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## MENA Programme: Meeting Summary

# The Political Outlook for Syria

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the discussions that took place during a small closed-door study group convened at Chatham House in January 2012 to discuss the ongoing situation in Syria.

Key points that emerged from the meeting included:

- The regime is unlikely to survive in the long term but will fight on in the short term. In contrast to its counterparts in several other Arab countries, it has so far remained relatively cohesive in the face of the uprising.
- Although the protest movement has been largely peaceful, continued violence by the regime is leading to the beginning of an armed insurgency. A number of regional and international powers may offer arms and training to opposition groups.
- Nevertheless, the regime has the overwhelming advantage in terms of military capability and may be able to fight on for a year or two unless there is a massive uprising in Damascus and Aleppo, or an intervention. There could be many more deaths before there is a resolution.
- The economy is suffering badly from Syria's unrest and international isolation, which could gradually encourage the merchant class to withdraw support from the regime. This is likely to be a critical factor in Aleppo.
- The international community needs to convince President Bashar Al-Assad that his regime is not sustainable. Despite Western statements and sanctions packages, President Assad appears to believe he can survive with Russian and Iranian backing. However, if Russia and Iran come to believe the regime is not likely to survive, they may need to hedge their bets and look for ways to protect some of their interests in a post-Assad Syria.
- There has been little international appetite for military intervention in Syria, but the regime's intensifying violence could change this. Russia's alliance with Syria has been an obstacle to international action, but Russia will not necessarily support the Assad regime at any price.

- The regime is trying to stoke fears among the international community that if Assad goes, civil war will follow. Yet it is the regime that is responsible for the vast majority of the violence. The international community should not accept the regime's narrative.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

#### **The Chatham House Rule**

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

## The Roots of the Uprising

The discussion began by analysing the long-term causes of the uprising in Syria. It was said that the disproportionate empowerment and privilege of the Alawi minority regime was a remnant of the colonial era, as the Sunni minority regime of Saddam Hussein had been in Iraq in 2003. Over the past decade, the regime has lost much of its rural support base as economic policies favoured cities over rural areas, and as agricultural production was undermined both by policies (especially the lifting of diesel subsidies) and by successive droughts. The regime's initial semi-socialist economic policy has become visibly corrupt, particularly over the past five years. Since Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, regime insiders have increasingly focused on extracting wealth through networks of corruption inside Syria.

A study group participant said that the Ba'ath party now hardly exists as a political force. Having previously incorporated elements of the youth, the trade unions and other social forces, the party has been greatly weakened over the past two years. It was said that Syria has become an intelligence state with virtually no serious internal politics.

The immediate trigger of the Syrian uprising was the power shift that occurred as a result of the Arab Spring. Citizens started to feel capable of bringing down regimes. However unlike in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, the Syrian regime has managed to remain robust in the face of the uprising, partly as a result of the cohesion of the Alawi community. Participants noted that there has not been a split or any major defections from within the regime. Its tremendous armed power and willingness to use force means it can fight for a long time, and it clearly has the upper hand over the opposition when it comes to force. Furthermore the regime is still able to pay its military and civilian staff and it also has enough hard currency reserves to enable it to continue in power for the foreseeable future.

The uprising has also proved persistent, it was said. It is multi-centred and has not been weakened despite heavy state repression. The opposition is not prepared to give up. It was said that attempts to unify the political leadership of the opposition have not been successful. The uprising, like others in the Arab world, has been decentralized and has not been led by any particular individuals or political movements. Although the Free Syrian Army appears to be becoming increasingly important, it was noted that the uprising has its own local, civilian dynamics.

## The Economy

Syria's economy was suffering before the start of the uprising and is expected to continue to worsen in all sectors in 2012. However, the regime has sufficient financial resources to pay salaries for the army, security services and the large public-sector workforce. It may also be able to draw on financial support from its main allies, Iran and Russia.

There are no easy conclusions to be drawn on the state of the economy, or on how different political players within Syria will respond to economic and financial pressure. The data that are accessible are out of date, making current analysis difficult. During the first five months of the uprising the regime apparently spent \$2 billion of its \$12–13 billion reserves. The situation is more difficult to analyse from June 2011 onwards. Revenue from exports is based largely on what the country can sell to Iraq, and it is unclear how much of the country's reported export earnings reflect exports of manufactured goods or simply loss-making sales of subsidized fuel. Ministers are now suggesting that subsidies may not be sustainable. As the economy deteriorates, the regime is likely to lose support among those who had previously tolerated it because they had benefited from its previous economic liberalization.

When the European sanctions were first put in place in 2011, it was expected to be some 18 months before their full effect was experienced. It was noted that in practice it might take several months longer. Iran could be a source of economic support, but since Iran was facing its own economic and financial problems, this would limit the resources it could provide to Syria.

## The Future of Syria

It was noted that the regime is 'winning with a small 'w' but losing with a big 'L'; the elements that underpin its survival are being eroded. In the short term it is likely that the Assad regime will survive but it is difficult to see how it will secure its power in the long term. Damascus has become a ghost town, explosions and gunfire are heard frequently and even citizens who would prefer the regime to stay in power are finding it hard to imagine how the situation will improve. There are rumours that members of the regime have sent relatives and capital overseas.

However, a participant said that it was hard to imagine the regime collapsing or being defeated without either external intervention or a massive uprising in the key cities, Damascus or Aleppo. Currently, the regime's military capacity is very robust. It was said that there is little international appetite for military

intervention in Syria, but that if the regime intensifies its violence, there could be growing pressure for the UN to act. Russia's alliance with Syria has been an obstacle to international action, but Russia will not necessarily support the Assad regime at any price.

A number of future scenarios for political developments in Syria were discussed:

- The regime survives, embattled and deeply unpopular, not unlike Saddam Hussein's Iraq or the current Iranian regime. It could potentially remain in place for five years or more under this scenario. .
- The regime survives by making concessions to the population that absorb domestic pressure and give allies a story to tell about 'reform'. Concessions could include improved elections and a coalition government with limited power, aimed at giving the impression of power-sharing while maintaining authoritarian rule.
- A number of senior generals break away from the army and carry out an internal (Alawi-led) coup. Under this scenario, Turkey could potentially broker a political deal with a new leadership.
- The regime weakens to the point that it realizes it cannot continue to remain in power. This leads to a Yemen-style deal whereby the Assad family and their closest cronies leave the country in return for immunity, potentially escaping to Iran or Russia. It was said this was a scenario hinted at by Turkey and members of the Arab League as their preferred solution. The regime continues to fight and there are more defections from the army, leading to the collapse of the political system, exacerbated by economic crisis. This would leave Syria in a 'failed state' situation and could lead to a rushed coalition government, or alternatively Syria could fall into civil war.
- A 'Libya scenario' was thought to be unlikely as there seems to be little international appetite for military intervention in Syria, given its sensitive location. A participant asked if there could be a 'Bahrain scenario' whereby Assad could formally invite Iranian forces to help secure his regime. This was felt to be unlikely as the regime has plenty of its own military resources for use in repression and coercion. Any Iranian help would be more likely to be on the financial side.

There is a general unwillingness among the international community to resort to the use of force in order to remove Assad. It was said that this could change if something dramatic happened to change public opinion, but that the regime appeared to have learnt to calibrate its brutality; it was aware from Libya's experience that threatening a massacre was risky, whereas it had been able to kill 30–40 people per day for months without triggering international action.

In an election year for the United States President Obama is unlikely to get the country involved in another war. However, there is considerable support for engagement: the US has a very clear position with regard to the Assad regime and is happy to use sanctions and other non-military means in order to depose the Syrian president and his government. Equally the UK has expressed its desire to see the removal of the entire Assad regime – unlike its attitude towards Egypt where much of the structure of the regime has been preserved despite the overthrow of former president Hosni Mubarak and his former ruling party.

## The Opposition

Syria is seeing the beginnings of an armed insurgency. This is not necessarily based in neighbouring countries; it was noted that there are many areas within the country where insurgents could operate and that borders are fairly porous. There are already reports of an increase in weapons flowing into the country, with unconfirmed allegations that some may be funded by donations from the Gulf. A participant said that fighting could intensify for months or even years without necessarily spilling over into neighbouring countries, most of which have large armies of their own.

The Syrian National Council is not necessarily representative of Syrians; some are concerned that it has focused excessively on wooing international support rather than building domestic strength. On one hand, it was argued that the onus was on the regime to stop its violent repression and not on the opposition to prove it could govern. On the other hand, a participant said there was still likely to be a significant section of the population that was undecided between the regime and the opposition. Opposition groups would benefit from reassuring those who are concerned that without the existing regime, the country will plunge into chaos.

It was also noted that the Kurdish community is feeling isolated from Syrian opposition groups. The uprising is viewed as an Arab uprising and not

Kurdish in any way. For the future of Syria, it is crucial that the Kurdish population feels more included.

## Regional Players

Syria is part of an 'alliance axis' backed by Iran, Russia and to a lesser extent China, while being ostracized by the Arab League, Turkey and the West. It is difficult to know how much direct support the Iranian government is giving the regime, although rumours are plentiful. The relative stability of Syria's foreign reserves in the first part of 2011 – the latest period for which data are available – has led experts to assume that this money is coming from external sources, the most likely of which is the Iranian regime.

Meanwhile, a participant said there had been a surge of weapons flowing into Syria, especially since the Gulf states withdrew their support from the Arab League monitoring mission.

Parts of Iraq's Sunni population were said to be concerned that, if the Assad regime collapses and Iran loses a major regional ally, the Islamic Republic would redouble its efforts to influence Iraq. It was also said that the Lebanese government would collapse if the Syrian regime fell. A participant noted there were signs that parts of the 'March 9th' pro-Syrian alliance, notably the Amal movement, were beginning to shift their positions and may be hedging their bets.

## International Policy Options

It was argued that Western policy is perceived as fairly passive. Ironically, a participant said, the widespread assumption that the regime is doomed has become an excuse for the international community not to intervene. A participant argued that the West needed to become more proactive in pushing for the end of the regime, saying that the regime had entered into a state of open-ended warfare against its population that was only likely to deteriorate into further bloodshed. Another participant said the West should arm and train the opposition, and there were suggestions that other states in the region might already be doing so.

Conversely, one participant argued that there was an opportunity for third-party mediation given the financial pressure on the regime and its probable willingness to forgo some of its power to prevent its complete collapse. Yet there was very little confidence among other participants in the prospects for



negotiations. Russia's position, as one of Syria's key backers, was said to be critical and a participant said the West needed to think about ways in which Russia might be able to maintain some of its interests in post-Assad Syria.

It was said that the international community should urgently press for humanitarian relief as access to medical care was severely restricted and worsening. Hospitals were not safe for injured protestors and many were turning to makeshift private facilities for treatment. The International Committee of the Red Cross was being denied access to prisons. Journalists and NGOs have virtually no access to the country except under heavily controlled and restricted conditions.

Finally, several participants agreed that the international community is sending mixed messages to Bashar al-Assad. By expressing concern that there could be a bloody civil war if the Assad regime collapses, the international community is unwittingly supporting one of the key narratives that the regime employs in justifying its stranglehold on power. Rather, the regime itself is the main source of the violence and is taking the country closer to civil war. It was suggested that Assad is convinced that the international community views him as irreplaceable. He may be hoping that international pressure will ease when there are fresh elections in the United States and other Western countries. Therefore, it was said, there is a psychological battle to be fought by the international community, which needs to convince Assad and his allies that the regime cannot survive with these levels of violence.

## **ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME**

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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