



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Middle East and North Africa Programme: Syria Study Group Meeting Summary

# Syria: Towards a Negotiated Transition?

April 2012

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of the discussions that took place during a small closed-door study group convened at Chatham House in April 2012 to discuss the latest developments in Syria.

Some of the main findings include:

- The UN mission to monitor the declared 'cease-fire' was not expected to make much progress towards resolving the conflict in Syria, but there were some hopes that it would reduce violence enough to enable peaceful protests, reduce the risk of further militarization of the conflict and provide some space for opposition groups to build political alliances and develop a strategy.
- On the downside, it was not clear how the UN mission would define failure, what level of violence would need to be reached for the 'cease-fire' to be declared to be over, or what the UN's next steps would be. The regime's behaviour suggests it remains confident that there will not be international intervention.
- While divisions in the opposition are to be expected in a context of such heavy repression, they have also allowed the Syrian government to claim that it does not have a partner to negotiate with.
- The international community, and the Arab League in particular, has encouraged the SNC to broaden representation within its executive committees to include figureheads from other opposition groups. An opposition restructuring committee has now been established, comprising five members of the SNC and five from other groups, with the aim of uniting a broader coalition of opposition forces behind a common agenda.
- There are three main scenarios for Syria: an intensification of diplomatic efforts and the resolution of the crisis through political processes; the arming of rebels by the international community, leading to an escalation of military confrontation; and a slide into civil war, seen as increasingly likely by the workshop participants.
- Any long-term solution to the Syrian crisis will need to tackle its root causes, which, as in the other Arab countries that

experienced revolutions over the past year, include unemployment, corruption and rising food prices.

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 UN Security Council Resolution

The meeting started with an analysis of the UN Security Council Resolution 2042,<sup>1</sup> which has enabled the deployment of a limited number of UN observers to monitor the agreed cease-fire in Syria. Few were optimistic about the immediate impact of the observer mission, and it was noted that for it to be effective, its numbers would need to be expanded significantly, and it would need to be given its own independent means to travel around the country.

One of the concerns that was highlighted at the meeting was the lack of clarity on what would constitute the failure of the cease-fire, or of the UN/Arab League-endorsed 'Annan Plan'<sup>2</sup> more broadly, and what the 'plan B' was if the cease-fire was declared to have ended. Although the cease-fire had in theory been accepted, it was already being breached. Seventy people were reported to have been killed the day before the meeting, and violence continued thereafter.

It was argued that the cease-fire and the observer mission had at least managed to reduce the levels of violence (although these vary substantially from region to region, and the competing reports are notoriously difficult to verify). One quantifiable measure of success is the impact on the number of Syrian refugees fleeing to neighbouring Turkey – from an estimated 1,000 refugees a week over the past month, numbers fell to approximately 700 during the first week after the cease-fire was declared.

Overall, however, the cease-fire was seen as weak and not underpinned by stabilization measures. Crucially, there is an urgent need for increased communication and more transport equipment to support the observer mission and enable it to be more independent of the Syrian authorities. It was argued that there needed to be a more high-level UN presence on the ground in Damascus as a 'political anchor' for the observer mission, and that the UN sometimes overestimated its ability to conduct diplomacy at long distance. It was suggested that the UN would be more effective if it ensured that a senior official – such as one of Kofi Annan's deputies – was permanently present in

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the resolution is available at:  
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10609.doc.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> The six-point plan of Kofi Annan, Joint Special Envoy of the UN and Arab League, calls for: an inclusive political process to address the aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people; a UN-observed ceasefire by all parties; a two-hour pause in hostilities in each to allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance; the release of arbitrarily detained prisoners and the provision of information about the whereabouts of detainees; freedom of movement and an easing of visa restrictions for journalists; and the guaranteeing of the right to peaceful protests. UN, 'Six-Point

Damascus, to ensure ministerial access and thus a continuity of diplomatic efforts.

Some hope was expressed that the resolution could be a stepping-stone to further diplomatic efforts by the UN. It was noted that the resolution went further than the Annan plan in that it explicitly called for a transition to democracy in Syria through a comprehensive political dialogue. If this was genuinely implemented, it would be likely to mean the end of the regime and the Baath party's dominance.

### **The cease-fire**

Few participants were optimistic about the prospects for a negotiated transition in Syria. However, the Annan plan for a cease-fire and negotiation process is widely seen as 'the only game in town', since there are few alternative options on the table. Participants said the international community needs to prepare scenarios and options in case it fails. The plan's failure would be likely to spark renewed large-scale fighting, with the countries that are currently arming the rebels likely to be increasingly drawn into the conflict. Some of Syria's neighbours could also find themselves drawn in, particularly if Syria pursued refugees into its neighbours' territory. It was suggested that there was an urgent need to plan alternatives to reduce the likelihood of this regionally destabilizing scenario.

While several participants questioned the plausibility of the Annan plan in achieving its stated goals, others argued that the cease-fire, as incomplete and fragile as it may be, has been successful in restoring a sufficient degree of normality for the Syrian people to resume basic everyday activities, such as the provision of food and family gatherings – something that was urgently needed in frontline cities like Homs. It also provides an avenue for the international community to coordinate the delivery of aid to Syria.

This important development has been largely overshadowed by the scepticism that surrounds achieving the goals of the Annan plan. There was broad agreement among participants that President Bashar Al Assad is highly unlikely to enter into negotiations that would imply the dissolution of his regime and the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic state. In fact, many argued that the Syrian regime is using the UN cease-fire to reassert its position within Syria.

Equally, however, it was argued that the cease-fire provides an opportunity for the various opposition groups to create an inclusive, coherent opposition, unified under an umbrella structure broader than the existing Syrian National Council (SNC).

### **The opposition**

Despite the ceasefire, killings continued on a daily basis, but nevertheless protests were also continuing. Opposition activists remain determined. However, the fragmentation of the opposition has been a key concern. While divisions in the opposition are to be expected in a context of such heavy repression, they have also allowed the Syrian government to claim that it does not have a partner to negotiate with.

Broadly, it was suggested that a distinction should be made between the internal and the external opposition movements. Crucially, while the various internal opposition groups may have achieved influence at the local level, they remain localized movements rather than being nationally representative. Moreover, many within Syria would be afraid of participating in negotiations because of the risk that the regime could retaliate against them or their families. Hence it has been generally recognized that having an exiled opposition movement representing and supporting the interests of the Syrian domestic opposition abroad might ultimately be beneficial.

The external opposition can essentially be divided into the SNC and a number of other groups. While there have been calls to accept the SNC as the legitimate opposition force, the international community, and the Arab League in particular, has encouraged the SNC to broaden representation within its executive committees to include figureheads from other opposition groups. Doubts remain, however, as to the level of commitment by the SNC to absorb other opposition groups within its structure. An opposition restructuring committee has now been established, comprising five members of the SNC and five from other groups, with the aim of uniting a broader coalition of opposition forces behind a common agenda. There was a general consensus among participants that the urgent need for a credible negotiating body representing the opposition makes the above a vital development.

The Arab League has been called upon to host a meeting to bring together as many opposition groups as possible. Consolidation would enhance the likelihood of the opposition's success, particularly considering that a significant number of Syrians still feel that the current divisions hinder the development of a credible alternative to the regime. Consequently, while they

may not directly support the regime, many Syrians refrain from actively opposing it, fearing that change could lead to an even greater worsening of living conditions. Greater opposition coherence could potentially shift those perceptions. In the meantime, a participant said, it was important for the international community to increase its efforts at mapping the Syrian opposition and gaining an understanding of the key goals of the various different groups involved. Another participant said there was a need to recognize the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as a significant actor within the Syrian opposition. While they might be dispersed and lacking a unified command, the armed groups that make up the FSA will continue to hold a degree of power. If the SNC fails to make real progress, the likelihood of the FSA being seen as the more legitimate opposition will be relatively high. The notion of legitimacy was questioned, and a participant said that the international community should not focus on whether to recognize the Syrian opposition, as this should be up to the people of Syria; the issue was to allow them to have a free choice.

Participants disagreed over the necessity of a unified opposition. Given the unlikelihood of Assad committing to dialogue and negotiations, and, consequently the uncertainty over a post-Assad future, some suggested that the debate should focus on more immediate concerns, chief among them breaking the current cycle of violence. According to this analysis, the international community should contemplate ways to deter the resort to force within Syria, before discussing the state of the opposition.

Others argued that the fracturing of the opposition could ultimately encourage an increase in violence and a further militarization of the crisis. It was argued that the lack of a representative body makes a political resolution of the conflict less feasible.

Finally, the degree of communication between the internal and external opposition groups was debated. It was suggested that many interactions occur on a personal level and that therefore the idea that there are few connections between the exiled and the internal opposition groups is a misconception. Nevertheless the need for more secure communications was highlighted and it was suggested that Western countries should provide secure communications equipment to the opposition.

### **Longer-term transition prospects: minorities**

There was a perception that a positive structure exists within Syrian society that might allow it to undergo regime change and transition without

experiencing major sectarian conflict. Nevertheless, delegates stressed that religious and national minorities need to be taken into account.

In order to reduce the risk of a sectarian struggle during a future transitional period, it is imperative that religious minorities are included from an early stage. It was said that, contrary to popular belief, considerable numbers of the Alawi population have not done well under the current Syrian regime but have nevertheless been successfully persuaded by Assad that their existence is at risk should his regime crumble. There was agreement that there is a need to provide them with a win-win scenario in order to gain their trust, allow them to contribute to the revolution and, in this way, prevent future sectarian tensions.

Some questions were raised over the role of Syrian Kurds in the current crisis. They have taken mixed positions on the uprising. It was said that Iraqi Kurdish politicians have been warning their Syrian counterparts that they should form a clear agreement with the rest of the opposition factions on how Kurdish issues would be dealt with in a post-Assad Syria. Otherwise, the Iraqi Kurds have suggested, the specific issues of concern to the Syrian Kurds may be postponed indefinitely, just as the Iraqi Kurds are still struggling to reach agreements with the Baghdad government on oil contracts and on the disputed city of Kirkuk. Most Kurdish parties are cautiously trying to work out who the main opposition figures are, how they could be approached and what future prospects for cooperation exist.

### **Longer-term transition prospects: resilience of state institutions**

Participants argued that, unlike in Libya, Syrian state institutions are sufficiently robust to survive after Assad. Nevertheless, the longer the conflict goes on and therefore the more state institutions are eroded, the harder it will be to rebuild them. Crucially, unlike in Libya, there are no oil reserves in Syria to finance rebuilding after the destruction brought about by the fighting. The most likely providers of international aid were thought to be the Gulf monarchies, which were likely to seek greater political influence.

Others argued that apart from security structures, state institutions have been largely hollowed out in Syria, mostly through corruption and by becoming personal fiefdoms, to the point where it has for several years been virtually impossible to pass any type of civil legislation that is not in some way influenced by corruption.

A participant noted concerns about the potential for long-lasting economic sanctions to weaken state structures further, and said there was a lack of



clarity on how sanctions could be unwound. It was suggested there could be more focus on steps the regime could take to ease the sanctions, as part of a package of incentives for the regime to change its behaviour.

### Turkey's role

There has been a rapid deterioration of relations between Syria and Turkey over the past few months. As engagement on several levels failed, diplomatic relations have been largely aborted. Turkey has supported regional plans to restore stability in Syria, including the Arab League mission, but had to reassert its position after the mission was suspended.<sup>3</sup> While sceptical about the potential for its full implementation, and conscious that alternatives should be considered, Turkey currently supports the UNSC resolution, acknowledging the cease-fire's success in reducing the refugee inflow from Syria.

Despite this limited achievement, the refugee question remains an important element in Turkey's policy equation. With the total number of refugees exceeding 27,000,<sup>4</sup> Turkey is committed to building new refugee camps but has announced a need to seek international financial assistance to that end.

Another concern has been a number of incidents on the Turkey-Syria border. Syrian military personnel have fired into Turkish territory, targeting refugees, a Turkish security vehicle and an administrative building. A participant said that violating the territory of a NATO member such as Turkey gives the impression that the Assad regime feels very confident that there is no international appetite for military intervention. Nonetheless, it was noted that such incidents could have the potential to escalate. Turkey regarded these actions as grave violations of sovereignty. It favoured a diplomatic solution to the crisis and would not act unilaterally to escalate the situation with Syria, but nonetheless 'kept all options on the table'.

Overall, it was said that the Turkish government recognizes the need for a holistic political solution to the Syrian crisis, which, in its view, should include the end of the Assad regime.

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<sup>3</sup> The Arab League monitoring mission was suspended in late January 2012. The Arab League's secretary-general, Nabil Al Araby, cited 'the critical deterioration of the situation in Syria and the continued use of violence' as the reasons for the suspension.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the meeting.

## Russia's role

The Syrian government was seen to be in a position of considerable military and psychological strength, gained mostly by the lack of international action over its atrocities in places such as Homs. It was stated that Russia's support for the Assad regime contributes to the latter's confidence. This view was challenged, as others argued that Vladimir Putin's support for Assad is not unconditional. Suggestions were made that Russia has recently been hinting that it may not be as committed to the Syrian regime as was initially thought. Participants noted that Moscow has opened a dialogue with parts of the Syrian opposition. After meeting in mid-April with the Syrian National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, an opposition group that is opposed to international military intervention in Syria, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, had come out in favour of expanding the UN observer mission – possibly as a result of requests from the NCC. This suggests Russia feels under pressure to at least be seen to be moving on the Syria issue.

The reasons for Russia's reluctance to condemn the regime were discussed. Part of the explanation was said to lie in what Russian president Vladimir Putin perceives as a betrayal by the West over Libya, whereby the UN mandate for a no-fly zone was seen to have been used as an opportunity to bring about regime change. Russia also has a direct strategic interest in the form of a naval military base in Tartus, its only access route to the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, Syria remains an important customer for Russia's arms sales and one of its only allies in the region. Finally, it was noted that in 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Assad was the first foreign statesman to fly to Russia and offer his support to Putin. It was said that Putin takes personal relations very seriously.

Nevertheless, it was noted that Russia did sign up to the latest UN Security Council resolution. While some argued that Russia's stance could ultimately prove decisive in determining the outcome of the Syrian crisis, others questioned its purported 'pivotal' role. On a day-to-day level, Syria's immediate neighbours Lebanon, Iraq and Iran are far more critical, particularly considering Syria's trade with Iraq (which is largely responsible for sustaining Syria's economy) and the military support it receives from Iran. These processes are unlikely to be interrupted. It was concluded that, unless Russia were to authorize a full-scale international intervention (an unlikely scenario), the Syrian regime should be able to survive without its support.

It was envisaged that the Syrian foreign ministry would work hard to shore up support from China, which, unlike Russia (through its naval base in Tartus), does not have much at stake in Syria itself. It was stated that China needed to be mindful of its wider interests across the Middle East, which in some instances run counter to its position on Syria (notably its growing economic links with Saudi Arabia).

## Future scenarios

Given the experience of the past months, participants said it was difficult to envisage the Syrian opposition winning its struggle unaided. Certainly in military terms the regime has proved resilient. To avoid a deadlock, the international community would have to heavily arm the opposition or else hope that negotiations can curb the levels of violence and, over the long term, facilitate the emergence of an increasingly powerful civil society that would eventually be able to overthrow the regime through political processes. There was considerable disagreement about which was the more likely option. The two strategies conflict with each other, yet the coming months could potentially see both being pursued by different international players.

Three main scenarios for Syria's medium-term future were presented:

- the resolution of the conflict through a political process and confidence-building measures;
- an escalation of the conflict, whereby outside players (particularly in the Gulf) would put increasing pressure on the Assad regime by arming the opposition;
- a slide into full-scale civil war.

A protracted, low-scale civil war was seen as the most likely scenario by some participants – reinforced by the lack of assertiveness or consensus among the international community on either of the above options.

Finally, the likelihood of military and high-level political defections that could lead to an internal disintegration of the regime was discussed. While there was agreement that currently this prospect remains highly unrealistic, a participant suggested that the expansion of the UN mission might set in motion a process that would undermine the regime's internal stability.

It was said that there was already a sense in some quarters of greater freedom to express dissent since so much had come out into the open. A

participant described visiting friends in Damascus who for the first time felt unafraid to talk about politics in front of their children, although they would still warn their children not to repeat what they heard outside the house.

### Options for a resolution

Delegates discussed various options to resolve the Syrian crisis, including

- regime decapitation, whereby only the head of the regime is ousted (such as in Yemen);
- a military intervention (as in Libya); and
- a negotiated political transition.

The risk with the 'decapitation solution' was that an even more authoritarian figure from within the regime could gain power. While the Syrian regime currently appeared to have almost total control of its security forces, there were questions about the impact that a change of leader could have on the unity of the armed forces and the possibilities for internecine conflict.

It was agreed that a military intervention continued to look unlikely. Apart from Russia's and China's almost certain veto at the UN, there remained wider concern about the risk for intensified violence and radicalization – fears that were being exacerbated by reports of an intensifying inflow of jihadist fighters from Iraq into Syria, and that were continually exploited by the Syrian regime.

The mobilization of the Syrian population along sectarian and religious lines was seen as another possible risk for the escalation of the conflict. It was suggested that it was only through an inclusive political process and the ensuring of sustainable economic conditions that such divides could be overcome. It was argued that there could be a direct correlation between deteriorating economic conditions and increasing violence. As the levels of dissatisfaction and desperation rose, the likelihood of constructive political thinking was reduced and the resort to violence became a primary option for the resolution of a crisis.

### Conclusion

The UN mission was not expected to make much progress towards resolving the conflict in Syria, but there were some hopes that it would reduce violence enough to enable peaceful protests, reduce the risk of further militarization of the conflict, and provide some space for opposition groups to build political

alliances and develop a strategy. On the downside, it was not clear how the UN mission would define failure, what level of violence would need to be reached for the 'cease-fire' to be declared to be over, or what the UN's next steps would be. The regime's behaviour suggested it did not judge international military intervention to be likely.

Participants generally saw a high risk of an intensification of violence in Syria. It was said that neighbouring states needed to work together to mitigate the risks of civil war and to prepare for a possible increase in refugee flows in the future.

In concluding, a participant argued that rather than trying to determine ways of unifying the opposition, the international community should focus on identifying opportunities for breaking the cycle of violence currently taking place in Syria, and that the priority was to avoid a slide into civil war, not discussing potential future roles and structures of the opposition. Other participants suggested that, unless the opposition could achieve greater unity and coherence, there was a risk that divisions might deepen and lead to additional violence. The regime survived partly by convincing people there was no alternative to the status quo except for chaos and violence, it was said, so the opposition could gain by articulating a clear vision for a peaceful and inclusive post-Assad future. Finally, as a broader comment, it was suggested that the root causes that had sparked uprisings in other Arab countries were still present in Syria. Thus any long-term solution to the Syrian conflict would need to tackle factors such as corruption, unemployment and rising food prices.

## **ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME**

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