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Misrepresenting the Syrian Revolution

Unlike other recent uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Leila Nachawati argues, the Syrian revolution has attracted no real allies. This circumstance is partially attributable to the narrative being presented by self-interested external powers. They have more to gain by portraying Syria's violence as a fragmented quarrel among local interests instead of it being a mass rebellion against a repressive regime.

By Leila Nachawati for ISN

If one wishes to frame the current conflict in Syria in black and white terms, then it is a conflict between those who are comfortable with the *status quo* and those who are not. People from different religions -- Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims, Alawi, Druze, Ismaili -- and ethnic groups -- Palestinians, Iraqis, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians -- may be found on either side of the divide. And although the Alawi community (to which the ruling Assad family belongs) has long dominated the government and key military positions, people from each group have benefited from a system of institutionalized corruption and injustice. The uprising that started in March 2011 challenges that system as a whole, regardless of the religious elements. If one wishes to reduce the conflict down to its essence, one should focus on this aspect rather than any religious or ethnic overlays.

Despite the violence the regime has displayed -- and its attempt to exploit sectarian, ethnic and religious elements to present itself as necessary to maintain cohesion -- the goal of the Syrian revolution remains the same: to overthrow the regime and make way for a country where justice, freedom and dignity are respected. However, now that the country has entered a stage where the days of the Assad regime may be numbered, we are witnessing an international tendency to assess the situation with analysis that disregards the political and sociological aspects and instead [focuses on religious and sectarian elements](#). What should be noted is that these analyses are directly dependent on each country's geostrategic interests.

(Over-)Simplifying a complex reality

Religious and sectarian readings fall short of capturing the reality of a complex and diverse Syrian society where co-existence has persisted for decades, despite attempts to turn groups of population against one another. A Syrian journalist (name known to the author) told the ISN that sectarian clashes will happen "and it should not surprise anyone, given Assad's support in the past for radical groups - in Lebanon and Iraq - and the way he has promoted sectarianism as a way to keep people divided and frightened."

She also noted that some small, destructive cells "can have a disproportionately big impact, but this

does not mean that the revolution has become sectarian as such. In fact the revolutionary camp is careful - in every address, statement and declaration - to make reference to there being room for every Syrian group in the future Syria."

According to Syrian blogger Yassin Swehat, a very complex reality is being increasingly simplified and therefore dramatically diverging from the narrative of activists on the ground. In an interview with the ISN, Swehat argued that this demonstrates the inability of many in the international community to see Syrians "as anything more than tribes and religious communities who follow irrational impulses and are deprived of all historic, economic and socio-political context."

Geostrategic interests at stake

Every geostrategic power has something to gain from the depiction of Syrian society as divided and fragmented. Unlike other uprisings in the region, the Syrian revolution has, it could be argued, no real allies. Russia and China, for example, have been quite consistent in their support for the Syrian regime. By supporting Assad - who claims to be fighting [Islamist terrorist gangs](#) and a Western conspiracy against the country - Russia and China have nevertheless displayed their own power ambitions. Through military aid (and by replicating the narrative propagated by pro-Assad sources) they seek to present themselves as an alternative to the influence of the United States and its allies.

Iran continues to support the Assad regime for similar reasons. By portraying the Syrian uprising as Western-, Israeli- and Saudi-backed, Iran's narrative aims to promote Shia hegemony across the region. At a press conference on 28 July, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Akbar Salehi announced that "whoever thinks there will be a regime change in Syria is being very naïve." And when asked about whether Iran would resort to the [mutual self-defense pact](#) formed with Syria to protect the Assad regime, an explicit denial was noticeably absent.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, needs a narrative to counter Iran's. Riyadh supports the Free Syrian Army by portraying it as part of a religious struggle between the Sunni faith and the allegedly anti-religious Assad regime. At the same time, the Saudi regime is fearful of the Syrian revolution being framed as a liberation movement - a sentiment that could spread to Saudi Arabia, where the legitimacy of the ruling monarchy is increasingly being questioned. The most profitable scenario, therefore seems to be a military struggle in which neither the regime nor the Free Syrian Army succeed -- a struggle that would wear Syrians out and weaken the country as a whole.

Counter-intuitive as it may seem Israel may once have had a good ally in Syria. Instead, deterioration of central authority in Syria could re-activate conflict over the Golan Heights and make attacks on Israeli-held territory more likely. A long struggle and a weakening of Syria would therefore also be the most positive scenario for Israel. Viewing the Assad regime as 'a lesser evil' is seemingly apparent in the US' public stance, which shifted from being openly critical to more lenient following a meeting between President Barack Obama and Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak in February 2012.

The US' and European Union's most recent statements regarding Syria reveal the disconnection between international interests and the true needs and demands of Syrians. Both powers seem eager to support [retired Brigadier Manaf Tlass](#) as the politician to lead a post-Assad Syria. A pillar of the Syrian establishment, Tlass is the son of former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass. A fact worth noting is that the elder Tlass was in office during the 1982 Hama massacre, an event which reportedly left more than 10, 000 dead. The younger Tlass is a member of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle and closely associated with the abuses of the Assad regime. Indeed his defection and announcement that he intends to preserve state institutions was received with scorn by activists.

The most complete revolution

Despite the [loss of human life](#), the hundreds of thousands displaced or forced to flee and the devastation being wreaked on the country, prolonging the armed confrontation seems to be the most positive scenario from the viewpoint of certain geostrategic powers. Delegitimizing the revolution and diluting its proclamations of freedom and justice in favor of religious and ethnic framings are not useful for Syrians but suit outside powers.

Despite attempts to hijack it, the Syrian revolution continues. Defections increase as the Syrian army becomes increasingly desperate and violent, killing more than a hundred civilians a day. Thousands continue to demonstrate all over the country, especially on Fridays: these days continue to be given a different name every week to honor the cities, the victims and the values of the revolution. Syrians continue to question the regime as a whole as an oppressive system, beyond any religious components.

For Syrian activist Sara Ajlyakin, "this is the most radical and complete revolution because it is against the regime in its entirety. Syrians are fighting alone against its figures, its extensions, its capital. Cosmetic change is not possible. If the revolution succeeds the regime will fall entirely" she told the ISN.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Syria's Phase of Radicalisation](#)

[Why Syria?](#)

[Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response](#)

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