, and its civilian population reportedly was encouraged to leave<sup>34</sup> – something it was loath

<sup>29</sup> In ordinary times, orders were handed down to security chiefs, who would obey by directing their staff to go after the specified target – jihadis, black market currency exchangers, drug dealers and so forth. This tendency to work in fits and starts, concentrating on one group before moving to the next, exists to this day. It helps explain the intense campaigns of arrests focused on specific categories, as seen below in the case of humanitarian aid networks.

<sup>30</sup> *Shabbiha* referred originally to a largely unrelated phenomenon, namely the appearance of criminal gangs with ties to the ruling family that terrorised coastal dwellers and drove around in a type of Mercedes dubbed *shabah* (ghost). They were rooted out by the regime in the 1980s, but the expression stuck and now has come to loosely designate the wide array of groups whose behaviour is seen either as supporting the regime or as expressing its true, inherent nature. Resort to extra-legal militias has been a persistent phenomenon in Syria ever since the Baathist 1963 coup d'état and tends to recur in times of crisis.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Beirut, May 2012.

<sup>32</sup> For example, tanks typically display Bashar's picture on their turret.

<sup>33</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, various combatants, Homs, May 2012, suggest opposition armed groups appeared in the city as early as May 2011.

<sup>34</sup> A senior official explained: “The armed groups in and of themselves do not present a major military challenge. Things could go much faster, but we've been delayed by bad weather [there was some snow] and the presence of civilians. Our aim is not to kill civilians. We even encouraged them to leave by

to do given its lack of trust in the authorities. Slow but relentless shelling ensued, designed not so much to maximise casualties as to soften up the area ahead of ground operations that had proved too difficult in the past.<sup>35</sup> The official narrative's take on the offensive's final stages was akin to what in U.S. military doctrine would be called "clear, hold and build". State television displayed army troops – having rooted out "terrorist groups" which purportedly had been specifically targeted – celebrated as "liberators" by local civilians. The regime quickly announced a return to "normalcy", and Assad himself staged a visit to launch and supervise an alleged reconstruction drive.<sup>36</sup> Authorities blamed the massive destruction on the opposition, which it accused of resorting to sabotage, while ignoring the large numbers of displaced residents.<sup>37</sup>

The operation was either an unmitigated failure or an undeniable success, depending on one's perspective. If the goal was to solve the challenge presented by Baba Amro, then the regime did so, but at the cost of essentially depopulating the neighbourhood. Armed groups were not destroyed; they chose to retreat. Local civilians fled devastation. In the subsequent period, there was neither normalisation nor reconstruction, sending a clear signal to others around the country about what the regime had to offer.

The regime paid a price internationally as well, though ultimately not as high as might have been expected. The mainstream media described events as a systematic effort to massacre civilians; an experienced reporter who was wounded during the assault went as far as to compare Baba Amro to Srebrenica and Rwanda.<sup>38</sup> However, as observers and commentators multiplied their calls for some sort of outside intervention, the international community did little, including those in the West and the Arab world most hostile to the regime. The impression of impotence thus projected deflated and demoralised an opposition that had invested much of its hopes in the possibility of international intervention. The regime, by contrast, battered

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megaphone, but they will have nothing of it". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2012.

<sup>35</sup> In December 2011, an official stressed the difficulties: "Civil war has started in parts of Homs but it is hard to step in, especially in neighbourhoods like Baba Amro. Our people make forays, but casualties are heavy on both sides. For us to really go in would entail levels of violence that we cannot consider at this stage. There are many children and women, and this is one of the reasons why we must think twice before proceeding". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 March and 27 March 2012.

<sup>37</sup> A UN official involved in discussions with the government said it rejected the standard terminology "Internally Displaced Persons", preferring to describe them as "people who had left their homes". Crisis Group interview, May 2012.

<sup>38</sup> BBC, 3 March 2012.

by months of mounting foreign and domestic pressure, felt emboldened.<sup>39</sup>

After a month of siege and shelling, the takeover of Baba Amro sent a powerful message regarding the regime's superior force, its willingness to use it as well as its domestic and foreign foes' inability to prevent this. If anything, Baba Amro's fate cleared the way for more vigorous deployment of the military solution. In the period that followed, the army announced a string of victories in other parts of the country as, one by one, it took on armed opposition groups in their remaining enclaves.

Baba Amro became a template for the military solution. From strict counter-insurgency it morphed into collective punishment and verged on a wholesale scorched earth policy. As an increasing number of areas were destroyed, the regime made fewer efforts to protect or support affected civilians.<sup>40</sup> Nor did it develop any discernible strategy to cope with the swelling number of displaced,<sup>41</sup> worse, many were subjected to harassment by security services that – given the displaced persons' affiliation to opposition strongholds – perceived them as a threat. Indeed, security forces have been known to arrest individuals seeking to aid or shelter the displaced.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, there has been no tangible sign of rebuilding or reconstruction in any of the devastated and depopulated zones.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°32, *Now or Never: A Negotiated Solution for Syria*, 5 March 2012; Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Whatever small steps the regime took to address these problems typically generated hostile reactions from local citizens who viewed their purported benefactors as their assailants – thus further discouraging the regime to act.

<sup>41</sup> In July, National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar suggested such a strategy might be in the works, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9716>. To date, it has had no tangible expression.

<sup>42</sup> An activist involved in supporting the displaced, and whose network suffered from several arrests, asserted: "Refugees and those who help them are hounded. In [the Damascus suburb of] Muadhmiya, the authorities arrested both a family of refugees and the owner of the flat they were renting. They tell people they should go back to Baba Amro. They don't care that everything is destroyed there". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>43</sup> In a rare, possible counter-example, Haffeh, close to the Mediterranean coastal city of Latakia, reportedly benefited from some reconstruction immediately after the end of military operations. Crisis Group correspondence, journalist originally from Latakia (and generally critical of the regime), June 2012. Arguably, both the economic crisis and international sanctions have depleted the state's budget to the point where meaningful reconstruction would be virtually impossible. That said, the ruling family's deep pockets almost certainly could fund projects, for example in an area like Baba Amro, if it were a priority. Bashar's cousin and business mogul Rami Makhlouf reportedly

To the contrary: in areas the military entered, looting assumed industrial-scale proportions, with army trucks ferrying out war booty.<sup>44</sup> Such practices, which had not been prevalent during the security solution phase, were reminiscent of the military's behaviour when it operated as a self-proclaimed peacekeeping force in Lebanon; in a sense, it was deploying on its own terrain habits acquired abroad. The security services and *shabbiha* soon followed suit; pillaging in Homs reached the level of an overt and institutionalised practice.<sup>45</sup>

In like manner, troops widely resorted to arson. They reportedly burned down homes during early military operations, including in Rankous in late January. Similar reports since have become far more pervasive, emanating from various parts of the country and coming hand in hand with allegations of wanton destruction of private property as a means of raising the cost of dissent.<sup>46</sup> Tellingly, one of the distinctive traits of the so-called military solution has been the army's tendency to shell towns and neighbourhoods without ever undertaking a ground operation, as if recapture was not an objective.<sup>47</sup> Instead, by operating

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pledged to help rebuild Homs, though there has yet to be any sign of it. Crisis Group interview, businessmen and residents of Homs, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>44</sup> In Zabadani, a small town adjacent to the capital, villas owned by regime officials and wealthy Damascene families were plundered on two occasions, as troops established positions in their midst ahead of January-February 2012 operations. During the first campaign, troops broke down doors, stole food, uprooted trees to improve visibility and demolished stone walls to erect fortifications. During the second, they stripped villas of furniture and bathroom fittings. Crisis Group interviews, villa owners, Damascus, February, April 2012. An official corroborated the claims with detailed pictures from his cell phone.

<sup>45</sup> Alawites remaining in a city that a majority of Sunnis have left are said to be engaging in the systematic looting of depopulated areas. Stolen goods reportedly have been put on sale in a dedicated market place and given rise to trade with merchants from other cities, notably Aleppo. Crisis Group interview, Alawite activist from Homs, Beirut, June 2012; also, "In Homs, 'Sunni markets' sell looted goods", Reuters, 19 June 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons from Rankous, Damascus, February 2012. See also "A report from Rankous", *The Economist*, 18 May 2012. On widespread burning and destruction of houses in Idlib governorate, see, eg, "They Burned my Heart". War Crimes in Northern Idlib during Peace Plan Negotiations", Human Rights Watch, May 2012; *The Guardian*, 4 May 2012. Examples abound of such wanton destruction and at times suggest methodical, gratuitous reprisal. "I went to a village where a big demonstration was held. The next day the *shabbiha* came and broke the windows of every car they could find, some one hundred of them". Crisis Group interview, activist from Deraa, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>47</sup> In late April-early May, villages in Southern Hawran allegedly were shelled at a distance, to empty them of inhabitants. Crisis Group interview, area residents, Damascus, May 2012. Muhasan, close to Dayr Zor in the east, reportedly also was bombed

from a distance, the military is able to keep the number of casualties and deserters from its ranks to a minimum, even as it exacts a high price from regime opponents.

This logic of collective punishment was captured by an alleged encounter between Bashar and prominent Damascene merchants. A businessman recounted the scene as described to him by purported participants:

On 8 May, Bashar met with over twenty leading Sunni businessmen from the capital. He said that he had heard that some of them were supporting the revolution. He said that, if it was true, he was willing to do to [the historical commercial hubs of] Hamidiya and Madhat Pasha what he had done to Baba Amro. He wanted them to know that this would pose him no problem whatsoever.<sup>48</sup>

As a result, opponents have come to see the regime as capable of the most horrendous exactions. They have come to believe reports that it deliberately targeted children, massacred in cold blood entire families and engaged in other forms of arbitrary killings, sexually abused women, summarily executed detainees and burned bodies.<sup>49</sup> Whether these are true or not, the fact that they are seen as credible suggests the degree to which the regime has crossed a threshold in the minds of its citizens.

A principal victim of this phenomenon, unsurprisingly, has been the military's reputation. As seen, it enjoyed a measure of credibility and respect at the outset; had it justified those feelings by acting as a national army – cracking down on armed opposition groups while seeking to minimise civilian sufferings; restoring law and order even at the cost of pushing back against security services and *shabbiha*; and, more generally, acting more professionally than the security services – it almost certainly could have rallied

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repeatedly by loyalist troops who made no clear effort to retake it. Crisis Group interview, Muhasan resident, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, pro-opposition businessman, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>49</sup> The UN in particular has claimed that regime forces deliberately targeted young children; see Associated Press, 24 February 2012. A prominent figure from Dayr Zor claimed that "for every casualty on the regime's side, its troops randomly killed five citizens". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012. Increasingly, alleged rape victims come forward; see, eg, *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2012; and *The Atlantic*, 11 July 2012. In late April/early May, rumours spread that the regime had issued orders to carry out summary executions. "The prisons are full now, so the orders are to finish off anyone who can be". Crisis Group interview, businessman, Damascus, May 2012. A former official asserted: "In Homs, the state hospital was turned into an interrogation and execution centre. Troops have been burning bodies there to ensure they remain unaccounted for". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

considerable support, including among some opposition sympathisers. Instead, it rapidly assumed the identity of an alien occupation force, estranged from large parts of the population. A security official himself used this expression:

I need to work on the ground like an occupation force more than as a local police. Forget that the enemy is Syrian and that you are Syrian. You are like an occupation to them. You need to erect good fences between you and them. They must count to ten before they attack you, meaning you have to make it very expensive for them to do so, so they will tire of using weapons. People anywhere in the world like to live more than they like to fight.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than an alternative to the security forces, the military came to be seen as their mere extension, following the same logic only with far greater firepower.<sup>51</sup> Worse, the army has been tainted (justifiably or not) by massacres that were perpetrated virtually under its nose, most notably in Hula.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, whether or not it was directly responsible for such events, the military's propensity to leave a vacuum in the wake of its destruction created space for such horrors. The regime has proved incapable of restoring any sustainable security or military presence in areas reportedly "liberated" by its forces,<sup>53</sup> with the exception of those that remain largely depopulated; even in those, armed groups typically seep back in.

Ultimately, just as the political solution undermined those involved in politics, and the security solution wrecked the security services' ability to operate, so the military solution eviscerated the military's own credibility. A regime insider said:

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<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A regime insider drew a parallel between the regime policy and the U.S. "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and Iraq: "It is true that the uprising is partly Islamist. We violently criticised the U.S. after 9/11 for dealing with the issue of militant Islamism solely on the basis of confrontation and spiralling violence. We used to boast that we were savvier and more subtle. Yet, we are doing exactly the same thing, in our own home and with the same results". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, April 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrians opposed to the regime, Damascus, April-May 2012.

<sup>52</sup> For background, see Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, "Dozens of children die in brutal attack on Syrian town", *The New York Times*, 26 May 2012. Unlike in other massacres, UN observers reached the site in time to unambiguously establish that civilians – including women and children – had been murdered.

<sup>53</sup> In mid-May, despite two military operations, opposition combatants once more claimed control of Zabadani, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes on street corners and in cafés, as if nothing had happened. Anti-regime songs blared in minibuses carrying passengers who sang along. Crisis Group observations, May 2012.

The regime cannot solve this crisis without changing direction. This is what we have been waiting for all along, yet it continues to forge ahead, burning its bridges one by one. I think that is partly intentional: some fear any change and prefer this headlong rush. Take the army. It was broadly respected and could have been part of a solution at some stage. Why send it to the front line, and under the security services' control? To burn it, like all the rest.<sup>54</sup>

The regime's actual intent notwithstanding, the military's involvement in acts of wanton brutality almost certainly served to diminish prospects of a coup; its legitimacy in tatters and its popular support at a minimum, it would be taking a considerable risk were it to challenge the regime's leadership. In another way too, spoiling the military's image might have benefited the regime by undercutting the notion that it might serve as the backbone of the state, ensuring order and stability in the event of a political transition. In that respect, these dynamics arguably further diminished international appetite to push for regime change through reliance on the military institution.

### C. THE END OF TERRITORIAL COMPARTMENTALISATION

From the regime's perspective, perhaps the most significant drawback of the military solution has been the reversal of one of the principal gains of its predecessor, namely the Syrian territory's compartmentalisation.<sup>55</sup> Thanks to locally recruited informants and proxies, an expansive network of checkpoints and the security services' own extensive deployments, between mid-2011 and early 2012 the popular movement had in effect been partitioned into a number of separate sections within which specific rules were set.

In Damascus and Aleppo, the services made massive efforts to insulate the most central districts from their generally restless periphery so as to prevent dissent from spreading inwards. In several minority-inhabited areas – the predominantly Druze south and the predominantly Kurdish north east – the regime showed restraint, seeking to avoid the kind of bloodshed that might spin out of control. In others, including the rebellious Ismaili town of Salamiya as well as some heavily Christian areas, it resorted to intense pressure to ensure that its narrative of a sectarian

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<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, April 2012. Schoolchildren have come to play games in which the "regime army" (*nizami*) confronts the "free army" (*hurr*), much like cowboys and Indians – a powerful indicator of the army's waning star as a national institution. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>55</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit.

and fundamentalist Sunni uprising would not be undercut by minority group protests.

In opposition strongholds, security forces did not systematically target all signs of protest;<sup>56</sup> instead they focused on particularly large demonstrations, attempts to join forces with neighbouring areas, excessively provocative slogans or attacks on regime assets.<sup>57</sup> In those instances, the response typically was harsh, even deadly. Overall, the ebb and flow of violence appeared to be implicitly regulated by formal or informal arrangements between protest leaders and local security officers aimed at limiting friction and bloodshed.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See, eg, Stephen Starr, "The Fog of Civil War", *Middle East Channel*, 23 July 2012.

<sup>57</sup> A businessman with close regime ties said, "an officer in [the southern town of] Deraa just told me that one of the biggest problems they face are personal insults, which inflame security personnel. They don't care quite as much when abuse is aimed at the president". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2012.

<sup>58</sup> There are many illustrations of these implicit understandings struck at the time of the security solution. In the desert town of Tadmur, Crisis Group witnessed demonstrations in front of security headquarters that were remarkably unhindered. Unlike most protests, they were neither filmed nor posted on the internet, almost certainly making it easier for local regime forces to ignore them. Crisis Group observations, Tadmur, July 2011. An activist from Dayr Zor said, "in Dayr Zor, it seems the areas where the military is deployed are better off than where the armed opposition operates. In the latter, the fighting is constant. In the former, protesters coordinate with the military to keep demonstrations alive without overly provoking the security services". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2011. An activist working in the Damascus suburbs said, "there are many forms of negotiations between the protest movement and the security apparatus. In Barzeh, young protesters told me that at some point they were exhausted, and security forces were threatening to launch a major attack. But those forces were exhausted as well. So the protesters kept a lower profile, demonstrating in smaller numbers for a while. The security forces could boast they had succeeded, and both sides enjoyed a break before resuming business as usual". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, January 2012. "In [the town of] Tell, our local leadership has been quite mature and sophisticated. They made sure properties of [Baath party national command member Abdallah] al-Ahmar didn't come under attack in order to co-opt his family. They struck a deal with the security forces, ensuring they would stay within certain limits and organise demonstrations only in specified areas. That has worked well until now. Many deserters have come to our side, but they don't mount operations in Tell; they join others and do so in Duma or Barze". Crisis Group interview, resident of Tell, north of Damascus, Damascus, May 2012. A more recent example was the nearby town of Yabrud. Austin Tice, "In Syria, an oasis from the war," *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2012.

In some areas, of course, armed confrontation escalated. Here too, however, it followed a relatively clear geographic pattern: where repression was particularly ruthless, armed opposition groups emerged, for the most part as self-defence forces. Their popular legitimacy stemmed from their ability to protect a perimeter within which protests could occur, hence the seemingly paradoxical situation in which peaceful demonstrations were made possible by military means.<sup>59</sup> Opposition groups organised increasingly widespread and bold attacks aimed at security services' informants, proxies, snipers, checkpoints and local headquarters. In central Syria in particular, at least some of these groups also engaged in tit-for-tat sectarian violence and criminal activity.<sup>60</sup>

All in all, however, these more violent dynamics were relatively circumscribed, as the regime maintained its stranglehold over much of the national landscape. In early 2012, expressing a broader sense of confidence in regime ranks, a senior official summed up: "Armed groups are militarily weak and geographically dispersed; we can easily crush them".<sup>61</sup>

One of the upshots of the military solution was to put an end to this territorial segregation. It was the political equivalent of kicking a hornets' nest: as the regime depopulated some areas, it exported their problems elsewhere. As repression grew exponentially, the opposition could rely on expanding solidarity networks that cut across formerly segregated compartments. Armed opposition groups, realising the limits of improvised self-defence in the face of armoured, airborne and artillery attacks, sought better weapons, increased their mobility and shifted to more conventional guerrilla tactics – going on the offensive rather than seeking to hold their ground.<sup>62</sup> For the regime, the calculus might well have been straightforward: by raising the costs of violent dissent, it would alienate ordinary citizens from such opposition tactics, thereby cutting off armed groups from their natural social base. Yet, excessive force and systematic abuse, coupled with the absence of any genuine regime outreach, ensured that those groups retained sufficient popular appeal, and thus sufficient resili-

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<sup>59</sup> For details, see Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "Beyond the Fall of the Syrian Regime", Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 24 February 2012. Armed groups typically comprised local volunteers who were joined by army deserters returning home to protect their communities and be protected by them. In areas with a strong military tradition, such as the central town of Rastan, the proportion of trained soldiers was particularly high. More than their numbers, deserters contributed their military culture and know-how to the nascent armed opposition.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, January 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

ence and mobility.<sup>63</sup> They were able to multiply armed attacks and targeted killings of individuals with ties to the regime across the country. Perhaps most importantly, the decision to go after its foes in opposition-held areas unwittingly brought the peril nearer home.

Damascus provides apt illustration. The impact of the military solution on the capital was, from all appearances, deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, by mid-2012 its central neighbourhoods seemed a bubble of calm and intense consumerism. Dense city traffic projected an impression of normalcy; luxury cars were more visible than usual; pedestrians filled streets, and all shops remained open; popular teashops bustled with activity. Indeed, several fancy cafés were opened, contributing to an artificial sense of economic revival.<sup>64</sup>

In reality, much of this activity reflected the fact that Damascus was absorbing displaced people from other parts of the country. Wealthy villa and farm owners on the outskirts of the capital relocated to the city as they faced mounting insecurity; idle and anxious, they drove around and engaged in frantic consumption.<sup>65</sup> Members of the provincial bourgeoisie, notably from Homs, likewise moved in with friends and relatives. The poorer, more destitute displaced sought refuge in a belt of underprivileged and rebellious suburbs.<sup>66</sup> As a general matter, a population expansion translated into an increase in available money, and both these upsurges were on display in a newly energised city.

The flip side was that the capital ceased being an oasis of calm, an exception to the conflict. To begin, the sudden influx of outsiders served as a collective eye-opener. Syrians fleeing military assaults were both shocked and distressed by the contrast between the devastation they had just witnessed and the artificial normalcy the regime pro-

jected in Damascus. An activist shuttling back and forth between Damascus and Deraa said:

When you're in Deraa, you could swear the regime will be over within 48 hours. When you come back to Damascus, you feel it is here to stay forever. These are two worlds apart. Refugees from Homs arriving in the capital were dumbfounded. They had no idea things were as they are. It suddenly hit them that the regime was not on its last legs.<sup>67</sup>

In mirror image, residents of the capital who had been relatively insulated from the violence were shaken by the mere presence of so many internally displaced in their midst, as well as by horrifying first-hand testimony.

Moreover, the constant arrival of new contingents of angry and suffering Syrians into the capital's periphery intensified the sense of collective plight and purpose. Although in some instances the displaced, exhausted, are said to have adopted a low profile, in others they immediately resumed their protests, giving the popular movement a shot in the arm.<sup>68</sup>

One of the most consequential results was that Damascus soon became the next battleground for armed opposition groups, which began active preparations by April 2012. Some combatants moved in haphazardly, part of the flow of forced displacement. But there also was a more focused, deliberate approach, itself the result of several factors. The international community's passivity convinced many that the long hoped-for intervention would not materialise.<sup>69</sup> The fight for Homs essentially was over, the city largely depopulated. Elsewhere, the regime's superior firepower and the increasingly ugly nature of the struggle left little reason to believe that the armed opposition could register significant gains in those provinces that had long seen the bulk of the fighting. In contrast, bringing the battle to the capital held the promise of a potential game-

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<sup>63</sup> The regime gave no indication that one would be rewarded for surrendering, ensuring that all who rebelled paid a huge price. At best, areas that engaged in insubordination would suffer endless harassment by security forces and neglect by the state. An activist initially opposed to armed resistance explained: "The shift from self-defence to guerrilla warfare is broadly accepted by people who have suffered indescribable repression. The armed groups still act in accordance with a sort of popular mandate, although this mandate has evolved: now it's not just about defending against the regime but attacking it as the only way forward". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group observations, Damascus, April-May 2012.

<sup>65</sup> This trend continued into the summer, albeit in ever-narrowing enclaves. See, eg, Janine Di Giovanni, "Champagne flows while Syria burns", *Newsweek*, 9 July 2012.

<sup>66</sup> For the most part, those who were forced to flee areas that had witnessed intense fighting tended to distrust residents of areas that had not; conversely, a profound sense of solidarity exists among people from different hotspots.

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<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>68</sup> "When refugees from Homs got here, the popular movement was energised. Before, we used to demonstrate two or three times a week at most. After their arrival, we went out every day". Crisis Group interview, resident of Tell, north of Damascus, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>69</sup> An opposition armed group commander in Homs explained that the struggle over Baba Amro was waged in hopes it would help tip the balance in favour of international intervention: "The leaders of the armed groups in Baba Amro held their ground because they expected intervention. They thought: 'We are in the 21st century, and the international community will not allow Assad to commit massacres like [his father did in 1982 in] in Hama'". Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012. By mid-2012, anti-regime activists by and large reached the conclusion that the uprising would have to succeed on its own. Crisis Group interviews and monitoring of community-based media, June-July 2012.



changer. As early as May 2012, the commander of an armed group in central Syria said:

We have started gathering in the suburbs of Damascus. After the battle for Baba Amro, we realised that the regime wouldn't fall in Homs. We are proud to say that Homs is the capital of the revolution, but nonetheless that is not the place where the regime will be defeated. So we sent armed groups, activists, money and arms to Damascus. We believe that the fighters and activists from Homs are the best. We have acquired know-how and experience after tens of battles against the regime. The *shabbiha* and security forces in the capital are used to brutalising demonstrators, but they have never confronted people who would not back down. The fighters of Baba Amro and Khaldiyeh will give them a hard time. In theory, we could retake Baba Amro, but it's not worth wasting more men, money and bombs.<sup>70</sup>

In late April and early May, the struggle for Damascus began with a series of small attacks against regime assets<sup>71</sup> as well as occasional, spectacular bombings.<sup>72</sup> But a steady pattern of targeted killings heralded a change. By May, virtually all residents had first-hand knowledge of an officer or alleged informant who had been assassinated in their neighbourhood.<sup>73</sup> According to opposition leaders on the ground, this gradual build-up was purposeful and meticulous. One of its coordinators said, "it's very organised, and every step is weighed and considered because security is very powerful here. That's why there is a strong focus on getting rid of regime spies".<sup>74</sup>

Around Damascus, numerous checkpoints were erected by late May but to no visible effect. In June, the conflict intensified, as the regime launched massive pre-emptive assaults on opposition strongholds such as Qudsaya and

Duma (to the north west and north east of the capital, respectively). In July, the geography of the fighting shifted, as major confrontations stretched to the south, in Tadhmun and Hajr Aswad. Over time, street battles became more furious and more widespread, reaching the immediate periphery of the capital's most central districts.

The impact on the regime's core narrative was devastating. It had claimed that the crisis was manageable, contained within defined territorial spaces and social categories; that it did not threaten the power structure; and that a so-called silent majority continued to back it, as evidenced by the calm that prevailed in Damascus. One by one, those assertions were shattered, even as the official media did its utmost to defend them. That said, this in no way has undermined the regime's determination to fight on; for now, its resolve appears unbroken.<sup>75</sup>

#### D. MISSED POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES?

Unwilling to consider a meaningful political solution when it felt strong,<sup>76</sup> the regime has appeared equally unpre-

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012. Another commander concurred: "There are fighters from Homs in Damascus. We have fighters in the heart of the capital". Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012. As suggested above, relations between the two cities had been deepening for months, as Damascenes mobilised in support of their besieged brethren. The commander added: "We have a huge network of relations with opposition committees in Damascus. The help goes both ways: they help us financially and with medicine; we help them with our own know-how and relations".

<sup>71</sup> One attack targeted the central bank, which is located on a roundabout virtually surrounded by several key security services facilities. Reuters, 29 April 2012.

<sup>72</sup> See, eg, Reuters, 5 May 2012; Associated Press, 10 May 2012. Authorities pointed to the deadliest attacks as proof that the opposition was nothing more than a band of terrorists, while the opposition claimed the regime had orchestrated them precisely in order to make that claim.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition leader, Damascus, June 2012.

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<sup>75</sup> The 8 July trip to Damascus by the joint UN/Arab League special envoy, Kofi Annan, allegedly was premised on the assumption that Bashar would be more amenable to compromise given the deteriorating situation on the ground and (marginally) tougher language coming out of Moscow. The delegation reportedly was surprised to encounter a president "even more relaxed and sure of himself" than previously. Crisis Group correspondence, UN official privy to the mission, July 2012. He made no serious concessions. The same official confirmed that a leaked transcript of the meeting – which showed Bashar cracking jokes and feeling in control – was "virtually verbatim". See Jean Aziz, "Assad and Annan: Back to square one", *Al-Akhbar*, 10 July 2012.

<sup>76</sup> This was the case for example in the wake of the February 2012 Russian/Chinese veto at the UN Security Council. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. In February 2012, a senior official said, "right now the regime feels very strong. We see that the president still enjoys the support of a good share of society. The international community is divided. The opposition would like to impose its conditions on us, but we don't see the balance of powers in that light. Why would we accept their logic of toppling the regime? We believe that we are in a position to impose our conditions. Anyway, the fact that the opposition rejects dialogue makes it all the easier for us". Crisis Group interview, Damascus. In late April, amid the phase of the military solution, the same official exhibited even greater confidence: "The regime is regaining ground militarily. Armed groups have lost virtually all the bases from which they could operate. Even in Idlib governorate we have retaken all major cities; only a few pockets of dissent in Jabal al-Zawiya remain. Armed groups can still mount attacks but in an isolated and scattered manner. And prospects of foreign intervention are not to be taken seriously at this stage". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012. During that period, someone with close ties to the ruling family described the cumulative impact of a

pared to do so when showing signs of weakness. This has been a regular feature of Bashar's rule. For years, he justified the slow pace of reform by pointing to the threats presented by international actors – notably in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and 2004 hardening of Western policy toward Syria.<sup>77</sup> When the regime's situation became far more relaxed in 2009 and 2010 – at a time when Syria reasserted itself in Lebanon, deepened ties to Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, France, Qatar and, to an extent, the U.S. and maintained relations with close traditional allies – reforms again proceeded at a crawl, this time due to lack of pressure.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, in recent months and despite shifting domestic and international sands, the regime has maintained a stubbornly steady political approach. Having laid out his roadmap for reforms in 2011, Bashar systematically went through its every item, checking boxes one by one, oblivious both to the plan's irrelevance and to the evolving context.<sup>79</sup>

To many, Syrians as well as foreigners, the notion that the president might ever have contemplated a change of course was fanciful. Others had been more hopeful; although not naive about the nature of the regime and although their expectations were low, they nonetheless sought omens of a potential evolution in subtle moves or hints. This explains why presidential speeches, elections or a government reshuffle could arouse at times unexpected interest among regime supporters and fence-sitters. Yet, they were repeatedly disappointed.

At the core of Bashar's reform program was a new constitution that was submitted to a referendum in late February, even as the siege of Baba Amro endured.<sup>80</sup> According

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string of unexpected good news: "We have been surprised by how things played out. We didn't expect the Russian veto. Even the President didn't. We didn't expect the Russians would fight so hard for us, nor the Chinese. And we didn't expect our army to perform as it did". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012.

<sup>77</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Evolving Strategy*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards? Syria's New Hand*, 16 December 2009.

<sup>78</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> In October 2011, a presidential decree appointed a "national committee" tasked with amending the constitution by February 2012. See Syrian Arab News Agency, 15 October 2011. The next steps in the reform program included electing a new parliament under a revised electoral law and forming a new government. During this period, municipal elections and internal Baath party elections were held; the regime touted both as symbols of the new democratic spirit.

<sup>80</sup> For background, see Alastair Lyon, "Syria referendum goes ahead amid military onslaught", Reuters, 26 February 2012. The poll was viewed with scorn and derision within opposition circles. Parodies were ubiquitous. In a scene filmed in Homs, heavily bandaged residents dropped shrapnel and spent ammu-

to official results, turnout was 59.4 per cent, with 89.4 per cent reportedly endorsing the text.<sup>81</sup> For the most part, the revised constitution left in place the fabric of the power structure, save for the heavily trumpeted downgrading of the Baath from the "leader of state and society" to one party among others.<sup>82</sup> That change was largely devoid of meaning; the Baath party long had become a mere shadow of itself amid a system built around unlimited presidential powers, ruling family networks and imperious security services. As if to dampen any hope derived from even this concession, the 8 March anniversary of the 1963 Baath takeover remained a national holiday and, on 7 April 2012, the 65th anniversary of the party's founding was celebrated with ostentatious pomp.<sup>83</sup>

Next, per Bashar's roadmap, parliamentary elections were held in early May even as violence raged in many parts of the country. Only the most docile opposition figures participated, and, even among this group, several ultimately pulled out on the grounds that the exercise was meaningless. In Damascus, unlike in past polls, members of respected families refused to stand; in what was perceived as an act of sheer provocation, three of the ruling family's most infamous business cronies – Muhammad Hamsho, Samer Dibs and Ahmad Nabil Kuzbari – formed a list, spending lavishly and buying the largest billboards.<sup>84</sup> The authori-

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tion rounds in a makeshift ballot box, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2m6gFTJA18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2m6gFTJA18); in another, voters dumped pieces of rubble in a large bin.

<sup>81</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency, 27 February 2012. With some 51 per cent of the electoral body allegedly having thus endorsed the text, regime sympathisers could maintain that a majority of the population was on its side.

<sup>82</sup> As early as June 2011, Bashar had raised expectations regarding this symbolically important issue. See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, op. cit. However, by the time the move materialised, the conflict had deteriorated to the point of rendering it largely irrelevant.

<sup>83</sup> For footage of nationwide celebrations extensively covered by the state media, see Syrian Arab News Agency, 8 April 2012.

<sup>84</sup> The Tadamun party, the first to be created under the new 2011 party law, withdrew its candidates on the grounds that "it expected the elections to produce the same results as the previous ones". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, May 2012. Asma Kuftaro, a granddaughter of the late mufti, Ahmad Kuftaro, and Shaaban Azuz, the head of the workers trade union, also withdrew. See Sami Moubayed, "Many Syrians to shun elections. People have no confidence in process", *Gulf News*, 7 May 2012. The poll was dismissed in mainstream opposition circles and, again, extensively parodied. "Activists mock Syria elections in online videos", Reuters, 8 May 2012. A prominent Damascene businessman said, "no big family took part. None of us wants to have anything to do with this regime. But the regime couldn't care less anyway. At first we were active, seeking to voice our concerns to decision-makers. But it was all a waste of time". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, April-May 2012.

ties claimed that voter turnout was about 51 per cent, enabling them to assert that the so-called reform process was backed by a slight popular majority.<sup>85</sup>

With a new parliament in session, the subsequent step was to reshuffle the government. In June, the president appointed a cabinet. It included two (especially compliant) opposition figures, Qadri Jamil, as deputy prime minister for economic affairs, and Ali Haidar, who assumed the novel portfolio of minister of state for national reconciliation affairs.<sup>86</sup> But those small steps were overshadowed by clear signs of continuity, with a familiar team led by an old-style Baathist who had served as agriculture minister under the previous government.<sup>87</sup> Even had the regime attempted a more convincing face-lift, it is doubtful it would have succeeded; very few credible Syrians remained willing to work with it as repression escalated. The regime has been moving in reverse for some time, weeding out from its ranks its more forward-looking, open-minded figures.<sup>88</sup> The reshuffle dashed once and for all the pro-

spect of a “national unity government” dangled months earlier by Bashar when he had pledged to form a cabinet that included “all political forces”.<sup>89</sup>

In a series of speeches, Bashar laid out the progress of his reform program.<sup>90</sup> By June, he declared it a complete success, rebuffing any further demands while equating all forms of dissent as the work of traitors, saboteurs and terrorists.<sup>91</sup> Although officially dialogue remained the goal, the so-called reforms essentially had the pernicious effect of shutting the door on any inclusive dialogue while justifying ruthlessness in waging an existential battle against the opposition. The only available option, the regime implied, was steadfastness in the face of a global conspiracy and the crushing of one segment of society in the name of another. Dialogue, as it were, was premised on the prior extinction of all armed opposition.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The Iranian ambassador to Lebanon went as far as to describe the turnout as evidence of “the failure of the enemies’ plots and the Syrian government’s seriousness in carrying out reforms”. Fars News agency, 15 May 2012.

<sup>86</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency, 24 June 2012. A Soviet-trained economist born in 1952, Qadri Jamil leads a splinter faction of the small communist party. Tolerated by the regime – he publicly supports Bashar’s continued leadership; rejects foreign interference; and applauds Russia’s stance – he won a seat in the 2012 parliament, something he had failed to do in previous polls. An eye-doctor by training and former classmate of Bashar, Ali Haidar (born in 1962) heads the Syrian branch of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, an organisation established in Lebanon in the 1930s that was known in particular for rejecting Greater Syria’s colonial-era partition and whose platform focuses on Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism. It progressively gained regime acceptance, especially under its current leader. Although the party formally is illegal, Ali Haidar was in parliament prior to the uprising. His son, Ismail, a pro-revolutionary activist, was killed in May 2012 in unclear circumstances.

<sup>87</sup> In the run-up to the formation of the new government, a local journalist with close ties to security officials foreshadowed this outcome: “I asked them whether they could appoint an opposition figure as prime minister. They replied: ‘Never. We will appoint a Baathist. We have the majority. Maybe we will give some minor ministries to the opposition’”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. That the new government head comes from Dayr Zor rather than Damascus or Aleppo was read by some observers as both a punishment and a warning for those two cities from where prime ministers traditionally have hailed.

<sup>88</sup> According to various sources, the regime had sought to broaden its outreach. A former minister who became a moderate opponent said, “the regime tried, but there is no one out there. Who else could have joined? For example, I was approached three times and even pressured to become minister. But there is just no way under present circumstances”. Crisis Group interview, July 2012. A gradual, self-inflicted purge has occurred within the power structure as some of its least subservient offi-

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cials have faded into the background, silently withdrawn or been sidelined. For example, the move toward the security solution was accompanied by the marginalisation of many who opposed it, including Manaf Tlass, as previously discussed; Vice President Faruq Sharaa; Defence Minister Ali Habib (who has since disappeared from view); and the governors of Hama and Dayr Zor, whose response to demonstrations had been relatively moderate.

<sup>89</sup> Bashar promised this in a January 2012 speech. See Syrian Arab News Agency, 12 January 2012.

<sup>90</sup> In 2012, he delivered a speech at Damascus University laying out his vision, Syrian Arab News Agency, 12 January; gave an inaugural speech at the new parliament’s first sessions, *ibid*, 3 June; and addressed the new cabinet, *ibid*, 26 June. His performance increasingly seemed designed to project a sense of self-confidence and determination, above all else to reassure and rally his support base rather than expand it. For an analysis of his earlier speeches, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide*, *op. cit.*

<sup>91</sup> On 3 June, Bashar proclaimed the reform program complete: “We announced a number of clear political steps to enhance the development process through popular participation in order to undercut all those who tried to hide under slogans of reform and make use of the events for unpatriotic and dishonourable objectives. These steps have been achieved within the announced timeframe contrary to the expectations of our foes and enemies who doubted our intentions.... This ... came as a slap in the face of all those who wanted Syria to be closed onto itself and to swim in the blood of its children and go backward decades into the past. Here is Syria with a new parliament completing the process that we have promised before the crisis and during it and moving towards the future with a great deal of hope, determination and defiance”. Syrian Arab News Agency, 4 June 2012. In his statement to the government later that month, he described the situation as “all-out war”. *Ibid*, 27 June 2012

<sup>92</sup> “We can only make serious progress on the political front once the violence stops. After that, the sky is the limit. We have no preconditions, unlike the opposition, which would like their preferred outcome [Bashar’s stepping down] as the talks’ entry point. We are even ready to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood,

As a corollary to this narrative, the regime denied wholesale that it had used excessive force. It gave no indication of willingness to address the *shabbiha* phenomenon, arguably the conflict's most defining and dangerous feature. A senior official downplayed it altogether: "It has been highly exaggerated. The foreign media have blown this completely out of proportion. Nor is there any risk of our troops running wild; they are all completely under our control".<sup>93</sup> When the first large-scale massacre of families occurred, in March 2012 in Karam Zaitun – a slaughter that even some regime insiders privately blamed on the *shabbiha* and that at a minimum suggested serious deficiencies in the authorities' ability to maintain basic security<sup>94</sup> – the only official reaction was to point the finger at the other side.<sup>95</sup> In a June speech, Bashar held the opposition

responsible for the massacre in Hula one month prior; he neither offered condolences to the families of victims nor advanced any suggestion for how to prevent a recurrence.<sup>96</sup>

Throughout, regime repression targeted far more than the armed opposition. It also arrested more moderate dissidents: Salameh Kaileh, a Palestinian intellectual, was detained and tortured; in June, Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian priest and long-time resident who had been critical of the regime and worked to bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians, was expelled; Ahmad Mu'azz al-Khatib, a non-violent Sunni prayer leader, was arrested; and Imad Huriyeh, a bookshop keeper, as well as Jalal Nawfal, a psychoanalyst, neither a firebrand, likewise were detained.<sup>97</sup>

A less brutal approach arguably may not have made a huge difference domestically. In what has become a highly polarised society, many if not most Syrians had already made up their minds; bitter opponents were not going to switch

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who may have no established structure on the ground but represent an important school of thought within Syrian society". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, April 2012. Another official offered the following caveat: "The regime doesn't really want a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood. I raised this with a senior official, and he said: 'Never! They are a bunch of criminals!' You can certainly find some officials who would like a genuine political solution, but these are individuals expressing a personal opinion". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012.

<sup>94</sup> A security official from Homs said local Alawite militias – euphemistically called popular committees (*lijan sha'biya*) – had perpetrated the massacre in retaliation for violence to which they had been subjected. Asked whether the regime could hold these forces in check, he replied: "They are more or less under control, but because of all their losses, some among them are using the same techniques as the armed opposition groups. In areas where the popular committees are present, they even protect themselves from the government. For example, if the government tries to send security forces to recover stolen goods, they try to block the roads and cause a lot of shooting. They belong to [tightly-knit, informal neighbourhoods called *mukhalafat* or] '*ashwa'iyat* and can easily hide there". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. On another occasion, he went further: "People took advantage of what happened to set up these militias, especially in Homs, and they are trying to deflect responsibility by blaming the other side. They also are trying to establish their own power on the ground. Some senior officials are concerned about this". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. An Alawite critical of the *shabbiha* explained: "The *shabbiha* feel above the law and beyond the reach of the security services. They can rape your wife if they want. It is a culture in which the regime invested and which has enabled outlaws, the dregs of society, whether Alawite, Sunni or other, to take control of specific areas under the guise of so-called popular committees or any other pretext of their choosing. For now the state can more or less control them, but god knows what will happen in the future". Crisis Group interview, central Syria, May 2012.

<sup>95</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. An Alawite activist from Homs, whose relatives for the most part back the regime and belong to the

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local *shabbiha*, claimed that the authorities had identified and were trying to track down the purported perpetrators of the Karam Zaitun massacre. Crisis Group interview, June 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 June 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interviews, activists, Damascus, May 2012. An activist said: "We set up a group a people to take care of displaced children. Then the security services began to arrest us so I stopped. They seem to be going after everything and everyone. They don't want people with arms; they don't want peaceful demonstrations; they don't even want humanitarian aid workers. They just want to crush this society". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. However, he conceded that "people who have been arrested generally have been involved in more serious activity than purely humanitarian aid – like interacting with the FSA for instance". See, for background, [www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5232/free-salameh-kaileh](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5232/free-salameh-kaileh); and <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/thomas-pierret/060512/arrestation-du-cheikh-mouaz-al-khatib-ancien-precheur-de-la-mosquee->; also, Neil MacFarquhar, "Syria expels Jesuit priest who spoke for change", *The New York Times*, 20 June 2012. The regime's routine overreaction to relatively minor offences often backfires. Thus Bassel Shehadeh, a popular young filmmaker and Christian activist, was killed in Homs while in the company of opposition fighters. The official media labelled him a terrorist; security services intimidated his family, seeking to prevent a funeral ceremony; they also allowed club-carrying regime thugs to chant "*shabbiha* forever, for your eyes oh Assad" [*shabbiha lil-abad, li-'uyunak ya assad*] in front of the church where it was supposed to be held. This occurred in the heart of a Christian neighbourhood of the capital where most residents had supported a regime whose violence and brutality it had not until then experienced. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, May 2012. Up to 1,000 of Shehadeh's friends or fellow activists from the progressive urban youth opposition movement, which reflects a cross-section of all communities in Syrian society, pledged their attendance at the funeral via online forums; on the day, many hundreds showed up, though the funeral had been cancelled. Crisis Group interviews, friends of Shehadeh, Beirut, May 2012

regardless of how “reasonable” the regime turned out to be or how many reforms it pledged; officials with blood on their hands and other diehard loyalists would have panicked at any perceived sign of weakness, undermining the power system’s cohesiveness without offering any guarantee that concessions would do anything but encourage more far-reaching opposition demands. Regime gestures potentially could have registered support from the so-called silent minority – an expression designed to capture the ambivalence of the unknown number of those who, in the country’s quieter parts, felt caught between dislike of the regime and fear of any alternative.<sup>98</sup> However, given this constituency’s inherent indecisiveness, hesitation and passivity, it would have been an uncertain and risky gambit.

By contrast, a more politically flexible stance possibly could have helped the authorities on the foreign front. It might have sharpened international divisions; facilitated the stance of allies such as Russia, whose reliability, at least at the outset, was not guaranteed; and kept to its side more “nationalist” or “anti-imperialist” Arabs who would have liked to maintain solidarity with the regime but found it increasingly difficult to do so.<sup>99</sup> Yet, even when relatively self-confident – as in the wake of the dual Russian and Chinese vetoes – the regime failed to take the diplomatic initiative. To the dismay of some of its more forward-leaning members, it would at most grudgingly and

partially implement the demands of the UN observers mission.<sup>100</sup>

Given the regime’s mindset, fine-tuning international pressure appears an almost futile exercise. Heightening it provokes the regime to lash out ever more viciously at its domestic opponents; lowering it produces precisely the same effect. As the regime sees it, there is only one viable sequence: the outside world gives up on the idea of far-reaching change for fear of internal and regional consequences; the authorities are given a free hand to crush what will have become an orphaned uprising; then, and only then, might some reforms be open for discussion. Conversely, the regime appears equally convinced that any immediate concession or political compromise would be seized upon by enemies at home and afar to bring it down. There is no middle ground, in other words, between absolute triumph and fatal defeat. The opposition’s shortcomings aside, such a deeply entrenched outlook has made it virtually impossible to initiate any negotiated political process.

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<sup>98</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria’s Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. A regime insider offered this description: “The so-called silent majority is made of people who don’t want to believe that a frontal collision with the regime is the only option. They don’t buy into the idea of change at all costs, such as a civil war entailing 100,000 victims. They assume foreign intervention will make things worse, not better. In a traditional Damascene logic, the regime should be given a superficial victory: it lives for superficial victories. And then it should be confronted with all its failures, politically. We know this regime and know how it responds to pressure. We have to do with what we have, which doesn’t mean accepting it as it is”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, April 2012. At least until violence reached central Damascus in mid-July, this outlook was not uncommon in the capital. Proclaimed reformists within the regime based their personal stance and outreach efforts on its narrative. See Radwan Mortada, “Syria’s Ali Haidar: Both sides have extremists”, *Al-Akhbar* (English), 13 July 2012.

<sup>99</sup> This camp has been shaken by endless, fratricidal rows over whether the regime was fighting its own people for the sake of sheer survival, thereby facilitating imperialist schemes, or was fighting imperialist schemes to which its people had naively fallen victim. For the first view, see, eg, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb articles at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1276>. For opposing views, see [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/20118286551105182.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/20118286551105182.html); <http://maxblumenthal.com/2012/06/the-right-to-resist-is-universal-a-farewell-to-al-akhbar-and-assads-apologists/>; <http://qunfuz.com/2012/07/16/blanket-thinkers>.

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<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria’s Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. A senior UN official noted that “the regime wasn’t as obstructive as it could have been” but never did more than the strict minimum and typically only under Russian pressure. Crisis Group interview, May 2012. A Syrian official privy to the issue expressed concern about the regime’s dilatory tactics: “Take one example: three visas were rejected due to the observers’ nationality. But these people are UN agents and therefore their nationality should not be considered an issue. Many small, unnecessary obstructions of this kind are occurring, and in the end frustration will add up”. Crisis Group interview, official, Damascus, May 2012.

### III. SHIFTING SOCIAL TRENDS

Over the course of this prolonged struggle, what initially were promising expressions of social solidarity increasingly have been soiled, as the conflict successively unearthed, worsened and became mired in the country's numerous divides and fault lines.<sup>101</sup> The tug of war between society's demons and its ability to resist them continues to this day, the most encouraging feature arguably being Syrians' at times remarkable self-awareness, grasp of the dangers ahead, weighing of options and – whether successful or not – attempts at course-correction. The unmistakable surge in collective hatreds coexists with a persistently sharp appreciation of what is at stake, just as radicalism coexists with restraint – a balancing that takes place, oftentimes, even within individuals.

As early as November 2011 and, with greater alarm, in April 2012, Crisis Group warned of Syria's possible collapse into a violent inferno that could overwhelm and crowd out the culture of peaceful dissent, tear down solidarity networks – as middle-class civil society activists turned their backs on an ever more dispiriting and costly conflict – and unleash an all-out sectarian civil war.<sup>102</sup> In many ways, this was the most likely, logical and tragic outcome of a brutal conflict allowed to fester for nearly a year and a half. It might still come to pass. For now, however, that dire forecast has only partially been borne out by events.

The picture has progressively darkened. Several armed groups have adopted an increasingly fundamentalist discourse and demeanour, a trajectory that mirrors the conflict's gradually more deadly and sectarian turn, popular loss of faith in the West and mounting pledges of support from Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.<sup>103</sup> Home-grown jihadis and foreign fighters have assumed a greater (albeit still limited) role.<sup>104</sup> As further discussed below,

anti-Alawite and anti-Shiite rhetoric have reached frightening levels, even as mainstream Alawites themselves have turned to bloodcurdling language. On both sides, a militia culture gradually is taking hold.

But even as these trends hardened, a variety of very different efforts – protests and civil society initiatives in particular – were re-energised, thereby both slowing down and containing the damage. Unlike conflicts in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon, for example, the existence of a broad-based popular movement predicated on cross-communal solidarity, national revival and collective aspirations has helped counterbalance the more centrifugal forces at play, whether inspired by revenge or the affirmation of localised identities.

Syria is far from immune from an uglier fate. The rapidly shifting dynamics of the crisis, most notably the present brutal fighting in Damascus and Aleppo, are likely to trigger more carnage on all sides. Until now, however, there has been no documented massacre of entire Alawite families.<sup>105</sup> Sectarian, indiscriminate killings of Alawites have been reported in recent months,<sup>106</sup> even though assassina-

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firmed by an opposition armed group commander in the area. Crisis Group correspondence, July 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Some Alawites interviewed by Crisis Group, notably within the security services, said such instances had occurred, though they failed to provide precise details or material evidence to substantiate their assertions. Crisis Group interviews, central Syria, May 2012. Faced with clear evidence of massacres targeting Sunnis, the regime and its supporters have variously alleged (without proof) that the opposition was killing its own supporters in large numbers to mobilise international attention and support and that those who were slaughtered were Alawites (in Karam Zaitun) or Shiites (in Hula). Katie Paul, "Syrian rebels, regime offer dueling tales of Karm al-Zeitoun massacre", *The Daily Beast*, 13 March 2012. An activist from Homs warned: "The armed groups in Homs are more or less disciplined. They are focused on the regime. They haven't started attacking Alawite areas merely on the grounds that they are Alawite, but I expect them to. We're headed that way, and it could be soon. The spirit of revenge is very powerful now". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. On 31 May, Russian freelance journalist Marat Musin published an article on Hula that embraced the regime's version, in which terrorists butchered local civilians. See [www.syrianews.cc/syria-journalist-houla-massacre](http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-journalist-houla-massacre). His claims were picked up by Rainer Hermann, a German journalist, then reverberated across the internet. For a more sober investigation raising serious doubts about the victims' purported Shiite identity, see Christoph Reuter and Abd al-Kadher Adhun, "A Syrian bloodbath revisited, searching for the truth behind the Houla massacre", *Der Spiegel* (online), 23 July 2012. No Crisis Group interviews, including some with longstanding interlocutors from neighbouring Alawite villages, corroborated the claim that the victims were Shiites.

<sup>106</sup> This is particularly true in central Syria. An opposition fighter in Homs admitted: "There are many killings of Alawites now,

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<sup>101</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit.; Harling and Birke, op. cit.

<sup>102</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

<sup>103</sup> Videos and print material produced by armed opposition groups have been marked by an increasingly religious and at times fundamentalist character. See Nir Rosen, "Islamism and the Syrian uprising", *Middle East Channel*, 8 March 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Their presence became more conspicuous in July, when the regime's hold on the country was shaken. At Bab al-Hawa, a border crossing to Turkey, foreign fighters who claimed to be in control were so new to and ignorant of the region as to film themselves burning a Palestinian flag in lieu of an Iranian one, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX1fWp1U2O0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX1fWp1U2O0). Libyan commander Mahdi Harati appeared on a video purporting to show him among Syrian opposition fighters in Idlib, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxem-8fLNh0&feature=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxem-8fLNh0&feature=). His presence was con-

tions for the most part appear to have been targeted, focused on military and security personnel, *shabbiha* and informants. Likewise, highly exposed pockets of Shiites (for example, in Bosra al-Sham and Fu'a, both surrounded by a conservative Sunni environment) have not come under serious assault and – contrary to regime claims – Christians have not been persecuted. Suicide attacks, a frequent symptom of social despair and radicalisation, have remained the exception rather than the norm.

## A. THE RESPONSE TO RADICALISATION

As the military solution unfolded, pitting an increasingly ruthless repressive apparatus against a growing and more radical armed opposition, activists and protesters at first marked a pause. As of February 2012, the feeling of powerlessness in the aftermath of Russian and Chinese Security Council vetoes, combined with the regime's regained composure and ferocious crackdown, drove down the number of street protesters and led many activists to flee the country.<sup>107</sup> Yet, after a momentary hiatus, some of the uprising's more inspiring aspects regained strength.

By May, demonstrations had picked up across the country, even in places that had just suffered severe collective punishment. As had been the case for months, such protests were more akin to festival-like celebrations of life than morbid outpourings of hatred. Paradoxically, the upsurge in suffering went hand in hand with a vibrant, elaborate culture of dissent, replete with its own music, humour, dancing, creative slogans, singing, street theatre and, more broadly, sense of collective plight and purpose.<sup>108</sup> Because it often came at great personal risk, participation in these activities reflected the conviction that such expressions were integral if not crucial to the struggle; in other words, militarily confronting the regime did not in itself guarantee success.

Such phenomena, because they helped transcend grief and grievances, countered the powerful pull of pure hatred and wanton revenge.<sup>109</sup> At bottom, the practice played an

important political function, clearly contrasting the popular movement's "civilised" behaviour to the regime's "savagery". By claiming the moral upper ground, it helped keep in check some – albeit definitely not all – of the worst forms of violence one might have anticipated on the part of armed opposition groups operating in a chaotic and extremely polarised environment. Most fighters, having grown out of this popular movement, profess an attachment to a culture they claim to defend. Tellingly, even fighters who espouse a fundamentalist discourse and demeanour do not necessarily shy away from participating in cultural expressions that by and large are incompatible with strict Salafist codes of behaviour.

A local journalist remarked in May: "The more civil society is vibrant, the less religious tonalities dominate. What we've seen of late is a noticeable retreat of the latter, as activists have returned in full force".<sup>110</sup> Had the regime faced isolated armed groups emerging in a social vacuum – as was the case, by and large, in Iraq under the U.S. occupation – its strategy might have proven more effective. Instead, it has had to contend with vast and complex forms of social mobilisation of which armed groups were but an outgrowth. In fact, the military solution unwittingly boosted the networks of aid and activism that underpinned the popular movement as a whole, which in turn helped to partially bridge its geographical, ideological, communal and class divisions.

As the level of suffering, destruction and displacement rose exponentially across the country, networks of activists were forced to remobilise. The change was particularly manifest in Damascus, which previously had seemed largely detached from the violence afflicting other areas. The majority of initiatives focused on providing aid, either to areas most affected by the fighting or to those where internally displaced people had sought refuge. There were

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not just *shabbiha* and security but any Alawite". Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, activists, Damascus and Beirut, February-April 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Harling and Birke, op. cit.; Layla al-Zubaidi, "Syria's creative resistance", *Jadaliyyah*, 8 June 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Immediately after the Hula massacre, students in the village of Binnish, in the largely conservative province of Idlib, improvised a street theatre performance re-enacting the events and attended by the local community, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfsy\\_kfy6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfsy_kfy6Q). Numerous such examples exist. Although the news from Hula was deeply traumatic, there has been no reported attempt to exact revenge against the more exposed pockets of

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Alawite or Shiite civilians. Many social initiatives are aimed at containing such a potential trend. An activist said, "when [Sunni] families reach Damascus after fleeing Homs, the way they talk at first shows that they are not willing to differentiate between the regime and Alawites as a whole. So we go as a group, and we carry aid to these families. We try to talk them through it, and we show ourselves as comprising all components of Syria. I am an Alawite, but we also have Christians, Ismailis, Sunnis and so on working together. I am not worried for the future. I know there will be problems. After the fall [of the regime] there will be much more work to do than what we have done already. Although many people are dying, there is a positive aspect to the fact that the revolution is lasting so long: it is helping ingrain this awareness among our people". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

also more symbolic but equally important gestures of communal outreach.<sup>111</sup>

Not everyone reacted similarly. The violence that engulfed the country is, in many ways, alien to Syrians,<sup>112</sup> and a number responded by withdrawing from the conflict, convinced that strings were being pulled by influential, regional or international players, that the outcome could only be destructive and that the region in its entirety was doomed.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Damascene circles reportedly significantly stepped up their material support to civil society initiatives in the wake of the Baba Amro massacre. "More money for aid is always needed but almost always available. People are paying, and this includes not least the people of Damascus who don't want to be directly involved and exposed in the uprising but have come to support it financially, big time". Crisis Group interview, activist from Homs, Damascus, May 2012. Initiatives covered a broad gamut of needs, from visiting and supporting bereaved families and providing first aid and medical care to offering education or entertainment to uprooted children, etc. There are abundant examples of token gestures that nonetheless make a difference. A Christian activist involved in humanitarian aid in the hot-spots shared her own experience: "There are some Alawites in our group. You should have seen the welcome when they made it to [the predominantly Sunni Damascus neighbourhood of] Barzeh to join a Friday demonstration. When they manage to get into Homs, the people we visit are just so enthusiastic. And this has held up despite the massive suffering inflicted to Baba Amro". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A Druze intellectual with pro-regime inclinations described another case: "Druze friends of mine went to [the underclass, predominantly Sunni Damascus neighbourhood] Saqba, and they received an extraordinarily warm welcome. [Prominent Druze activist] Muntaha Atrash had been there, and her visit visibly had had a profound impact on the people". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011. In the conservative neighbourhood of Muadhmiya, a religious leader said, "I have worked with Druze girls from Sahnaya who have been very active here. At some point they offered to wear a veil next time they came. I quipped: 'No, absolutely not; we are proud that you are working with us; in fact next time wear less clothes, not more'. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

<sup>112</sup> A Damascene businesswoman said, historically, political transitions in Syria have never been particularly brutal. This society largely has been spared, at least compared to its neighbours. This is why many Syrians find it difficult to recognise themselves in these terrible events". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, April 2012.

<sup>113</sup> As a businessman put it, "people around me tend to be neither here nor there. They are fed up with both camps; they can't see where all this violence is leading. And they feel that the stakes are elsewhere, that this has to do with a bigger [regional or international] struggle". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A Druze intellectual echoed this sentiment: "Increasingly I feel a sense of confusion and fatigue. People just want this to end. Events in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia resound powerfully here, and they are quite dispiriting. All in all it seems as if this region is doomed, that positive change is impossible, that our future is hostage to decisions taken elsewhere. The situation in

But horrifying violence also prompted renewed forms of peaceful dissent. In April 2012, a young activist set an example by standing alone in front of the parliament building, holding a banner that read: "Stop the killing. We want to build a homeland for all Syrians". The catchphrase – which arguably applied to both sides of the conflict – spread like wildfire, appearing on walls and pamphlets, precisely because it captured the growing sentiment that something had to be done before it was too late. Middle-class Damascenes – who had struggled to relate to a struggle located chiefly in the provinces and carried out mainly by the lower classes – were particularly drawn to it.<sup>114</sup>

Tellingly, the Hula massacre – along with the regime's response to it – provoked a spectacular strike in the old souks of Damascus. This was a potent signal: the business establishment at least passively had supported the regime for several decades, most famously during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>115</sup>

The accelerating militarisation and radicalisation of the opposition went hand in hand with growing concern among activists that armed groups should not be left alone to run – and perhaps derail – the uprising. Some fully embraced the logic of armed resistance as an inevitable by-product of regime repression and a necessary means to ensure its demise; they made no distinction between helping wid-

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Syria will not be resolved in Syria. It is an international struggle between powers that for now neutralise each other". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>114</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHL11BEKXew](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHL11BEKXew). The relative absence of the middle class had been conspicuous. "The middle class is based in the big cities, but the conflict is mainly located in rural areas, small towns or suburbs. Besides, the middle class broadly has depended on the regime – through employment in the state bureaucracy or through jobs they owe to the regime's liberalisation policies. It also has been exhausted in recent years by the increasingly difficult struggle to make ends meet. A final reason: the conflict has become so brutal that the middle class could not face such pressures. The only ones who can belong to the underclass, which has nothing to lose. Educated people don't face down *shabbiha* shooting at them". Crisis Group interview, inhabitant of a small town north of Aleppo, Damascus, May 2012. After the young activist deployed her banner, a middle-class Damascene said, "I have regained confidence that the protest movement [as distinct from armed resistance] will not stop. That girl who went out all on her own was a major turning point. People realised that they too could and must do something. Many emulated her one way or another. Such a simple slogan catalysed a whole peaceful resistance movement". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Adding to the significance of the blow, the strike came when the regime already was unprecedentedly isolated vis-à-vis mainstream Sunni religious leaders, despite the considerable time and effort it long had invested in developing a sophisticated *modus vivendi* with them. Thomas Pierret, *Baas et Islam en Syrie. La dynastie Assad face aux Oulémas* (Paris, 2011).



ows and orphans on the one hand and assisting fighters on the other. But for other activists, such differences remained paramount. Uneasy with or even resentful at the drift away from a broadly peaceful protest movement, they steered clear of any deliberate interaction with, let alone support for, armed opposition groups.

This split produced a division of labour of sorts between two outlooks or projects: those who aimed to topple the regime whatever the cost and those who focused on ensuring that society would survive the crisis, in other words on containing the damage caused by the process of regime change.<sup>116</sup> Among the exiled community, such tensions have tended to tear the opposition apart; within Syria, they tend to coexist more harmoniously, as one trend temporarily supersedes the other, depending on time and place. A middle-aged activist said, "I put a lot of thought into this and came to a conclusion: it's okay if some people want to execute the president even as we call for a stop in the killings. There is room for everyone, fighters and peaceful activists alike. We all are headed in the same direction after all".<sup>117</sup>

In the early months of 2012, rising ferment in the capital clearly worried the regime, which multiplied signs of anxiety. As previously noted, it detained and meted out harsh punishment to intellectual dissident figures; it conducted sweeping crackdowns against humanitarian networks;<sup>118</sup>

and those it arrested suffered more brutal forms of treatment than before. Minor provocations that, in the past, the authorities largely would have ignored triggered stronger reactions. A resident of Mezze, a middle-class and largely quiescent district, expressed surprise and irritation at a raid by security services and their proxies on the neighbourhood mosque "simply because people attending prayer started doing *takbir*".<sup>119</sup> All of which only deepened the anger and restlessness of Damascenes.

By mid-July, the security services' control of Damascus was at best superficial.<sup>120</sup> Underneath, society was simmering. The social mobilisation under way was intense and played a key part in allowing the armed groups to grow and develop to the point of shaking the regime's foundations in a matter of weeks and without arousing excessive regime attention.

The existence of a vibrant civil society had other, often unintentional repercussions on the conflict. By containing the radicalisation of the opposition and checking its retaliatory urges, it paradoxically gave the regime a freer hand to operate militarily. Likewise, because they established ever-growing aid and solidarity networks, social activists relieved the regime of many responsibilities; society, in a sense, has been taking care of itself.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps most importantly, insofar as it was activated only on one side of the divide, this expression of social solidarity contributed

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<sup>116</sup> An activist reflected: "There are many young activists for whom anything that hurts the regime is good. They have no red lines. And then you have people like me who are not obsessed with challenging the regime directly but with ensuring it leaves behind a society that will not collapse when the regime does". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Expressing his ambivalence, a Christian intellectual said, "I've hated this ruling family for decades now. Still, I have come to fear too brutal a transition after all the damage that has been wrought on society. I'd rather something more gradual. Many opposition figures around me are in this state of confusion". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. "Recently, Deraa resumed its peaceful mobilisation [*silmiya*], focusing on strikes, leaflets what have you. There are two tracks in Deraa now, and I've come to believe the only way forward is along both tracks, peaceful and armed. If there were no Free Syrian Army [a label used by most armed groups regardless of actual coordination with other factions], there would no longer be a revolution. I was against the FSA until I attended a demonstration during which a woman made me realise that without armed protection it could not take place". Crisis Group interview, activist from Deraa, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>118</sup> A dissident journalist said, "before, the regime would treat moderate opposition figures relatively well and release them rapidly. That is changing. We have entered a phase in which no one is spared". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Some activists suggested that the security services were targeting networks that enjoyed foreign financial support; others that

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they were singling out those that had relations with armed groups. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2012. According to another hypothesis, the regime feared that the concentration of displaced people in the capital would complicate efforts to control the city. Finally, one version stressed that such networks of militants – however much they might be geared toward humanitarian aid – could constitute a powerful constituency if and when the opposition decided to organise massive demonstrations in a push to take over the capital. Crisis Group interview, intellectual, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. *Takbir* is the glorification of God through chants of *Allah Akbar*, or God is Great. It was famously used during the Iranian revolution to defy the Shah's regime without taking to the streets; Iranians would chant *Allah Akbar* from their rooftops or within their homes, a practice that has become widespread in Syria.

<sup>120</sup> For a description of the anti-regime mindset in the capital on the eve of the eruption of violence there, see "Defiant Damascus", *The Economist*, 16 July 2012.

<sup>121</sup> In some areas, opposition-led local councils "have become an alternative to the old government, delving into issues related to electricity, water and municipal governance". Crisis Group interview, pro-opposition engineer, Homs, May 2012. Opposition groups have paid significant sums to contractors to clear rubble, collect garbage, repair electric lines and so forth. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Homs, May 2012. For a description of a sophisticated style of self-governance in Saraqib, near Idlib, see Rania Abouzeid, "A dispatch from 'free' Syria: How to run a liberated town", *Time*, 24 July 2012.

to a deepening gap in perceptions of the conflict between regime opponents and sympathisers. As discussed below, this is a legacy that will heavily affect the nation's evolution, even in the event of a political transition.

## B. AN EVER-GROWING DIVIDE

In several ways, the crisis has affected both sides of the conflict. Large numbers of regime sympathisers and opponents have been killed, although – especially in early stages – the regime has been a far deadlier force.<sup>122</sup> Patterns of suffering, anxiety and hatred at times have been remarkably similar, with the same scenes of families burying and grieving their martyred sons and daughters, the same desperate thirst for revenge, the same determination to fight to the end.<sup>123</sup> Not infrequently, slogans echoed one other.<sup>124</sup> One could be forgiven at times for viewing the struggle as a sectarian civil war being waged by and within the country's underclass. Indeed, the rank and file of the apparatus of repression – military, security but also *shabbiha* – shared virtually all of the socio-economic characteristics of those they were seeking to suppress.<sup>125</sup>

Yet, beyond the similarities, the two sides have been exposed to – or have chosen to see – profoundly different aspects of their own society.

### 1. One side's awakening

For Syrians who reject the regime, the uglier facets of the crisis have been offset by feelings of popular renaissance,

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<sup>122</sup> Unverifiable Syrian opposition sources claimed that 19,106 Syrians had been killed since March 2011, among whom, they said, 4,861 were security personnel. Agence France-Presse, 23 July 2012.

<sup>123</sup> An Alawite relative of a victim of the violence said, "they can kill all of us, but if there is one left he will stay to support the president". Crisis Group interview, central Syria, May 2012. Substitute "fight" for "support", and the same sentence could be heard in opposition circles.

<sup>124</sup> Pro-regime Syrians sometimes sing "*al-shabbiha ju'anin, baddon yaklu mundassin*" (the *shabbiha* are hungry and want to eat infiltrators); opposition Syrians responded with a play on words: "*ulu lish-shabbiha nahnu al-dabbiha*" (tell the *shabbiha* that we are the slaughterers). Crisis Group interviews and observations, May 2012.

<sup>125</sup> "The only people who could face the regime's brutality are the bullies in our midst. This led many thugs to assume leadership positions within the popular movement. Of course, they lacked political culture and vision. But they have learned on the job and have had to deal with many delicate issues, such as what to do with local regime officials or pockets of Shiites in northern Syria". Crisis Group interview, inhabitant of a small town north of Aleppo, Damascus, May 2012. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

a sense of national pride, solidarity, courage and creativity. This came as a surprise; few thought it possible in a society that long appeared deeply apathetic, demobilised, fragmented and, culturally, somewhat sterile.<sup>126</sup> Accounts abound of communities coming together and transcending various divides. In Homs, deeply entrenched class divisions were overcome as a result of indiscriminate repression;<sup>127</sup> the downtrodden southern plain of Hawran, which sees itself as the "revolution's cradle" (*mahad al-thawra*), is now brimming with pride;<sup>128</sup> even areas devoid of any particular local identity appear to be developing one.<sup>129</sup> Such disparate forms of awakening are merging into sentiments of nationwide revival reflected in slogans, aid distribution across geographical boundaries and activists travelling to different parts of the country.

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<sup>126</sup> Tellingly, although several uprisings occurred in the past against the current regime, they always were strictly limited to specific categories: conservative Sunnis in the late 1970s and early 1980s; Druze in 2000; and Kurds in 2004. An intellectual noted: "Syria has produced more notable forms of art and literature in the past twelve months than over the past 30 years". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2012.

<sup>127</sup> In Homs, one witnesses unprecedented camaraderie between upper and lower classes – albeit targeting Alawites who generally are perceived as extraneous to the city. "In Homs, we used to hold prejudices against Baba Amro. We saw it as a nest of drug dealers and criminals. But the regime made the mistake of attacking [the upper-class, neighbouring district of] Insha'at, killing members of big families, such as Maha Atassi. The town came together. It is unique in Syria. People will not stop. There has been too much blood. That is true of the middle and upper class as it is of the underclass". Crisis Group interview, activist from Homs, Damascus, May 2012. A similar phenomenon occurred in the Damascus district of Kafar Susa, where the crisis helped bridge a historical split between rich and poor.

<sup>128</sup> "In Deraa the amount of destruction is incredible. It is another world. But what is even more incredible is the people's resilience. For them the regime is over; it's only a matter of time. They can't really explain this but are convinced of it deep down. Despite all those who have been killed or disappeared, they continue to demonstrate, plan general strikes, etc. Immediately after a clash occurs, they come right back out. There also is pride and solidarity. People used to ignore each other. Now people want to help others out in every possible way. Plus, it used to be chaotic. Now people tend to respect traffic lights, are courteous to women, stand in line at the bakery". Crisis Group interview, activist from Deraa, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>129</sup> "In our area on the northern outskirts of Aleppo there never was much solidarity, even at a local level. Now even scattered villages feel they belong to a broad popular movement. Of course we share a past of neglect and animosity on the part of the regime dating back to the 1980s. But the primary factor has been the regime's behaviour during this crisis: blind oppression, a sectarian behaviour and an official media coverage that relentlessly adds insult to injury". Crisis Group interview, inhabitant of a small town north of Aleppo, Damascus, May 2012.

At a personal level, the uprising has provided Syrians with first-hand exposure to regime practices but also first-ever experience of demonstrating. Many describe it as a life-changing event. Activist networks, which often bring together people of different age groups and backgrounds, have fostered powerful new relationships. Housewives and civil servants have become shrewd and fearless activists. People speak of inspiring friendships.<sup>130</sup> The pride taken in collective achievements plays no small part in providing individuals with this sense of personal accomplishment.<sup>131</sup>

These feelings have been all the more intense as they are contrasted with the regime's reckless and abusive behaviour.<sup>132</sup> Opposition members do not necessarily ignore their

own shortcomings; yet, even when acknowledged, they are downplayed or rationalised. Sectarianism might be on the rise, but it tends to be blamed exclusively on the regime's divisive tactics and seen as an Alawite question;<sup>133</sup> in contrast, relations with other non-Sunni communities typically are portrayed, rightly or wrongly, as unproblematic. In fact, members of the opposition like to point out that the situation is best wherever the regime is absent; conversely, they argue that wherever troubles occur, the security services are rarely too far off.<sup>134</sup> The uprising's increasingly religious, if not fundamentalist, overtones are described as the natural, inevitable and reversible side effects of the crisis.<sup>135</sup>

As for the armed groups' alleged crimes, brutal violence and abusive behaviour – some of which initially were revealed by Human Rights Watch<sup>136</sup> – opposition supporters

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<sup>130</sup> A Sunni activist from Deraa claimed that “most of the activists I have worked with are Druze. Minorities have been very involved in civil society initiatives. Indeed, it is easier for them to get through checkpoints. The regime used to treat them less harshly when they were detained. Now that has changed. Everybody gets the same treatment. What I have seen from these people has been so inspiring. Of course I wonder: can this society repair the damage that is being done?” Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A secretary who used to work for a government body said, “I am alive. After the revolution, I realised what all those years of idleness and boredom had done to me. My knowledge, my instincts, my thought processes, everything was wrong. I had to unlearn everything I had learned and start anew”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A coordinator of the uprising in Homs said, “we discovered how brave we are. We acquired new values. We developed new friendships with lots of people. Before the revolution, I don't think I could have come across people like those I work with today. I discovered them, realised how poor in their belongings and how good in their hearts such people are. These friends from this revolution are the best I have ever had”. Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012.

<sup>131</sup> The levels of violence with which the uprising has had to contend arguably has only added to this sense of achievement: “We are a miracle [*mu'jiza*]. The people's steadfastness and resistance are a miracle”. Crisis Group interview, opposition armed group commander, Homs, May 2012. In some ways, the absence of tangible international support has had the same impact, with many opponents marveling at what they could endure and accomplish on their own. “I have come to oppose the international intervention we once called for. After all this time, we came to see that we are fighting our battle for independence, against the whole world. We discovered Turkey's lies and Europe's hypocrisy. We saw that nothing serious beyond words would come from the Gulf. No one abroad really wants Bashar to go, but we will still defeat him. And we will be able to say we did it alone”. Crisis Group interview, opposition leader, Damascus, June 2012.

<sup>132</sup> Due to deeply-ingrained convictions regarding the regime, accusations levelled against it are immediately taken at face value; that the opposition might have committed such acts is regarded as impossible. When the Hula massacre first was reported, word quickly spread among anti-regime Syrians that the perpetrators had slit the children's throats. Although children

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were killed, UN observers found no evidence to corroborate this claim. Crisis Group interview, UN official, May 2012.

<sup>133</sup> The regime is blamed for stirring up sectarianism both because of the make-up and behaviour of its predominantly Alawite security apparatus and because it is believed to have worked tirelessly to sow communal divisions in order to present itself as the only bulwark against civil war.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, April-May 2012. There are many cases in which social actors sought to contain communal tensions. In February-May, a series of killings and kidnappings between Sunnis from Hawran and Druze from neighbouring Sweida came close to turning an historically tense relationship into an all-out feud. Druze religious leaders and prominent Hawran families mediated the crisis, and the ensuing arrangement was pressed upon central authorities in Damascus. Crisis Group correspondence, Druze intellectual and journalist from Hawran, June 2012.

<sup>135</sup> The decision by Abdul Razzaq Tlass, a leader of the armed opposition in Homs, to shave his moustache and give himself a Salafist look prompted considerable debate. Many sought to downplay the significance of the gesture. “It's amazing all this fuss about his facial hair. He is a smart guy. He needs money and knows where it is coming from”. Crisis Group interview, secular Sunni activist from Homs, Damascus, May 2012. “He has shaved his moustache and that has caused an uproar. And then he shows up on [Al Jazeera's nightly show] *saharat al-thuwwar* [revolutionaries' evening] and sings and dances. Now, what kind of a Salafist is that?” Crisis Group interview, Christian businessman opposed to the regime, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>136</sup> In March, Human Rights Watch published a report documenting abuses by opposition armed groups, “Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses. End Kidnappings, Forced Confessions, and Executions”, 20 March 2012. A particularly bitter activist said, “some fighters are acting like the regime's *shabbiha*, becoming the '*shabbiha* of the revolution'. They steal cars and kidnap people who have no relation with anything”. Crisis Group correspondence, activist from Deraa, June 2012. Regime officials sought to highlight such instances, hoping to bring attention to the “true nature” of the armed opposition and put off their mainstream supporters. “There are madmen on both sides. Recently, people have come to realise

tend to attribute them to individual cases or invoke special circumstances, while contrasting their conduct with that of loyalist forces. An opposition figure said, "our fighters have morals and dignity and are respected by those they defend; the regime's forces are just gangs".<sup>137</sup> Bombings aimed at regime locations but that kill innocent bystanders tend to be blamed on the authorities' own "terrorist" tactics.<sup>138</sup>

All told, Syrians who reject the regime have come to see themselves as belonging to a remarkably functional society that has successfully overcome well-established divides. Local businessmen – perhaps seeking to hedge their bets – increasingly have come to assist members of the opposition, striving to retain employees, supporting families in distress and funding various civil society initiatives.<sup>139</sup> Syria's large diaspora has been highly active, bolstering historically feeble ties. Syrians who live through these dynamics have emerged with greater faith in their country's future. Far from fearing the regime's demise, they have concluded it is a prerequisite for the nation's rebirth.

Their perspective may sound naively optimistic and, in some ways, it is. It nonetheless constitutes a powerful vi-

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many crimes were committed by the opposition. At first they didn't want to believe it and embraced Al Jazeera's narrative". Crisis Group interview, military official, Damascus, May 2012.<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interview, local opposition figure, Muadhmiya, May 2012. The regime's narrative argues precisely the reverse. An activist from Deraa maintained: "Armed opposition groups kill security officials and informants but are very precise in doing so. They don't just blow things up. They executed a doctor who informed the regime about wounded activists and Free Syrian Army members; they did so in front of his wife after recapitulating all the harm he had done". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. The type of random sectarian killings spreading in central Syria are not frequently reported elsewhere. A Druze intellectual, deeply distrustful of the opposition, nevertheless said, "as far as I can tell, assassinations generally are targeted. A Druze general recently was killed by the opposition, and it is true that his reputation was appalling, including among Druze. There are many such cases". Crisis Group interview, activist from Deraa, Damascus, May 2012.<sup>138</sup> Bomb attacks almost always reinforce pre-existing views of the regime and its opposition. Those inclined to see the regime as the primary source of instability are quick to point out perceived anomalies or incongruities to cast doubt on the identity of perpetrators. "A friend saw Syrian television show up in Meidan before that recent explosion took place. Plus, why does the regime cover Meidan and ignore other bomb attacks, like the sticky bomb killing right next to our house? Also, I'm struck by the absence of any attack against Russian interests". Crisis Group interview, businessman, Damascus, May 2012. Some instances do raise serious questions about authorship, such as several odd bomb attacks or attempts allegedly foiled by the security services.

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interviews, businessmen and their beneficiaries, Damascus, December 2011-July 2012.

sion that has inspired and guided the popular movement more than any political platform, exiled opposition leader or organised network on the ground.

## 2. The other side's vision

On the other side of the divide is another powerful vision, equally grounded in a mix of personal experiences and collective perceptions. But unlike the opposition, what regime sympathisers tend to see of their own society is almost exclusively sinister and terrifying. None of the most inspiring aspects of the uprising – civil society initiatives; expressions of solidarity and generosity – are visible to their eyes. The culture of dissent so much in evidence to one side is indiscernible to the other; it occurs for the most part in opposition strongholds and is shared via social media that pro-regime circles simply do not watch. Because peaceful demonstrations tend not to take place in areas controlled by the regime, the only aspects of the opposition that are manifest to regime loyalists also happen to be its most objectionable: an increasingly brutal armed struggle; a dysfunctional and inept exiled political scene; and its generally ineffective and almost always strident international backers.<sup>140</sup>

Naturally, the official media relentlessly have sought to disparage the opposition, depicting it as a murky coalition of traitors, saboteurs, terrorists, fundamentalists, foreign agents, criminals or mercenaries. In like manner, dissent is equated with support for Israel, U.S. hegemonic designs, Saudi or Qatari involvement, sectarianism or Syria's partition.<sup>141</sup> According to this version, people demonstrate chiefly because they are paid<sup>142</sup> or even drugged<sup>143</sup> to do

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<sup>140</sup> See Peter Harling, "How not to prolong the Syrian agony", *Middle East Channel*, 30 August 2011; Peter Harling, "Collectively failing Syrian society", *ibid*, 24 January 2012.

<sup>141</sup> This is true even of peaceful demonstrations. Indeed, faced with an unfamiliar society that clearly rejects them, security officials tend to take refuge behind the notion that this shift in attitudes must be the result of unprecedented outside interference. The father of an Alawite victim said, "we lived through [the peak of the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising in] 1982. This is worse. A strange, foreign hand has entered the country". Crisis Group interview, central Syria, May 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Bashar himself often has invoked this theme. See for instance his 20 June 2011 speech. There is no doubt that the protest movement enjoys significant financial support, notably from the local elite and the diaspora, though that hardly demonstrates that its primary motivation is material.

<sup>143</sup> A pro-regime political figure said, "the [opposition coordination committee] *tansiqiya* in Mezze not only gets money from outside but hashish and alcohol as well". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Security officers repeatedly make this claim. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus and central Syria, May 2012. A security official from Homs said, "most of the opposition's money is drug money. They are allied with drug dealers who send cheap drugs to Saudi Arabia, such as capta-

so and resort to violence with a view to destroying the country on behalf of an ill-defined conspiracy. Official media extensively cover the more horrific forms of violence, notably bomb attacks in civilian areas, invoking them to discredit the opposition and deride the so-called freedom and democracy agendas they purport to promote.<sup>144</sup>

As often in times of conflict, the official narrative is rife with contradictions, though that hardly seems to matter. Among them: that a vast conspiracy is at work, yet the homeland is safe; that unending, nationwide crimes are being carried out by soon-to-be defeated fringe terrorist groups; that only a few more decisive military operations will suffice to deliver a triumph that has proved elusive for months; that all Syrians are brothers, but only the regime can spare the country a civil war; that the state is indestructible, yet all would be lost without Bashar. At its core, the message is that the regime, far from wreaking havoc, is the bulwark against those who are. To its loyalists, the regime's rhetoric – at once soothing and a source

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gon, paltan and amphetamines. Over the past three years, the government put most of the mafia's leaders in jail and seized their money and lands. Most were operating out of Baba Amro. They are not fighting the government because of religion or politics but to maintain their business". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A businessman with close ties to the regime attributed the affair to a feud between security officials on the one hand and local drug manufacturers as well as dealers on the other. He claimed there was a time when the security services tolerated drug manufacturing and trafficking both to make money and flood the Saudi market, when relations between the countries were strained. In the context of the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement prior to the uprising, Damascus allegedly reversed its policy and cracked down on the traffickers, alienating former partners who were quick to seize upon popular unrest as an opportunity to exact revenge. Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, June 2011. Opposition sources from Zabadani and Qusayr stressed that notorious smugglers there and in other border towns, such as Tal Kalakh, had acquired prominence within the anti-regime movement, especially after it became militarised. Some had been involved in drug trafficking. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, May-June 2012.

<sup>144</sup> In the aftermath of bomb attacks that cause civilians casualties, witnesses interviewed on national television frequently ask "is this their freedom? Is this their democracy?" See, eg, Syrian television, 27 and 30 April 2012. Regime supporters and security officers insist that the uprising has nothing to do with freedom, arguing that Syria was far better off before, and the rebellion seeks to destroy what freedom existed. Another frequent contention is that the opposition's refusal to tolerate any support for the regime demonstrates its anti-democratic nature. "I didn't see one guy come out for freedom. What freedom do they want, the freedom of fundamentalism? Do you think they have freedom in Saudi Arabia? They fight the real freedom, freedom of opinion. It doesn't exist fully anywhere, but we had it in good measure. You could belong to any party you wanted and voice your opinion". Crisis Group interview, security officer, Damascus, May 2012.

of constant anxiety – appears to have a quasi-mesmerising, hypnotic appeal.<sup>145</sup>

### 3. The Alawite community's nightmare

Among pro-regime constituencies, the majority of the Alawite community – usually estimated at approximately 10 per cent of the nationwide population, although figures are unverifiable – has experienced Syrian society at its worst.<sup>146</sup> The community was predisposed by history to believe and fall prey to regime attempts to exacerbate and manipulate communal fears.<sup>147</sup> Centuries of discrimination, prejudice and persecution, notably at the hands of Sunni rulers and elites, coupled with its more recent, decades-old de facto association with the country's current leadership, meant it was more inclined to feel at risk of sectarian aggression. As a result, perceptions within the community as a general rule have been several steps ahead of developments on the ground.

As soon as the conflict erupted, long before they were exposed to any serious threat, many were arming themselves, forming militias and erecting barricades. By mid-2011, although genuine sectarian strife had yet to begin in earnest, the community was gripped by bloodcurdling rumours about what "terrorists" would do to their dead bodies. A year later, their thoughts continued to outpace what was becoming an increasingly grim reality. Unsubstantiated accounts of massacres and medieval forms of violence against Alawites spread throughout the community.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Among regime sympathisers, people who routinely used to ignore Syrian television began following it compulsively, watching every news bulletin, even when little seemed to be happening. Crisis group observations, March 2011-July 2012.

<sup>146</sup> A minority of Alawites have come out against the regime: activists, dissident intellectuals and opposition figures. They are not specifically covered in this report. Nir Rosen, "Syria's Alawite activists stuck in the Middle", Al Jazeera, 8 March 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.; and Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit.

<sup>148</sup> Among various rumours, one portrayed a woman from Homs, Umm Khalid, who would ask the "terrorist armed groups" to bring her the corpses of Alawites so she could drink their blood, cut them up in pieces and disperse their body parts around the country. A crude video, showing a woman drinking red liquid likewise circulated among Alawites. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Damascus, August-September 2011. See also Anthony Shadid, "Key Syrian city takes on the tone of a civil war", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2011. Crisis Group was shown pictures of the corpse of a young security officer that bore clear marks of torture, riddled with six bullet shots – one each in his arms and legs, stomach and head. Crisis Group observations, central Syria, May 2012. A security official was adamant armed opposition groups in Karam Zaitun had "raped and slaughtered hundreds of women and children and impaled some of them on a stake [*khazuq*]". He claimed the regime had

Fear of possible extermination, at times, has prompted fantasies about obliterating large swathes of a society perceived as inherently threatening. Even among educated Alawites in the capital, the prospect of emptying Homs of much of its Sunni population appeared to produce few qualms.<sup>149</sup> According to a local journalist:

A very sophisticated Alawite friend of mine spoke crudely, saying you had to “fuck them”, “eradicate them”, “cleanse the country”. In his view, the solution in Homs was to kill every Sunni who lived there. He even claims that Homs “originally” is an Alawite city, which someone like him must know is nonsense. I listened to him for a long time before slowly challenging his narrative and getting him back to his senses. But I’m quite sure my efforts ultimately were in vain.<sup>150</sup>

As the conflict deteriorated, Alawites increasingly felt insecure, causing noticeable shifts in long-established patterns of behaviour. In Damascus, crammed Alawite neighbourhoods turned into closed, militia-run strongholds with checkpoints and vigils. Residents ceased going for strolls or picnics in the capital’s open spaces. In government offices and among guards in front of public buildings, Alawites began to conceal their consumption of *matte*, a herbal drink consumed with a straw, because it is an unmistakable identifier of Alawite (and Druze) communal belonging. Discussions with colleagues and friends grew more guarded. Those who publicly voiced support for reforms privately confessed they favoured solutions based on “destroying”, “eradicating”, “cleansing” or “purging”.<sup>151</sup> Many Syrians interviewed by Crisis Group acknowledged their difficulty in engaging substantively with Alawite counterparts and had limited the frequency or depth of their interaction;<sup>152</sup> such forms of ostracism, naturally, only

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refrained from publicising the news for fear of provoking sectarian strife. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, April-May 2012. After military operations had largely depopulated the city, and before they began in the capital, the mindset among Alawites in Homs reportedly was triumphalist. “The looting of Homs is generating an economic self-sufficiency which in turn creates an atmosphere in which Alawites feel that they no longer need the Sunnis. After the shelling of Bab al-Amr, a growing sense of confidence in the regime is bringing many to say, ‘Let’s just get this over with and finish them all off’”. Crisis Group interview, Alawite activist in Homs, June 2012. See also “Alawite fortress and Sunni wasteland in Syria’s Homs”, Reuters, 19 June 2012; “Syria crisis: In Homs, ‘Sunni markets’ sell looted goods”, Reuters, 19 June 2012.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, April-May 2012. “Cleansing” [*tathir*] is now standard terminology for describing military and security operations in the official media.

<sup>152</sup> A Christian businessman said, “my Alawite friends all back the regime. In my experience, there are no exceptions. They are convinced that any alternative will lead to their eradication, but

further deepened the Alawites’ sense of isolation. A non-Alawite official put it starkly:

These people have their own stories, their own pictures, their own videos, that circulate almost only among them. They have their own ideas that they don’t easily share with others. They form an increasingly distinct group within society, virtually a sect.<sup>153</sup>

To an extent, Alawites fears were grounded in reality. During the Muslim Brotherhood-led revolt in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they experienced vicious sectarian violence that was condoned if not ordered by some of today’s leading opposition figures, who have yet to express any regret. As an official sympathetic to the community although critical of the regime said, “it’s not as if the Alawites were making it all up. They have a history with the Islamists. That tells them what their future will be”. In recent months, they have become the object of mounting prejudice and hatred.<sup>154</sup> Worries about possible collective annihilation have been bolstered by the large number of casualties in their ranks; most victims were members of the security services, yet for their relatives, these were sons, husbands and fathers killed while performing their duty of fighting “terrorists” determined to destroy the regime,

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they frame that fear in a narrative in which the regime is saving Syria from Salafis, Wahhabis, [Qatari Emir] Hamed, the U.S. and Israel. They want to see what the regime is doing as a war to save Syria, the homeland and the resistance, when in fact it is all about the community. They only watch [the pro-regime satellite television channel] al-Dunia and never hear the other side of the story. They pretend to be open-minded and reformist with people who don’t share their positions, but deep down they are 100 per cent with the regime. As a result, it has become very hard to talk to them other than superficially. And therefore we tend to see each other less often”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. A Druze intellectual echoed the view: “We are witnessing unspeakable forms of violence. I saw a video in which *shabbiha* stand around a corpse that they crucified on a table, singing ‘*shabbiha lil-abad li’uyunak ya assad*’ [we’ll be *shabbiha* for ever, for your eyes oh Assad] while they desecrate the body. I continue to have some Alawite friends but as a result of this have become allergic to their ideas, even their accent. Just hearing it makes me feel nervous. I am well-educated and moderate. I force myself to maintain contact with these friends. But, deep down, I despise and hate them”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, anti-regime Druze, May 2012.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interview, official originally from Dayr Zor, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group correspondence, official, July 2012. These feelings are experienced even by some Alawite defectors. Deborah Amos, “A Syrian defector confronts a sectarian divide”, National Public Radio, 16 July 2012. Some community web-pages, designed to serve as platforms for denouncing regime officials, proxies or even supporters, have become vehicles for overt anti-Alawite incitement. A good example was [www.facebook.com/Syria.Revolution.Intelligence?filter=1](http://www.facebook.com/Syria.Revolution.Intelligence?filter=1), which recently was taken off the internet.

the nation and the community. Families in mourning spoke of their lost ones having “died in the service of the nation” to which they pledged to “offer many more martyrs”.<sup>155</sup>

In theory, the arrest and torture of moderate opposition figures, as well as the killing of peaceful protesters or young activists from different minority communities, ought to have collided with this worldview. Despite lack of official coverage of such events, many pro-regime Alawites were in a position to know, given their own or their relatives' professional affiliation to the security services. Yet, they chose to belittle such occurrences,<sup>156</sup> instead playing up reports of crimes and wrongdoings by the opposition that, in their minds, justified retaliatory actions.<sup>157</sup> An almost obsessive reference to the “state” likewise has served to explain regime violence: “There is a difference between killing a man going to work for the state and killing a man taking up arms against the state. Our sons were killed doing their duty”.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officers, Alawite villages and neighbourhoods, May 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Many downplayed these events by emphasising their banality. “Everybody in Syria including me knew before the uprising what would happen if you were to fall in the hands of the security services. We all knew the police wouldn't read us our rights. If you step into the lion's cage, you cannot ask the lion, ‘why are you hurting me?’” Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, May 2012. In the same breath, they also offered the contradictory view that the security services were respecting the rule of law. “Demonstrations are against the law and need a license; that's why protesters get arrested now. Doctors are arrested for treating the wounded because if you treat a person injured by gunshot you have to take a copy of his ID. Likewise, it is illegal to ask for foreign intervention, which is another reason some demonstrators were arrested”. Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, April 2012. The ultimate argument is that the “state” is under attack and entitled to defend itself by all possible means. “Innocent people are killed because you cannot always distinguish between innocent and guilty targets. But do you think any authority in the world would fail to defend itself? The protesters' goal was to occupy public squares as they did in Egypt. Did you think the state would bring them cake? After they failed to occupy squares, they tried for a Libyan scenario”. Crisis Group interview, pro-regime notable, central Syria, May 2012.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officers, central Syria, May 2012.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interview, relative of killed security officer, central Syria, May 2012. As the crisis deepened, pro-regime Alawites have tended to identify the state with Bashar (however much such personification would seem to be at odds with the very notion of statehood) and reject the notion that the regime was Alawite in nature (even as their behaviour suggested that they only fully trusted fellow community members). Crisis Group interviews and observations, Alawite villages and neighbourhoods, May 2012. A large slogan painted on a wall in the

Importantly, and unlike the opposition, Alawites loyal to the regime have seen virtually nothing of the revived sense of solidarity. Civil society networks that have emerged to support bereaved families have focused on victims of regime repression; there have been only rare equivalents on the other side of the barrier.<sup>159</sup> What is more, the ruling family and its allies have shown little inclination to lend assistance to those among their sympathisers who have been wounded, displaced, widowed or orphaned. Instead, the regime expects state institutions to assume such functions at a time when, long corrupt and ineffective, they also are increasingly bankrupt.<sup>160</sup>

Nor, some claim, are their respective dead similarly treated. On the opposition's side, victims of the conflict are cherished, honoured and remembered; numbers meticulously are kept up to date. On the regime's side, by contrast, national funerals appear to be sporadic,<sup>161</sup> there are no precise statistics, only occasional figures released by the official media. At times, it appears that the Alawites' plight is to be fighting against a society that threatens the community's very survival, on behalf of a regime that takes their sacrifice for granted, and in the name of a state that has become more slogan than reality.

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Alawite district of “Mezze 86” in Damascus reads: “The Assadist Republic of Syria” (*al-jumhuriya al-asadiya al-suriya*).<sup>159</sup> Although some initiatives exist, they are rare. In Damascus, a group calling itself “*nahna rijalak ya bashar*” (we are your men, Bashar) organises pro-regime demonstrations but also pays visits to families of martyrs. Crisis Group interviews, members of the group, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>160</sup> So far, an extensive database of leaked emails has unearthed only token efforts to alleviate the losses of families of fallen soldiers and officers. See, eg, “Asma and Bashar: Syria's British royals”, *Al-Akhbar* (English), 8 July 2012. The same is true of Bashar's cousin and business mogul Rami Makhlouf who, despite running a charity (the Garden Association, *jami'at al-bustan*, supposed to fund surgical operations across the country) reportedly has failed to pay its bills to suppliers or private clinics. Crisis Group interviews and observations, May 2012. Some state-run initiatives purportedly support families of victims; these include financial compensation or loans designed to help launch economic projects. Crisis Group interview, military official, Damascus, May 2012. For the most part, however, such families merely continue to receive the deceased's salary or pension.

<sup>161</sup> Some families complain that bodies of their fallen relatives are either not returned to them or buried in mass funerals in which they must struggle to figure out who is who. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Alawite villages and neighbourhoods, April-May 2012. A local journalist with close ties to the Alawite community accused the regime of “mismanaging the bodies of its own martyrs. Some families stay for weeks without news of their sons because no one told them they were dead. Corpses go unidentified or are hurriedly buried. As far as one can tell, the regime doesn't even keep a precise, updated list of its martyrs, unlike the opposition”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

A final, critical distinctive feature of the Alawites' outlook is that they have the most to lose. As described in a previous Crisis Group report and contrary to conventional wisdom, the regime did not privilege the community as a whole.<sup>162</sup> The Alawite countryside remains strikingly underdeveloped; many join the army for lack of an alternative; members of the security services typically are overworked and underpaid. Ordinary Alawites rarely benefited from high-level corruption, least of all under Bashar.

That said, from the 1960s onward, the Baathist regime undoubtedly offered the Alawites an opportunity to overcome a second-class status to which history appeared to have consigned them. An Alawite intellectual said, "before that we had been slaughtered, persecuted, treated like animals and infidels".<sup>163</sup> In the aftermath of the agrarian reforms (decreed in 1958 and 1963, prior to the Baath takeover, but maintained by the subsequent regime), Alawite (as well as other) serfs of absentee landowners were allowed to live and work on their own property. The Baath party created new avenues for social promotion. As the party and state bureaucracy expanded, many rural Alawites moved into towns. Anti-Alawite prejudices remained but were somewhat reduced. With their more urban manners and marriage to Sunnis, the ruling family's second generation – and notably Bashar – solidified this impression of social integration.

The current crisis has thrown all these gains into question. Whether or not they took part in the regime's acts of brutality, and whether or not they condoned it, a large number of Alawites expect they will pay a heavy price should Bashar be toppled. The security services as they currently exist will be wiped out; the Baath party almost certainly will be outlawed; and purges likely will occur within the bureaucracy. Violent reprisals can be expected against predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods in Damascus and Homs that have been involved in the repression and many Sunnis perceive as the product of a form of internal colonisation.<sup>164</sup> In the countryside in central Syria, a number

of Alawite villages have been built on land that their (non-Alawite) original owners still claim. Lacking any faith in the future, Alawites are waging a desperate struggle in the present for fear of revisiting their gloomy past.

### C. THE ISSUE OF SECTARIANISM

One of the most sensitive and intractable issues in the crisis is sectarianism. Among Syrians, it evokes powerful emotions; their alarm at the thought of replicating the disaster experienced by neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq leads many to exaggerate or, alternatively, dismiss the problem. According to some, only a strong, authoritarian regime can protect society from its own ills; others argue that the current leadership has been encouraging and manipulating communal feelings for its own purposes. Foreign commentators have tended to adopt one or the other of these extreme views, choosing an exclusively sectarian prism through which to look at the conflict.<sup>165</sup>

Unpacking this matter is all the more complex given the multiple layers of Syrian identity. Communal loyalties co-exist with local identities, kinship ties, class affinities, ideological preferences, generational cleavages and pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sympathies, as well as strong attachment to the "nation-state" in its existing boundaries (despite, among some Kurds in particular, the thought of partition as a possible option of last resort). These typically can be found, in varying proportions, within any given individual. The conflict has intensified many of these feelings – including but not limited to sectarianism.

Three central aspects bear keeping in mind. First is the acutely felt anxiety of minorities at the notion of a predominantly Sunni uprising. For the most part, such anguish tends to decrease as interaction with Sunnis rises. Non-Alawite and non-Shiite minority activists, as well as those accustomed to dealing with a majority Sunni environment, have tended to manage those relations best: the Druze of Sweida, the Ismailis of Salamiya and Christians living in villages in central Syria are split between those sympathetic to the opposition and those loyal to the regime, but overall they have not been caught up in the conflict. By contrast, rumours of attacks against non-Alawite and non-Shiite minorities have been most likely to spread among those farthest from where violence is occurring. Christians of Aleppo, Damascus and the diaspora illustrate this point, as many have been among Bashar's strongest backers. So

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<sup>162</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alawite intellectual, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>164</sup> For instance, military bases and residential areas that exclusively host Alawite troops or residents, built on the foothills surrounding Damascus, have long been dubbed settlements [*mustawtanat*], a word whose connotation is all the more negative given its widespread use in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Some have been built on expropriated land, generating acute tensions. This is the case of Sumariya, which borders Muadhmiya, an opposition hotspot on the outskirts of the capital. "They came from the mountains and spread everywhere. They are worse than Jewish settlers in Palestine. They took the sensitive and strategic places. They infiltrated the fabric of society. It was a deliberate and planned internal population movement.

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They set up settlements like Sumariya, Wahid Tishrin, Ish al-Warwar, Mezze 86, Hay al-Warda, etc. Sumariya is open to 'their' officers and 'their' civilians' only". Crisis Group interview, local opposition figure, Muadhmiya, May 2012.

<sup>165</sup> This has led many to accept the oversimplified notion that all minorities by definition are inclined to support the regime.



far, however, there have been few known cases of opposition violence specifically targeting these minorities.<sup>166</sup>

Deepening anti-Alawite sentiment presents a second, far more serious threat. Some within the opposition are inclined to minimise the phenomenon, describing it as the natural consequence of the security forces' make-up and behaviour. But it is much more profound and worrying than that. As protesters first took to the streets, deep-seated prejudices rose to the surface;<sup>167</sup> their ascent has been all the more manifest as violence escalated. A year into the crisis, as the killing of Sunni civilians multiplied, blatant

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<sup>166</sup> Regime officials often spread reports of forced expulsions of Christians – almost certainly to both tarnish the opposition, notably in international eyes, and rally minority support – yet have not provided hard evidence. On 9 June 2012, the Vatican news agency Fides suggested that Christians had been ordered by Salafi armed groups to leave Qusayr, north of Damascus. Its language was circumspect and refrained from definite conclusions, but regime sympathisers quickly seized upon it, [www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=33181&lan=fra](http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=33181&lan=fra). Paolo Dall'Oglio, a pro-opposition priest who investigated both confirmed and minimised the role of some “fringe Jihadi hot-heads” who had kidnapped two Christians, claiming that they had singled them out for their active support of the regime. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 18 June 2012. The priest said he was able to secure the release of one and added: “Some Christians have been armed by the regime. That is part of the problem. But it remains a small phenomenon. Most Christians are just scared, sitting tight or leaving”. Regime opponents have denied any targeting of Christians by armed groups: “Christians fleeing Homs have done so because the neighbourhoods they live in have been shelled by the regime, not because they are chased by the opposition”. Crisis Group interview, Christian businessman opposed to the regime, Damascus, May 2012. A Christian described the opposition fighters in Qusayr who briefly detained and tortured him as uneducated thugs steeped in prejudices against Christians, whom they viewed as potential regime supporters; he was released within hours as the interrogation revealed that was not the case. He suggested most Christians had fled due to shelling, more than sectarian threats: “If you have good personal relations, then you have no problem with the fighters. I don't know if sectarianism is an issue for them. It definitely is with Alawites. But for Christians, it's just not clear at all”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, July 2012.

<sup>167</sup> In March 2011, one of the first slogans heard in Deraa was “no Iran, no Hizbollah, we want a Muslim who fears God” [*la iran la hizbollah, bedna muslim yakhaf allah*], a catch-phrase that clearly attacked the regime on religious grounds. An Alawite intellectual sympathetic to the uprising recounted early dynamics in Homs: “Sectarianism quickly emerged on all sides. The opposition came out of mosques. Even [supposedly non-confessional] communists started telling Alawites ‘you are the minority’. The first person killed by the opposition in Homs was an Alawite, the janitor at the officer's club, and protesters were shouting ‘Damn your soul, oh Hafez’. That was a clear provocation. The violence, coupled with support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar has made matters worse”. Crisis Group interview, Alawite professor, Homs, May 2012.

hatred of Alawites became commonplace. Worse, it expressed itself in particularly odious clichés pertaining to the community's alleged extraneousness and incapacity to truly assimilate with other Syrians.<sup>168</sup>

The notion that Alawites had “colonised” parts of the territory likewise evokes encroachment by a “different” people exhibiting alien traits and foreign values. This narrative is rooted in age-old preconceptions that castigate Alawites as mountainous hordes known for their “savagery” (*wahshiya*) and contrast their ways to purportedly long-established urban sophistication.<sup>169</sup> In the same vein, the regime's extreme brutality is depicted as an expression of an alleged Alawite ethos or essence and as such a source of division within an otherwise harmonious society.<sup>170</sup> Even secular Syrians at times speculate that the Alawites' suspected godlessness may have something to do with it.<sup>171</sup> Generally, they are widely assumed to be devoid of “morals”, in a country where ethical values (however superficial and insincere) are considered paramount. Latent prior to the crisis, these biases have emerged in full force. A Druze intellectual expressed a number of them:

People are asking: “Do Alawites belong here?” Their behaviour suggests otherwise, and the gap is widening. Do they have dignity? They used to send their daughters to work as servants, which no other community

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<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interviews, various parts of Syria, April-June 2012. See also Phil Sands, “Sectarianism casts shadow over Syria's uprising”, *The National*, 21 June 2012.

<sup>169</sup> For an academic study of Alawite identity, including references to the persecution and prejudices to which they have been subjected, see Torstein Schiotz Worren, *Fear and Resistance. The Construction of Alawite Identity in Syria* (Oslo, 2007). Hafiz Assad's grandfather was a wrestler nicknamed the “savage” [*wahish*], which remained the ruling family's name until the 1920s; afterwards it became Assad, which means lion. See Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle For The Middle East* (London, 1988).

<sup>170</sup> The regime's worst crimes tend to be attributed specifically to Alawites, even when they implicate a much broader cross-section of society. The Hama bloodbath of 1982, in particular, was carried out by army units commanded by a variety of officers, such as Druze General Nayif al-Aqil. In popular historiography, however, what sticks is that the “majority were Alawites”. Crisis Group interview, armed opposition coordinator, Homs, May 2012.

<sup>171</sup> The Alawite religion is esoteric, making it largely unknown and thus the object of multiple fantasies. Reflecting one such myth, a (non-Alawite) regime official said, “I have been in touch with generals from the Republican Guard. They speak of Bashar as a God. At the rank-and-file level, security officers forced people to repeat ‘there is no God but Bashar’. I have come to think that the idea of God's incarnation in the person of Bashar is a reality for them”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Alawites typically do not perform rituals or practice visible forms of religiosity.

did. Even poor Christians, poor Sunnis and poor Druze could not imagine doing something like that. Take another example: when Hafiz took power, he created many nursery schools, which quickly became 99 per cent Alawite. They also became brothels, to the extent that it was hard to find people willing to be their managers. That's why you have many problems today in hospitals, where nurses mistreat the wounded even when the security services leave them alone. They beat them or refuse to give them medicine.<sup>172</sup>

This perceived otherness is bolstered by the conviction that Alawites may ultimately seek to limit their presence to specific areas of the country. As seen, some Alawite neighbourhoods are closing themselves off from other communities; they have all but evacuated other locations.<sup>173</sup> Rumours of a collective "plan B" – namely creation of an Alawite rump state in the north west and perhaps parts of central Syria, have long been in the air, but many non-Alawites now have the feeling it is becoming a reality on the ground.<sup>174</sup> A local journalist listed several signs – real or simply rumoured – of this purported geographic re-location:

Alawites from central Syria say they want to move the administrative centre of Hama governorate from Hama to the [predominantly] Christian locality of Mahrada. They depend on Hama for jobs in the state bureaucracy but don't want to face the constant problems they have in the city. In Homs, some Alawites are said to want to move into a depopulated Baba Amro. Such patterns reinforce the notion of the Alawites' internal colonisation of the country. Others have dug up the Alawite flag created at the time of French colonialism [when several communal statelets were established, of

which Lebanon is the only remnant], as if they were headed for independence.<sup>175</sup>

Not all non-Alawites share such simplistic views; some who have been most exposed to regime brutality have shown remarkable enlightenment,<sup>176</sup> just as some Alawites have worked hard to dissociate themselves from the repression.<sup>177</sup> And it is always possible that the heights of sectarian emotions reached in the crux of the conflict will subside as the conflict comes to an end.

But the danger of widespread sectarian reprisals, indiscriminate killings, large-scale displacement (whether forced or spontaneous) and blanket discrimination should not be taken lightly. The exiled opposition's repeated inability to put forward a serious, meaningful initiative that might as-

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<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. An activist from Apamea, northwest of Hama in central Syria, articulated widespread views: "The Alawites have this creed [*aqida*] of forming their own state; they want the western part of Syria. They cannot take control of the east of the Orontes river, because we [Sunnis] are just too numerous. Look at Idlib – it is completely under opposition control, because they cannot take it, so they don't want it. What they want is Homs as their capital". Crisis Group correspondence, June 2012.

<sup>176</sup> See, for instance, the plea for a settlement made by Shaykh Anas Ahmad Sweed, a Salafi shaykh from the Bab Sibaa neighbourhood of Homs, at [www.facebook.com/anas.ahmad.sweed/posts/414950148556001](http://www.facebook.com/anas.ahmad.sweed/posts/414950148556001). An armed opposition group commander in Homs, displaying remarkable appreciation for their predicament, said, "guarantees for the Alawites can be envisaged, of course. These are people who are suffering, exposed to kidnappings and murder. The regime ignores their pain. Syrian TV always says Syria is fine, and it's over, but there are many Alawite families who are suffering and lost their sons. Ultimately, we need a settlement. I have had contacts with individual members of the community, but we cannot discuss this issue seriously as long as the security and *shabbiha* control Alawite neighbourhoods". Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012. Another opposition figure concurred: "The Alawite situation is difficult. Where would they go if the regime fell? They want a solution. For Alawites, the security services meant a source of employment. Alawite villages are very poor and those were the only jobs available". Crisis Group interview, Deraa, June 2012.

<sup>177</sup> According to opposition activists, some Alawites in Homs have supported the uprising after having witnessed regime brutality first-hand. A Sunni activist from Bab al-Siba'i said that Alawites had sent food and medical supplies to besieged Sunni areas and that a network of Alawites within the security services was providing rebels with information: "I accompanied an Alawite activist to Khaldiyyeh. When we arrived at a checkpoint, the rebel commander checked the activist's ID and waved him through, saying his name was on a list. It turned out they have long lists of Alawites who are secretly helping the revolution from the inside. Once the regime falls, there will be plenty of Alawites we know we can trust". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2012.

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<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, anti-regime Druze intellectual, May 2012.

<sup>173</sup> Reportedly, the numerous Alawite civil servants in the overwhelmingly Sunni governorate of Dayr Zor have left the governorate entirely. Crisis Group interview, official originally from Dayr Zor, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>174</sup> See, for instance, Hugh Mcleod and Annasofie Flamand, "Syria's 'Plan B': An Allawite State?", *Global Post*, 16 July 2012; Robert Fisk, "If Alawites are turning against Assad then his fate is sealed", *The Independent*, 23 July 2012. A Russian official said, after visiting Damascus, "most Alawites feel there is no escape; some officials have told me they are thinking of building an Alawite state and, if need be, just go to the mountains. But this is not sustainable as they would be vulnerable to attack. I don't mean that the regime likes such an idea of partition; most officials remain nationalists and actually believe they are fighting for a cause – against terrorists, jihadis, etc. They buy their own narrative. But nevertheless they are talking more and more of partition as a de facto reality, one more likely than the full collapse of the regime". Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

suage concerns is reason enough to worry.<sup>178</sup> A question that has dogged and shaped the unfolding conflict for months may well come back to haunt any eventual transition.<sup>179</sup>

A third significant aspect of sectarianism is a derivative of the second: however powerful anti-Alawite hatred might be, anti-Shiite feelings surpass them. Syria's Shiite community possibly is the smallest, most fragmented minority of all. It is dispersed in an archipelago of tiny human islands spread across the country, some of them centuries old; others reflecting subsequent migrations from Lebanon and Iraq; and still others a product of more recent proselytising.<sup>180</sup> Over the past several years, the latter phenomenon, although marginal, has prompted extensive discussion among Syrians and in foreign policy circles regarding Syria's alleged "Shiitisation" (*tashyi*) at a time

when the Iraq invasion already had inflamed sectarian passions.<sup>181</sup>

The Shiites' often ostentatious support for the regime is not a sufficient explanation. The same can be seen in certain Christian neighbourhoods, yet they have not suffered anything near the same backlash. Nor is the presence of Shiites in the *shabbiha* a good argument: the security forces' proxies also have Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Ismailis among others. The much-trumpeted backing of the uprising by Sunni regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Qatar cannot fully account for this deep-rooted hatred either: the vast majority of Syrian activists and fighters interviewed by Crisis Group in fact expresses disappointment and bitterness at these nations' half-hearted and mostly verbal assistance.<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, influential Salafi clerics such as Adnan Ar'ur have projected their long-standing anti-Shiite rhetoric onto the Syrian crisis.

The intensity of prejudice cannot be fully understood, it would seem, without taking into account both mounting Sunni-Shiite antagonism within the region and, within that context, the nature of the regime's external allies, Iran and Hizbollah. Their blind endorsement of the official version, lack of sympathy for civilian victims of regime repression and double standards (as illustrated by their championing of the overwhelmingly Shiite Bahraini uprising) generated considerable resentment for which Syrian Shiites have paid a price.<sup>183</sup> So far, there has been little evidence of anti-Shiite violence, though this simply could reflect the current cartography of the conflict and could change as the regime loses control of parts of the territory.<sup>184</sup> Clearly,

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<sup>178</sup> Recent (and long-overdue) efforts by opposition groups aimed at articulating a vision for the future are not always cause for comfort; some risk reinforcing the widespread belief among Alawites that the community would lose everything in a transition and be forced to pay a collective price. The documents that have emerged suggest that the complex web of regime structures – in which Alawite presence is overwhelming – would be eradicated and that accountability for crimes under the current leadership would be interpreted broadly: despite talk of "reconciliation" and "national unity", the scope of planned prosecutions appears to be extensive. One document developed with support from Western think-tanks asserts that transitional authorities will "arrest, disarm and detain all those who have committed criminal acts against civilians, including key members of the Shabbiha, Ba'th Party militias, other paramilitary groups", and would "abolish old intelligence services, collect their weapons, and arrest their key leaders". It refers only in passing to Alawites and assumes the regime's "collapse". *The Day After Project: Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria*, United States Institute of Peace and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, July 2012. Another states that "the political solution in Syria starts with the removal of Bashar al-Assad and the figures of his authority, and holding accountable those involved in the killing of Syrians". "As soon as the caretaker government assumes authority, the ruling Baath Party shall be dissolved along with all its affiliated institutions, and their properties will be seized and returned to the state, while its members will be allowed to practice political work according to the new laws.... The National Security Council shall oversee the restructuring of the armed forces and security agencies after they submit to the Council's authority in order to rid these agencies of whoever is proven to have been involved, dissolve armed militias (Shabiha), withdraw weapons from civilians, and to recruit revolutionaries who want to join the armed forces". "The Joint Political Vision for the Features of the Transitional Phase as Approved by the Syrian Opposition Conference held Under the Auspices of the League of Arab States in Cairo", 3 July 2012.

<sup>179</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncharted Waters*, op. cit.

<sup>180</sup> For a study of this controversial issue, see Khalid Sindawi, "The Shiite Turn in Syria", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 8, June 2009.

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<sup>181</sup> See, eg, Andrew Tabler, "Catalytic converters", *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 April 2007.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interviews, various parts of Syria, April-June 2012.

<sup>183</sup> In keeping with the notion that the regime increasingly has sold out to a sectarian, Shiite axis, unsubstantiated rumours have circulated regarding the conversation to Shiism of several officials. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2012. Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbollah, appears to have offered his condolences only once, in July 2012, when several senior officials were killed in Damascus.

<sup>184</sup> A pro-opposition Shiite in Deraa said, "an entire Shiite family from the Amuri family in a village next to Qusair was killed, but nobody knows who did it". Crisis Group interview, Deraa, May 2012. The report of the killing could not be independently verified. On the assassination of a Shiite scholar in Sit Zainab, a neighbourhood of Damascus, in April, see [www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/14/207566.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/14/207566.html). More serious violence reportedly broke out in this district in July 2012, although exact circumstances remain murky. In many places, truces seem to have been worked out, although they appear eminently fragile. An activist in (Sunni) Binnish, a small town next to Idlib which is adjacent to (Shiite) Fu'a, gave an example: "We've reached an agreement between the elders [of our villages]. It was calm for eight months, but yesterday they kidnapped two of our peo-

feelings toward Shiites have deteriorated at an alarming rate, as exemplified by this account of the massacre of Sunni families in Karam Zaitun, which appears to be taken for granted by many Sunnis:

The killing of those families was performed by, or designed as a present to, Hizbollah. In their Shiite worldview, the more blood is spilled, the sooner the [disappeared Imam] Mahdi Muntazar will reappear [announcing the end of time]. So they used blunt knives to slit the throats and carve up the bodies.<sup>185</sup>

#### D. THE ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE

As in all major conflicts, the struggle for Syria has consumed, produced and redistributed vast quantities of resources. The formal economy has been devastated. Beyond the obvious and immediate material damage caused by fighting and international sanctions,<sup>186</sup> there are many, of-

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ple. The problem is that many of them have family who are *shabbiha* or security officers. When we get arrested and tortured, the interrogators often are from Fu'a. For months before the agreement, we were kidnapping each other and then negotiating releases. Some of them actually are with the revolution, but by now they all have moved to Binnish. Those who have remained in Fu'a are all pro-regime". Crisis Group correspondence, activist in Binnish, June 2012.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interview, secular Sunni activist from Homs, Damascus, May 2012. "The hatred of Shiites surpasses that felt for Alawites. Even Alawites blame Shiites for Karam Zaitun as a way of deflecting blame". Crisis Group interview, Christian activist, Damascus, May 2012. A Hizbollah official complained: "We face a systematic disinformation campaign carried out by the Syrian opposition and targeting Hizbollah. If you listen to them, Hizbollah snipers are all over Syria. After the battle for Zabadani, the bodies of Hizbollah fighters supposedly littered the streets. Many others allegedly have been captured here and there. And in Karam Zaitun, it also purportedly was Hizbollah that cut up those corpses in the most horrific ways. Of course, the opposition has never come up with any evidence to support such claims". Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, April 2012. A Syrian security officer added: "There is an order that no Hizbollah fighter should cross the Syrian border. We don't want any one of them to die, not even in a car accident. That way, nobody can claim that Hizbollah is fighting in Syria". Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, April 2012.

<sup>186</sup> Most of the country's productive sector (factories and workshops) is located in working-class areas engulfed in the conflict, including the peripheries of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. Wave after wave of "targeted" sanctions, theoretically designed strictly to undermine the regime's ability to function, have deeply affected ordinary business. A prominent, anti-regime businessman explained: "I used to have 700 people working for me, and I've had to fire all but 100. It's mostly because of the sanctions. Money transactions are a nightmare, and we cannot get the raw materials. We suffer from sanctions more than the regime". Crisis Group interview, businessman from Dayr Zor, Damascus, May 2012.

tentimes overlooked long-term consequences: disruption of the agricultural and educational sectors, significant capital flight, depletion of foreign currency reserves and the state's looming insolvency.<sup>187</sup>

At the same time, another economy has boomed, as both sides have accumulated new resources. Within anti-regime circles, civil society activities are underwritten by abundant donations from the local business establishment and Syria's large and highly entrepreneurial diaspora, as well as various support programs set up by Western governments and non-governmental organisations. Armed opposition groups have acquired a level of financial autonomy by tapping into their benefactors' deep pockets, by their own admission predominantly Islamists and foreign-based.<sup>188</sup> By and large, with some exceptions noted above, they have refrained from predatory activity for fear of alienating their social base; that said, some have engaged in for-profit criminal behaviour, including looting or kidnapping regime sympathisers for ransom.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, the status conferred upon armed combatants and the assets to which they have access promote and empower social outcasts; their ultimate integration within a more pacified society may prove as problematic in Syria as it has in other post-conflict situations.

By the same token, the loyalist camp has adjusted to the developing economy of violence. The regime's shrinking ambitions in terms of nationwide governance have extended its financial lifespan: deep cuts in all bureaucratic budgets, the neglect and outright abandonment of local administration in large swathes of the country, together with the weakening domestic currency – which has increased the relative value of foreign currency reserves<sup>190</sup> –

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<sup>187</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit. Burning crops has been widespread in the regime's scorched earth policy, depleting food reserves nationwide. Fertilisers, traditionally provided by the state, have been withheld, not least because they can be used to produce explosives. Crisis Group interview, armed opposition commander, Deraa, June 2012. At least until the July outbreak of violence in the capital, the state continued to pay salaries; beyond that, however, it appeared bankrupt. It long ago suspended all perks traditionally extended to civil servants; likewise, state-related projects, whether performed by public entities or private firms, have gone unfunded. By May, the state appeared to be hungry for resources, for example engaging in unprecedented efforts to recover payments of electricity bills; in some parts of the country, proof of payment was required at checkpoints. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Damascus, April-May 2012.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interviews, armed opposition group commanders, various parts of Syria, May-June 2012.

<sup>189</sup> See, eg, the case involving the ransacking of a truck at a "liberated" border. "Turkish truck drivers accuse rebel fighters of looting". Agence France-Presse, 21 July 2012.

<sup>190</sup> A businessman accused the regime of speculating against the national currency. "The regime orchestrated the drop in the

likely helped it focus its dwindling resources on sustaining the security apparatus. Pro-regime businessmen supposedly lent a hand, bankrolling the *shabbiha*; some have turned to forms of profiteering, benefiting from new smuggling opportunities or, more simply, the predicament of fellow businessmen.<sup>191</sup>

Most importantly, pro-regime fighters have ensured their self-sufficiency through such activities as looting, kidnapping for ransom, carjacking and smuggling.<sup>192</sup> As a result, they have a wealth of resources at their disposal. A businessman enjoying ties to both activists and security officials said:

Corruption has grown to unprecedented levels. In Homs, troops were encouraged to pillage. Money is made by stealing, selling war booty or even weapons. People pay to be released from prison or to be able to escape an area under attack. There is a price for everything. As a result, many of these people involved in repression now have a vested interest in ensuring chaos lasts as long as possible.<sup>193</sup>

All in all, and despite an array of Western and Arab sanctions purporting to impair its ability to function,<sup>194</sup> the re-

gime appears to have successfully converted its economy to one predicated on continued violence – a system on which such measures have virtually no bearing.<sup>195</sup>

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value of the Syrian pound in order to purchase local currency at a cheap rate and be able to pay salaries. They made a lot of money this way". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>191</sup> Accusations regarding the *shabbiha* have been levelled against pro-regime businessmen in Aleppo, [www.therevolting-syrian.com/post/13047793336/aleppo-the-shabee7a-name-shame-syria](http://www.therevolting-syrian.com/post/13047793336/aleppo-the-shabee7a-name-shame-syria). That most reputable businessmen have distanced themselves from the regime and adopted a low profile created huge opportunities for the few remaining pro-regime ones. Nadia Bitar, "When sanctions backfire. Syrian war profiteers cash in on insurgency", *Der Spiegel* (online), 6 June 2012.

<sup>192</sup> Such endemic corruption in many ways can help the opposition, armed and unarmed. According to combatants, officers at many checkpoints can be bribed to pass vehicles unchecked or sell weapons and ammunition. Crisis Group interviews, central and southern Syria, May-June 2012. Stacks of weapons confiscated by the regime reportedly find their way to the black market. Crisis Group interview, opposition combatant, Muadhmiya, May 2012. Prisoner releases can be bought. Crisis Group interviews, opposition members, May-June 2012. Footage taken by security officers of pro-regime proxies engaged in criminal activity reportedly has been sold to opposition media. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, Beirut, May 2012.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>194</sup> Sanctions typically have been announced in response to escalating bloodshed, most likely in order for governments to show they were "doing something", even as options remained limited. This explains why wave after wave of sanctions have been decreed despite no discernible effect on the regime's capacity or willingness to resort to violence. They increasingly appear to be convincing Syrians from all walks of life that the outside world in fact seeks the destruction of the country more than of the regime; this was heard time and again, from both

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pro- and anti-regime interlocutors. "The U.S. will not act because it is doing Israel's bidding. They will not repeat a Libyan model here. They don't know whose hands the weapons will reach and fear this society's awakening. They want its destruction and the survival of a weak regime. Everybody is convinced of this now". Crisis Group interview, activist from Homs, Damascus, May 2012. A regime insider echoed this: "We are convinced that the U.S. wants to weaken the country but preserve the regime because at the end of the day, and leaving aside all the bluster, it doesn't threaten Israel much". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012.

<sup>195</sup> In a sense, "targeted sanctions" can be said to be sanctions what "surgical war" is to war – a catchphrase evoking razor-sharp precision while concealing a far more indiscriminate impact. Members of the ruling family found ways to protect their assets and engage in business even as violence raged. Atef Najib, Bashar's cousin and a security officer broadly seen as responsible for triggering the initial protests in Deraa in March 2011, reportedly bought the Bristol restaurant in Yaafur, a rich residential district on the outskirts of Damascus, for \$4.5 million dollars. Crisis Group interview, Syrian with knowledge of the matter, Damascus, May 2012. Another cousin and security official, the low-ranking but powerful Hafez Makhlof, had \$3 million frozen (and subsequently unfrozen) by Switzerland in the context of a deal for property in Syria. See Reuters, 11 February 2012. His brother and business magnate, Rami (who in June 2011 had pledged on television to focus on charitable and development work), continued to expand his empire. See "Rami Makhlof: Buying Syria one bank at a time", *Al-Akhabar* (English), 10 July 2012.

## IV. CONCLUSION

There are many aspects to the Syrian crisis, but whereas much international attention has been focused on the diplomatic manoeuvres, UN Security Council happenings and the Annan mission's travails, those largely have been a sideshow. The heart of a struggle variously described, with some justification, as a new cold war between the U.S., Russia and other emerging powers or as a region-wide sectarian battle has been and remains its domestic dimension.

Actors on the ground have not always been willing to see it that way. Just as Syrians rising up against the regime assume that a Hizbollah, Iranian, Iraqi or even Russian fighter lies behind every corner, so too do their adversaries believe they catch glimpses of foreign spies, agents provocateurs and jihadis in every protester's shadow. In neither case has evidence suggested more than limited reality.<sup>196</sup>

That is not to say foreign involvement has been nil or its impact insubstantial. Without sympathetic and relentless mainstream media coverage, Western political gestures and massive outside financial support, it is at least highly questionable whether the opposition could have grown so much, lasted so long and been as uncompromising in its goals. By the same token, the regime has benefited from continued Iranian and Russian material support and was given a significant boost by Moscow's and Beijing's repeated Security Council vetoes, enabling it to shun genuine political dialogue. While regime officials and supporters accuse the West, some Arab states and the media of urging on and propping up the opposition, thereby rendering it less open to compromise, so too in mirror-image do opposition members and their sympathisers blame Russia, China and Damascus's regional allies for encouraging Bashar to fight on. Given this international stalemate, Crisis Group expressed scepticism that Annan's mission could succeed.<sup>197</sup> That prognosis, unfortunately, so far has been borne out.

The conflict's genuine internationalisation is more future prospect than present reality. In the event of a series of particularly massive attacks against civilians – with thousands of casualties in a matter of days – or the feared loss of control of chemical weapons, the U.S. administration and some of its European allies might overcome their strong reluctance and launch a military attack.<sup>198</sup> The spillover of vio-

lence and massive refugee outflows that have begun could cause neighbours, notably Turkey, to get more involved than they currently are comfortable with. Israel could intervene, fearing that the regime might transfer its large arsenal of strategic weapons (ballistic but mainly chemical) to Hizbollah or that militant opposition groups might seize them. Under some circumstances – perhaps a Western military intervention – Hizbollah and Iran could be tempted to lend the regime a more direct hand. Finally, the regime itself, facing a complete impasse, could decide to go for broke, knowingly taking action that will prompt foreign intervention.

For now, however, outside actors essentially have done little more than enable their respective allies' to hold on to their more uncompromising goals without providing the means required to achieve them. Polarised and paralysed, the international community's behaviour thus puts the onus on Syrians to work it out among themselves.

They are less and less likely to do so through political means. The regime, as described in this report, has burned all its domestic bridges and evolved in ways that give infinitely more weight to the most inflexible within its ranks. Indeed, the recent "decapitation" assassinations in Damascus arguably reinforced this trend, as the most powerful and hardline officials were not hurt, while some of the officials reputed for their relative moderation, such as Major General Hassan Turkmani, were killed. The inner core around which the power structure has been rebuilt appears to share a largely nihilistic vision of *après moi, le déluge* – the conviction that there can be no compromise lest it bring about the demise of the regime, the system and its members as a whole. While it can contemplate minor adjustments and small fixes,<sup>199</sup> anything that might undermine the power structure is immediately rejected, prompting a form of blackmail; in the words of a senior

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strategy and the upcoming presidential elections: on one end of the spectrum, train opposition in insurgency tactics, on the other, strike at crucial regime targets from B-52s or other ways that don't require taking out the entire air defence system. Certainly, we could degrade the regime military capacity. But the administration, particularly after two wars, doesn't really want to get into another one and then have to deal both with it and all possible downstream contingencies in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq or Lebanon. That said, if the situation truly were to worsen, Obama might well feel compelled to do tomorrow what he is dead set against doing today". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, June 2012.

<sup>199</sup> For instance, a security official offered the following long-term prospects for security sector reform: "Our plan is to limit our security sector and make it more like the FBI and the police. Air force security will revert to the air force (after the crisis). Before the incidents, air force security never dealt with ordinary citizens; they had no mandate to operate like they do on the streets". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2012.

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<sup>196</sup> This despite intense regime efforts to prove a case, eg, Israeli shekels allegedly found in opposition hideouts of Baba Amro, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/03/syrian-televisions-underwhelming-evidence-of-foreign-backing-for-rebels>.

<sup>197</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Now or Never*, op. cit.

<sup>198</sup> A senior U.S. official said, "there are many things we could do, but the administration is extremely reluctant because of war fatigue, the fear that we will be sucked in without a clear exit

security official: "My friend, we can burn down the entire region".<sup>200</sup>

On the opposition's side, abhorrence toward the regime has proved overwhelming – an insurmountable obstacle to virtually any genuine politics. As most see it, the essence of the problem is the regime, the solution is to get rid of it and, from then on, things basically will fall into place. Tellingly, opposition plans for the future almost always avoid the most controversial issues: protecting Alawites against mass reprisals; reforming rather than disbanding the shockingly dysfunctional security services; saving a military that is fracturing along sectarian lines; avoiding a Syrian version of Iraq's de-Baathification; and designing a credible national reconciliation process. These glaring omissions can be explained, in part, by the highly emotional climate resulting from current levels of violence. But they also reflect darker and more dangerous instincts: the conviction that, ultimately, the solution is to be found in comprehensively eradicating a thoroughly evil regime and the notion that Alawites cannot escape scot-free after all they have done.

But the most fundamental question of all is this: after decades during which the regime has worked to dismantle the state, and after months during which the opposition has sought to dismantle the regime, what precisely will be left at the end of day? Neither the regime's scorched earth policy nor the opposition's vision of a *tabula rasa* can offer a satisfactory answer to the many Syrians who embrace neither logic. Seventeen months of bloodshed and destruction have not been enough for either the regime or its opposition to put forth a proposal that does not involve eradication of the other.

From a military standpoint, it is becoming clearer by the day that the outcome of the struggle will be much messier than either party once hoped. On the one hand, the regime will not succeed in suppressing the armed groups. If anything, its ruthless practices have guaranteed a virtually limitless pool of recruits prepared to fight with the opposition no matter the costs. Conversely, both the regime (by design) and its opponents (through negligence) appear to have ensured that a large portion of the Alawite community now feels it has no option but to kill or be killed.

A quicker ending is theoretically possible. Shaken to its core by the succession of blows it has incurred in recent days and weeks, the regime might crack. If its Alawite hard core concludes that all is lost and that beloved ones in towns and villages are at risk in an ill-defended hinterland, the bulk of the security services could possibly engage in a spontaneous and uncoordinated retreat. Under

this scenario, the regime could disintegrate; it would then be up to the opposition to establish a credible reconciliation process that swiftly and effectively addresses the fears of the defeated.

Perhaps. But such an outcome, quite plausible a year ago,<sup>201</sup> appears far less likely today. Indeed, just as the opposition has evolved and adjusted to the crisis, so too has the regime. In many ways, it no longer is what it was at the outset of the conflict. The very fact that it has withstood the spectacular killing of top officials in the heart of its traditional stronghold; street combat in Damascus, Aleppo and a string of other towns; the loss of important border crossings with Turkey and Iraq; and all this on top of near-total economic devastation and diplomatic isolation in itself sends a powerful message.

What it says is that although the regime as it once was has been terribly weakened, it has grown increasingly indifferent to its own losses, whether political or territorial: its metamorphosis has made it impervious to setbacks that once might have spelled its end. A former official said, "regime officials use the expression *balaha*, meaning they can do without – as in '*Homs? Balaha!*'. They can do without most of the country, without the state, without much of the people. It's just not an issue to them".<sup>202</sup> What remains, at bottom, is an ethos much closer to that of a large, exceptionally well-armed and committed militia than it is to that of a state. All of which raises the question: can one topple a militia?

The situation might not yet have reached that point.<sup>203</sup> In mounting its July counteroffensive against armed groups

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<sup>201</sup> See Robert Malley and Peter Harling, "How the Syrian Regime is ensuring its demise", *The Washington Post*, 2 July 2011.

<sup>202</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. "These people will sell anything to stay in power. They will let go of anything save the throne. Hosni Mubarak was better than these people". Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, April 2012. "Only one half of this country is important. Who cares about Idlib or Baba Amro?" Crisis Group interview, pro-regime notable, Damascus, May 2012. "Security chiefs are saying incredible things. They refer to downsizing the country if need be". Crisis Group interview, former senior official retaining ties to the regime, June 2012.

<sup>203</sup> Reflecting on this evolution, an official said: "The regime might well be moving in that direction, especially with the accelerating pace of events. What you have is the establishment of the nucleus of an Alawite fighting force, on one side, and the establishment of the nucleus of a Sunni fighting force, on the other. All actors, domestic and foreign, have been contributing to this dynamic one way or another. Ultimately, we may indeed have two militias or sets of militias facing each other. So far it is not quite that clear. There still is the semblance of a military institution. But now the regime is summoning all those Alawites who can fight into the reserves. This indeed suggests the

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<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Damascus, April 2012.

in Damascus and elsewhere, the regime was able to carry out multiple, simultaneous and relatively sophisticated military operations. In so doing, it exhibited at times a lighter, at others a heavier touch depending on political objectives; for example, it tended to resort to ground troops rather than long-distance shelling in areas of the capital where, for political reasons, it did not wish to cause too much damage and did the opposite where it saw no cost to utter destruction.

But the trend-line is clear. The regime is mutating into something more akin to a militia and, if the answer to the above question is that a militia cannot truly be toppled, at least not in any clear-cut way, then the conflict could be even longer, bloodier and more traumatic than what many have come to expect. Indeed, even if the authorities were to suffer significant military defeats, the conflict itself might simply morph, as what remained of the regime could choose to refocus on more limited, achievable objectives, such as protecting an Alawite stronghold as opposed to reasserting complete nationwide domination.

This could be a temporary outcome. But it is not a solution, and certainly not a sustainable one. Alawites, many of whom were born and raised in towns and cities, will wage a fierce fight before accepting to be driven back to the barren villages of their ancestry. Assuming they are compelled to abandon the capital, they might concentrate their efforts on consolidating their longstanding presence in areas such as Homs or the coastline; then and there, the level of sectarian violence could become far more intense than anything witnessed to date. Issues such as how Alawites might establish territorial contiguity, ensure communal homogeneity and gain access to natural resources, as well as questions such as the fate of the nationwide infrastructure – notably the electrical power grid – evoke the likelihood of an endless and nightmarish conflict. An Alawite “plan B” – partition of the country along sectarian lines – would not spell an end to the struggle. It would signify the beginning of its next phase.

More importantly, however deeply the notion of such a plan may be rooted within Syrian society in general and the Alawites’ ethos in particular, a larger problem lurks: as currently constituted, the regime has neither plan A, nor plan B, nor plan C. It remains powerful – and, in strictly military terms, extremely so. But it also is stuck, dangerously so – a danger not just to itself, but for others as well. The regime, having been stripped to its bone and reduced to its core, is all at once unable to defeat its enemies, incapable of designing an alternative solution and virtually impossible to destroy without bringing down the country as a whole.

However difficult, it is time to face a stark reality: under today’s circumstances, “toppling the regime”, as the opposition and its backers would have it, means going to war with the Alawite community, and going to war with the Alawite community means the end of a united, pluralistic Syria. The point is not about saving the Assad family; it has done more to harm than protect members of the community and proved itself incapable of effectively defending them when they needed it most. The point is, given how closely intertwined the regime and the Alawite community have become, one cannot target the former without hitting the latter.

In other words, Syria’s future largely depends on the Alawites’ fate. To cast them aside or marginalise them would plant the seeds of the next conflagration. It also would exacerbate fears among other minorities who, having incurred persecution, like the Kurds and the Druze, or feeling insecure, like the Christians and Ismailis, would wonder whether they were next in line. If Alawites cannot find their rightful place in it, Syria will face the likely prospect of instability, civil strife and fragmentation.

The solution is not to be found in some neat confessional or ethnic recipe, a Syria-style “Taef agreement” that endured in Lebanon largely because the Syrian hegemon was there to make it so. Not that Taef truly ended the fifteen-year Lebanese civil war; rather, it updated and re-balanced the sectarian power-sharing system that it inherited from colonial times and that condemned the country to communal strife in the first place. Confessionalising the political system in U.S.-occupied Iraq cast a similar curse, triggering the very forms of sectarian violence that it purported to prevent.

Instead, the solution is to be found in answers to the following questions: what will the opposition do, today, about retaliatory violence, mounting sectarian killings and creeping fundamentalism? How will it ensure, tomorrow, that the transition includes the Alawites as full-fledged partners? How can it dismantle the structures of the regime without punishing the community that, more than others, depended on it? How creative and forward looking can it be regarding questions of transitional justice, accountability, amnesty and the safeguarding of some current institutions? There are no easy responses. As opposition leaders no doubt will be quick to point out, the mood on the street – which, so far, they have felt compelled to respect – hardly is amenable to generous, open-minded proposals. But with dynamics on the ground presaging only more violence, despair and radicalisation, that is not a sufficient answer. At times like these, leadership must mean swimming against the tide – not being swept away by it.

**Damascus/Brussels, 1 August 2012**



APPENDIX A  
 MAP OF SYRIA



## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

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**July 2012**

## APPENDIX C

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

#### Israel/Palestine

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<b>Chevron</b>	<b>George Kellner</b>	<b>Ana Luisa Ponti &amp; Geoffrey R. Hoguet</b>	<b>Kevin Torudag</b>
<b>Neil &amp; Sandra DeFeo Family Foundation</b>	<b>Amed Khan</b>	<b>Kerry Propper</b>	<b>VIVA Trust</b>
<b>Equinox Partners</b>	<b>Faisel Khan</b>	<b>Michael L. Riordan</b>	<b>Yapı Merkezi Construction and Industry Inc.</b>
<b>Fares I. Fares</b>	<b>Zelmira Koch Polk</b>	<b>Shell</b>	<b>Stelios S. Zavvos</b>
<b>Neemat Frem</b>	<b>Elliott Kulick</b>	<b>Nina Solarz</b>	
<b>Seth &amp; Jane Ginns</b>	<b>Liquidnet</b>		
	<b>Jean Manas &amp; Rebecca Haile</b>		

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## SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

<b>Martti Ahtisaari</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Eugene Chien</b>	<b>Nobuo Matsunaga</b>	<b>Leo Tindemans</b>
<b>George Mitchell</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Joaquim Alberto Chissano</b>	<b>Barbara McDougall</b>	<b>Ed van Thijn</b>
<b>Gareth Evans</b> President Emeritus	<b>Victor Chu</b>	<b>Matthew McHugh</b>	<b>Simone Veil</b>
<b>Kenneth Adelman</b>	<b>Mong Joon Chung</b>	<b>Miklós Németh</b>	<b>Shirley Williams</b>
<b>Adnan Abu Odeh</b>	<b>Pat Cox</b>	<b>Christine Ockrent</b>	<b>Grigory Yavlinski</b>
<b>HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal</b>	<b>Gianfranco Dell'Alba</b>	<b>Timothy Ong</b>	<b>Uta Zapf</b>
<b>Hushang Ansary</b>	<b>Jacques Delors</b>	<b>Olara Otunnu</b>	<b>Ernesto Zedillo</b>
<b>Óscar Arias</b>	<b>Alain Destexhe</b>	<b>Lord (Christopher) Patten</b>	
<b>Ersin Arıoğlu</b>	<b>Mou-Shih Ding</b>	<b>Shimon Peres</b>	
<b>Richard Armitage</b>	<b>Uffe Ellemann-Jensen</b>	<b>Victor Pinchuk</b>	
<b>Diego Arria</b>	<b>Gernot Erlor</b>	<b>Surin Pitsuwan</b>	
<b>Zainab Bangura</b>	<b>Marika Fahlén</b>	<b>Cyril Ramaphosa</b>	
<b>Shlomo Ben-Ami</b>	<b>Stanley Fischer</b>	<b>Fidel V. Ramos</b>	
<b>Christoph Bertram</b>	<b>Malcolm Fraser</b>	<b>George Robertson</b>	
<b>Alan Blinks</b>	<b>I.K. Gujral</b>	<b>Michel Rocard</b>	
<b>Lakhdar Brahimi</b>	<b>Swanee Hunt</b>	<b>Volker Rühle</b>	
<b>Zbigniew Brzezinski</b>	<b>Max Jakobson</b>	<b>Güler Sabancı</b>	
<b>Kim Campbell</b>	<b>James V. Kimsey</b>	<b>Mohamed Sahnoun</b>	
<b>Jorge Castañeda</b>	<b>Aleksander Kwasniewski</b>	<b>Salim A. Salim</b>	
<b>Nareh Chandra</b>	<b>Todung Mulya Lubis</b>	<b>Douglas Schoen</b>	
	<b>Allan J. MacEachen</b>	<b>Christian Schwarz-Schilling</b>	
	<b>Graça Machel</b>	<b>Michael Sohlman</b>	
	<b>Jessica T. Mathews</b>	<b>Thorvald Stoltenberg</b>	