

Syria: Quickly Going beyond the Point of No Return

International Crisis Group 3 May 2011 (...) Over the past several weeks, a number of Syrians have taken to the streets chiefly to express frustration over their worsening economic predicament, outrage at the brutality and unaccountability of the security forces, and solidarity with parts of the country that have witnessed the fiercest forms of repression. (...)

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Although one cannot exclude possible foreign involvement in the ongoing crisis, credible evidence points to abundant instances of excessive and indiscriminate state violence, including arbitrary arrests, torture and firing into peaceful crowds. At its core, this is a spontaneous, peaceful, popular uprising, fuelled far more by the regime's own actions than by any putative outside interference. There are plausible reports of security forces being ambushed by unidentified armed groups, as well as of protesters firing back when attacked. But for those on the ground, there can be no doubt that the vast majority of casualties are the result of regime brutality. The regime is also fanning the flames of sectarianism, spreading rumours of impending attacks targeting specific groups. Sectarian tendencies no doubt exist in parts of the country. But the authorities' tactics betray a determined and cynical attempt to exploit and exacerbate them.

At this point, moreover, questions are being raised both about the authorities' ability to control and discipline the security apparatus and about the security forces' willingness to convey to their political leadership a truthful picture of what is happening on the ground.

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The regime's violent, unlawful and disorderly response has only further deepened a pervasive sense of chaos. In turn, this has discredited the reforms it announced in hopes of defusing the situation and shoring up its political base. However meaningful or promising they might have been on paper, they have proven worthless in practice. The regime has lifted the emergency law but has since allowed the security services to conduct business as usual, thereby illustrating just how meaningless the concept of legality was in the first place. It authorises demonstrations even as it claims they no longer are justified and then labels them as treasonous. It speaks of reforming the media and, in the same breath, dismisses those who stray from the official line. It insists on ignoring the most outrageous symbols of corruption. Finally, and although it has engaged in numerous bilateral talks with local representatives, it resists convening a national dialogue, which might represent the last, slim chance for a peaceful way forward.

The regime's hope appears to be that a massive crackdown can bring the protesters to heel. Some claim that a show of force is required to restore calm and provide the room necessary to carry out reforms. Such a course of action would entail loss of life on a massive scale. It could usher in a period of sectarian fighting with devastating consequences for Syria. It could destabilise its neighbours. And, ultimately, it is highly unlikely to work. (...)

(...) The only -- decreasingly realistic-- chance to avoid this outcome would be for the regime to take immediate steps to rein in its security forces, take decisive action against those responsible for state violence and initiate a genuine, all-inclusive national dialogue. A halt to the cycle of violence could create the space necessary for representatives of the popular movement to articulate their demands and for negotiations on a real, far-reaching program of reforms to proceed. Most importantly, it would give the regime the opportunity to demonstrate it has more to offer than empty words and certain doom.

For the international community, the Syrian crisis poses a vexing challenge. Beyond denouncing the brutal repression, making clear to the regime that its conduct will lead to increased isolation, and urging it to implement long-overdue reforms and national dialogue, there unfortunately is little it can do. Outside actors possess little leverage, particularly at a time when the regime feels its survival is at stake. It has survived past periods of international isolation and likely feels it can weather the storm again. Even countries that have developed close ties to Damascus, such as Turkey, are viewed with growing suspicion by officials who are increasingly paranoid and consider anything short of outright support an act of betrayal. The sanctions targeting individual officials involved in acts of repression that have been announced are unlikely to have any effect; their impact would be maximised if, rather than simply naming individuals, the decisions were backed by solid, public evidence. Broader sanctions run the dual risk of serving the regime by bolstering the claim that it is facing a foreign conspiracy and of harming ordinary citizens, who are already paying a high price for their country's dramatic economic downturn. (...)

(...) Neighbouring states have an enormous stake in averting enduring instability. Chaos in an ethnically and confessionally heterogeneous Syria would have swift and potentially devastating impact on Turkey – a country with which it shares an 877 kilometre long and porous border; Lebanon, whose fate historically has been tied to its neighbour's; Jordan, a small state likewise at the mercy of Syrian developments; and Iraq, which is barely recovering from its civil war and can hardly afford sectarian fighting at its borders. As a result, they should strive to prevent any cross-border trafficking involving militants, weapons or money.

Some are calling for more from the international community. But a Libya-type military intervention is implausible, risky and undesirable, and any other form of direct outside help for the protesters inevitably would be used by the regime to depict them as foreign agents, thus exposing them to further repression without offering them any protection or materially affecting the outcome of the struggle.

In fashioning a proper international response, two more factors should be borne in mind.

First, although overall trends are increasingly clear, many specific allegations regarding developments in Syria (concerning for example possible dissent within the security forces; the scale of protests; the identity of those who have killed security officers) remain hard to verify. Because the regime has denied the international media access, many in the media have been forced to rely on uncorroborated material posted on the internet as well as on unvetted witness testimony. There is a risk in reacting immediately to such raw and inevitably partial accounts. It will be important for outside actors to base their actions on as thorough and level-headed as possible assessments of events on the ground.

Second, one should not ignore the views of many Syrians – even among those without sympathy for the regime – who continue to fear its precipitous collapse . They dread the breakup of a state whose institutions, including the military, are weak even by regional standards. They fear that sectarian dynamics or a hegemonic religious agenda could take hold. They are suspicious of possible foreign interference. And they distrust an exiled opposition that is all too reminiscent of Iraq's. Short of the regime's implosion, they seem persuaded that only an indigenous, negotiated solution can offer hope for a successful political transition.

The international community clearly has an important stake in the outcome of the current crisis, even if little capacity to influence it. That influence principally lies domestically: with the protesters, striving to claim their rights and whose greatest strength resides in their ability to remain peaceful, resilient and grounded in local support, and with the regime which must be brought to understand that continued resort to violence will only further deepen the crisis which it has brought upon itself. (...)

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