

The Syrian Crisis at Risk of Radicalization

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Although the 2011 Arab protest movements ended dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the trial of strength between the Damascus regime and the Free Syrian Army keeps intensifying and the conflict is more increasingly at risk of radicalization. The conflict fuels a Salafi extremism emerging from the opposition, it also emphasizes the prospect of the regime resorting to non-conventional weapons, and might extend the stage of confrontation to other neighbouring countries. The recent events in Damascus and Aleppo as well as the failure of the diplomatic approach –buried by the double veto at the UN Security Council– underline how the end of the conflict is not necessarily as close as it seems.

Communitarizing the conflict

Turning the Syrian people's rising into a true civil war is undoubtedly Bashar al-Assad's regime's only success, its masterpiece. Indeed, when the first popular protests against the regime broke out, the regime chose the communitarization option. Its propaganda apparatus has never mentioned any confrontation between an authoritarian regime and a political opposition (before the latter became militarized), but has rather opposed an open and multi-confessional Syria –represented by the regime– to Salafi terror groups with foreign support. The protest movement included then Christian, Kurdish and Alawi opposition figures, while the regime was still supported by many Sunnis, mostly prominent citizens or religious people. Only later, as the conflict gradually became militarized, did the regime become trapped in the community logic it had set up. The Sunni supports have gradually shifted towards the opposition or dwindled, while the radicalization of Sunni rebels has kept many minorities¹ away, the latter having retreated into silence and angst.

In this context, the rebellion's recent attacks against the Alawi region may certainly be considered as acts of revenge and as a collective punishment². But they correspond above all to a strategic choice in the eyes of the opposition, with two major objectives.

The first consists of preventing the regime from setting up an homogenous and defensible withdrawal zone. The Free Army is thus trying to prevent any territorial continuity between the predominantly Alawi urban poles on the one hand, and between the Alawi region and Lebanon on the other hand. Besides, it is in this region, composed of the Alawi mountain and the coast running from Tartus (hosting a Russian military base) to Latakia, that the ruling clan recruits most of its officers. It is also where it keeps a large amount of heavy weapons. Hitting the Alawi region thus aims at cutting the regime from its majors resupplying zone, and also to make the separatist option impossible³.

The second objective consists of spreading the loyalist forces, drawing them westward, whilst the Free Army strikes Damascus more intensely and extends its control over a large part of Aleppo. Were the regime to abandon the Alawi region, pretexting a concentration of its war effort on the defense of the capital, this would be deemed as a treason by a community whose members are to

1 Druze, Kurds, but mostly Christians.

2 The Syrian regime is not just the power of one man or one family, but that of a religious community: the Alawis. It results from a history whose roots are to be found in Syria's confessional composition and in the social revenge of a marginalized minority having reached the top through the army and through its mixing up with the Ba'ath party. See: Masri Feki, "The Future of Syria: New Era of Democracy or Rise of Sunni Fundamentalism", *Diplomatist Magazine* (India), Volume 4, No.7, Aug. 2012.

3 Nowadays, some fantasize about the creation of a small state in the "Alawi recess," as the French did when their mandate began, in the 1920s.

be found among the presidential family and high-ranking officers of the regular army and of intelligence. It is indeed thanks to this region, and more globally to a large number of minorities, that the regime keeps resisting a largely Sunni and increasingly fundamentalist insurrection⁴.

The chemical weapons threat

Another aspect of this radicalized conflict lies in the regime's tougher means of repression: multiple Scud attacks, more intense air strikes, and the threat to use non-conventional weapons. Isolated and powerless as he is, Assad may very well use the chemical weapons he has, just like Saddam did during the repression of the 1988 Kurdish revolt in the North of Iraq. The use of non-conventional weapons by the Damascus regime would be an irrevocable threat to all the countries in the region and would lead to a foreign military intervention. Until now, a direct international action has been put aside due to the Russo-Chinese veto at the UN Security Council and the lack of consensus among NATO and Arab League members. Turkey and Arab countries (Syria's neighbours in particular) lament the growing presence of Jihadists ideologically close to al-Qaeda in the Syrian rebellion⁵. They fear the future Syrian government might be more of a menace for the region's stability than Bashar al-Assad's. The activation and use of chemical weapons would lead to an extreme situation no neighbouring state nor the international community would come to terms with. Several western states, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, have made it perfectly clear they would not let such a situation happen⁶.

Were a foreign military action launched, there would be two possible scenarios. The first would be to counter the use of chemical weapons with an intervention. This would mean dozens of thousand Syrians dying of suffocation to allow foreign troops being mobilized on Syrian soil. The less risky yet more daring second scenario would be preventive action. This would consist of sending special forces to get hold of stocks of chemical weapons before use, to destroy them on the spot or to take them out of Syria. The option is currently being studied by the United States and several European countries; special Western forces have been mobilized in Jordan and are expecting the watchword. The American president's recognizing Syria's National Coalition as the truly legitimate representative of the Syrian people and his refusing to military support the Free Army belong to a logic aiming at politically trapping Bashar al-Assad's regime. The measures should help discourage the young ruler from giving up the idea of a total war against the insurrection, at the cost of letting an unbearable situation last.

Exporting instability

The radicalization of the Syrian crisis also risks influencing the neighbouring countries⁷, for instance Iraq where tensions between Shi'ites and Sunnis are already important, and more particularly Lebanon, once more on the verge of civil war. Indeed, Lebanon is the most vulnerable of Syria's neighbouring states. Power there is fragile, inter-confessional tensions are raging, not to mention pro and anti Assad political stances. Lebanon is now regularly prey to border incidents, targeted killings, inter-community confrontations⁸, and to massive refugee flows.

In addition, a growing discontent may be found among Sunni people and several Christians about Hezbollah's hegemony and its particularly close ties with Bashar al-Assad's regime. Actually, the Iran-friendly militia's support to Damascus is not just political. It is fully involved in the Syrian conflict as the development of a land-bridge across Lebanon to connect Damascus to the Western part of Homs and to the Syrian coast (around Tartus) clearly shows⁹. Like the international Beirut-

4 Christophe Ayad, « Syrie : les combats gagnent la région alaouite, bastion du système Assad », *Le Monde* (France), 27 Dec. 2012.

5 This is in particular the case of the radical Salafi organization Jabhat al-Nosra, having recently appeared on the US list of foreign terrorist organizations.

6 Jean Guisnel, « Syrie : la peur des armes chimiques », *Le Télégramme* (France), 5 Dec. 2012.

7 For further reading about the Syrian crisis's regional outcome, see Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, « La situation syrienne, ses impasses et ses développements », *Institut Thomas More* (France), Tribune N°36, Nov. 2012.

8 Especially in North Lebanon, between Sunnis and Alawis. For instance, on 22 August 2012, clashes between Sunnis opposed to Assad and Sunnis supporting the Syrian regime resulted in five dead and dozens wounded in Tripoli.

9 Paul Salem, « Le Liban peut-il survivre à la crise syrienne ? », *L'Orient-Le Jour* (Lebanon), 14 Dec. 2012.

Damascus road –whose Lebanese side is under the close surveillance of Hezbollah– this corridor could become particularly strategic were Assad's troops to lose control over domestic main roads. Finally, Hezbollah's hegemony over Beirut and the Beqaa Valley and its influence over Mikati's government are reassuring elements for Damascus: Lebanon's capital still remains the nearest port and can thus be used as a strategic resupplying channel if need be.

Were the Syrian crisis to last long, Lebanon –like other countries in the region– might be faced with challenges of an unprecedented scale. Turkey itself might even be affected. As it did in the 1990s, Damascus could be more than willing to use the Kurdish issue as a lever over Ankara. Lastly, Golan Heights provocations to press Israel into the conflict are not to be excluded. On the contrary, a collapse of the Syrian regime now would clearly undermine Iran's geopolitical positions, weaken Hezbollah, and intensify tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Lebanon and Iraq. This would be a radical yet long-lasting disruption of all power struggles in the Middle-East, with the need to redefine long established positions.

In short, Syria's geopolitical situation is far more complex than that of the other countries affected by the Arab Spring. The Syrian crisis needs to be understood within a middle-eastern context. The international community's cautious steps are hence more understandable, all the more so if we bear in mind the means and efforts spread in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whichever way this conflict might end, the instability it has caused will affect Syria and the region for a long time, with further suffering and radicalization.