

## Syria and the Arab Spring

### Current situation and future prospects of the Assad Regime

**While Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans have overthrown their autocratic rulers, the issue of the political survival of Bashar al-Assad, whose regime represents one of the most repressive in the region, remains unsettled. This situation raises the question of how Assad could hold on to power in spite of overt political resistance that lasted over several months. What are similarities, but also differences between the case of Syria and other states of the Arab spring?<sup>1</sup>**

In October the United Nations estimated the number of casualties caused by the uprisings in Syria at more than 3500;<sup>2</sup> unofficial figures range much higher.<sup>3</sup> Causes for the resistance can be found in the poor economic situation, widespread corruption, as well as severe repression by the ruling Syrian Baath party amounting to human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> The "Damascus Declaration", published in 2005, already addressed the grievances of the Syrian system relentlessly. It demanded the establishment of a modern constitutional state, based on democratic principles in which all citizens, regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation, enjoy equal rights.<sup>5</sup> Although the Da-

mascus Declaration could unite a heterogeneous group composed of secular, Islamic, Arabic and Kurdish organizations, it was not capable of inciting a mass movement. Only in the wake of the Arab Spring 2011, has a broad opposition movement formed and engaged in mass protests that persist at the time of the formulation of this article.

The opposition movement, which was initiated in March, is increasingly better organized. With the establishment of the Syrian National Council, it became coordinated and institutionalized, and now has grown both in scope and reach.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other authoritarian rulers in North Africa, however, Assad successfully applied his politics of repression to cling on to power. One of the main reasons for the pertinacity of his regime is that it still enjoys the support of different elite groups. Also, it could prevent the movement of spreading to the political and economic centres of the country, i.e., Damascus and Aleppo.

*The Baath regime's power base is shattered, but not destroyed*

These elites include civic groups and business people in the urban centers. They have benefited from economic liberalization policies under Bashar, but are not strong enough yet to flourish independently without the privileges currently provided by

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank Isabel Lamers and Warren Altounian for translating the present article from German into English.

<sup>2</sup> UN News Centre (2011): Death toll passes 3500 as Syrian crackdown continues, says UN human rights office. 8 Oct. 2011.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?Cr=Syria&NewsID=40326> (accessed November 15 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Economist (2011): Syria's uprising – A downward spiral. 16 Oct. 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/21533160> (accessed November 24 2011).

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group (2011): Syria: Quickly Going beyond the Point of No Return. 3 May 2011

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/syria-quickly-going-beyond-the-point-of-no-return.aspx> (accessed October 20 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (2005), 16 Oct. 2005.

<http://www.demdigest.net/damascusdeclaration.html> (accessed October 27 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Perthes, Volker (2011): Syrien – Eine klare Botschaft an Assad. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 5 Oct. 2011

[http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/medienbeitraege/1110\\_05\\_HB\\_Syrien\\_Prt\\_KS.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/medienbeitraege/1110_05_HB_Syrien_Prt_KS.pdf) (accessed October 24 2011).

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the Syrian state.<sup>7</sup> The regime has also obliged the representatives of religious minorities by imparting them with political privileges. This is especially true for the Alawites, but also for Christian groups.<sup>8</sup> Also the middle class is allied with the Baathist regime due to jobs it provides in public service and administration. Accordingly, it is not the urban middle class which forms the backbone of the Syrian opposition movement, but rather the lower class of society from the provinces: farm workers, truck drivers, and small business owners.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Assad – unlike the toppled Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak – can continue to rely on the military: Although about 20,000 Syrian soldiers are estimated to have already deserted the army, it is by no means all that joined the ranks of the “Free Syrian Army” – the military opposition. Due to fear of the consequences for their desertion, many go into hiding or leave the country completely.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the security apparatus from the perspective of the regime is mostly intact.

The mass protests found a sudden and politically inciting onset in Daraa, a small town about 100 kilometres south of Damascus near the Jordanian border.<sup>11</sup> While Bashar al-Assad’s father Hafiz had supported the agricultural sector, Bashar shifted to a policy of economic liberalisation, which hitherto mainly benefited the extremely weak Syrian private sector. This shift entailed a complete

<sup>7</sup> Malley, Robert/Harling, Peter (2011): How the Syrian regime is ensuring its demise. International Crisis Group, 2 July 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/op-eds/harling-malley-how-the-syrian-regime-is-ensuring-its-demise.aspx> (accessed Oct. 24 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Beck, Martin/Collet, Lea (2010): On Syrian Politics and the Situation of its Christian Minority, KAS International Reports, Dec. 2011.

[http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226) (accessed November 24 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Thumann, Michael (2011): Aufstand der Armen. *ZEIT Online*, 24 Mar. 2011.

<http://www.zeit.de/2011/13/Syrien/seite-1> (accessed October 24 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Hafez, Salma (2011): Syria: How Far Has Uprising Spread? Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 25 Oct., <http://iwpr.net/report-news/syria-how-far-has-uprising-spread> (accessed November 24 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Thumann, Michael (2011): Aufstand der Armen. *ZEIT Online*, 24 Mar. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/2011/13/Syrien/seite-1> (accessed October 24 2011).

negligence of the stagnating agricultural sector. In combination with years of drought, poverty rose sharply in the country and many farmers, without future perspective, migrated to provincial cities like Daraa.<sup>12</sup>

*Damascus and Aleppo*

Damascus and Aleppo however, the political and economic hubs of the country, are characterized by a high proportion of wealthy businessmen and privileged state bureaucrats. In order to bind them, Bashar cleverly made use of his family members to serve him as a network into the affairs of private and public life. For instance, the Republican Guard, a 10.000 man strong elite force of the Syrian army, is commanded by his brother, Maher al-Assad. Bashar al-Assad’s cousin, Rami Makhlof, owns the country’s largest mobile phone company, “Syriatel”, while at the same time, is chairman of several influential contracting businesses.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the regime in Damascus exploited international economic relations so as to ensure privileges for the urban elites, the most prominent example being the 2004 free trade agreement with Turkey. Since the beginning of social unrest and the subsequent deterioration of Syrian-Turkish relations, trade between Aleppo and the Turkish city of Antakya has decreased by eighty percent.<sup>14</sup> This fact as well as the suspension of Syrian membership from the Arab League in November 2011, which also raised new economic sanctions, could lead to a constriction of the regime’s socio-economic base.

<sup>12</sup> Bittner, Jochen/Thumann, Michael (2011): Kann er stürzen? *ZEIT Online*, 11 Aug. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/2011/33/Syrien-Assad> (accessed October 24 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Parvaz, Dorothy (2011): Assad’s brother tops Syria sanctions list. Al Jazeera English, 10 May 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/05/2011083236550487.html> (accessed November 2 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Bittner, Jochen/Thumann, Michael (2011): Kann er stürzen? *ZEIT Online*, 11 Aug. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/2011/33/Syrien-Assad> (accessed October 24 2011).

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*Alawite Dictatorship?*

So far, the Syrian regime could rely on privileged Sunni and Christian groups. The commonly held conception that the Syrian regime is an *Alawite Dictatorship* is therefore mistaken.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless the Alawites play a central role in maintaining the relative stability of the Syrian system. The Alawites, which include the Assad family, represent, with about 2.4 million members, approximately 11-12 percent of the population. Thus, they constitute the largest religious minority in Syria.<sup>16</sup> They are also heavily over-represented in the security apparatus.<sup>17</sup> Members of this minority fear, above all, that Sunni forces will seize power. This idea is deeply rooted in the collective memory of Syrians due to the breaking down of opposition forces in the early eighties. Under the lead of Hafez al-Assad in 1982, the Syrian army massacred tens of thousands of people in the Sunni town, Hama. The attack primarily aimed at eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood, which was in opposition to the secular Baath party. The regime consolidated its power base through this campaign, not only because they muted the Islamist opposition for decades, but also by the fact that it – to make or mar – tied the Alawites to the regime.<sup>18</sup> This might explain why the Syrian officer corps and the Alawites in general, still stand – in contrast to the Egyptian case – behind Assad, despite of his shattered legitimacy: In the

event of regime change, they have reason to fear persecution based on their religious affiliation.<sup>19</sup>

Christians are the second largest religious minority in the country and have also relied on the secular Baathist regime in order to exercise their religion freely. Christians – notwithstanding their loyal political behaviour under the Assad regime – worry of being discriminated against qua their religious affiliation if Assad's regime is to be overthrown.<sup>20</sup> In addition, both Alawites and Christians apprehend that there will be economic hardship during a difficult process of transformation.<sup>21</sup>

*The role of Islamism*

The Assad regime has manipulated these fears for over forty years and consistently argued that the end of the Baath rule would lead both to an economic decline as well as to a takeover by extremists.<sup>22</sup> Even the representatives of the current resistance movement are systematically denounced as violent radicals who aim to establish an Islamist regime.<sup>23</sup> This characterisation, however, hardly corresponds to reality. The Muslim Brotherhood has been so brutally suppressed by the regime that it currently is not in a state to dominate the opposition. The Syrian-Islamist movement is also much more multi-faceted than depicted by the

<sup>15</sup> Beck, Martin (2011): Arabischer Frühling – Lebenslange Zugehörigkeit. E+Z, Mai, <http://www.inwent.org/ez/articles/194626/index.de.shtml> (accessed November 24 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Beck, Martin/Collet, Lea (2010): On Syrian Politics and the Situation of its Christian Minority, KAS International Reports, Dec. 2011. [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226) (accessed November 24 2011). Rafizadeh, Majid (2011): For Syria's minorities, Assad is security. Al Jazeera English, 16 Sep. 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/20110912135213927196.html> (accessed November 2 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Malley, Robert/Harling, Peter (2011): How the Syrian regime is ensuring its demise. International Crisis Group, 2. Juli, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/op-eds/harling-malley-how-the-syrian-regime-is-ensuring-its-demise.aspx> (accessed October 24 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, Nir (2011): Assad's Alawites: The guardians of the throne. Al Jazeera English, 10 Oct. 2011. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/20111010122434671982.html> (accessed October 24 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Rafizadeh, Majid (2011): For Syria's minorities, Assad is security. Al Jazeera English, 16 Sep. 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/20110912135213927196.html> (accessed November 2 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Beck, Martin/Collet, Lea (2010): On Syrian Politics and the Situation of its Christian Minority, KAS International Reports, Dec. 2011.

[http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_21410-1522-2-30.pdf?101212093226) (accessed November 24 2011). Rafizadeh, Majid (2011): For Syria's minorities, Assad is security. Al Jazeera English, 16 Sep. 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/20110912135213927196.html> (accessed November 2 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Steverson, Wendell (2011): Roads to Freedom. In: The New Yorker. 29 Aug. 2011. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/29/110829fa\\_fact\\_steverson](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/29/110829fa_fact_steverson) (accessed October 20 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Steverson, Wendell (2011): Roads to Freedom. In: The New Yorker. 29 Aug. 2011. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/29/110829fa\\_fact\\_steverson](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/29/110829fa_fact_steverson) (accessed October 20 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Guardian (2011): Syria's Assad warns of earthquake if west intervenes. 30 Oct. 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/30/syria-assad-warns-earthquake-west-intervenes?INTCMP=SRCH> (accessed November 4 2011).

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government. Furthermore, the resistance is sustained by actors from the rural areas of Syria, where traditional clans and tribes have the largest impact, not the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the composition of the Syrian National Council indicates a very diverse consortium within the resistance movement, rather than a religiously-motivated coalition.<sup>25</sup> The Council includes both dissidents from the time before the Arab Spring as well as representatives of the new, young opposition. Members are secular as well as Islamist leadership figures, communists, pan-Arabists, and representatives of the Assyrian and Kurdish resistance.<sup>26</sup>

*Scenarios*

*Scenario 1: Peaceful regime change*

In light of increasing pressure by the Syrian opposition forces, the Baathist regime has sought dialogue several times. These were half-hearted attempts at best, to respond to the people's demands for reform, in order to return to more stable conditions. The realisation of the scenario of peaceful regime change seems unlikely: On the one hand, unrealized promises of reform and extreme human rights abuses foreshadow that the regime simply lacks the political will to share power.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the loss of legitimacy of Assad's regime has reached

<sup>24</sup> Ali, Mohanad Hage (2011): Syria's opposition is unified and peaceful. The Guardian, 19 Oct. 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/19/syria-opposition-unified-peaceful> (accessed October 19 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Guardian (2011): Syria's Assad warns of earthquake if west intervenes. 30 Oct. 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/30/syria-assad-warns-earthquake-west-intervenes?INTCMP=SRCH> (accessed November 4 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Ali, Mohanad Hage (2011): Syria's opposition is unified and peaceful. The Guardian, 19 Oct. 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/19/syria-opposition-unified-peaceful> (accessed October 19 2011); Economist (2011): The tide turns against Bashar Assad. 19. November, S. 59f.

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group (2011): Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide. 13 Jul. 2011. [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf) (accessed November 3 2011).

such proportions that the opposition has little incentive to step back from their demands for regime change.

*Scenario 2: Swift regime change*

A second possibility would be that the Assad regime is overthrown and that the opposition assumes power. Although this second scenario appears to be more likely than the first, several obstacles have to be overcome for it to be realized. Indeed, the Baath regime has irrevocably lost its legitimacy amongst many parts of the population. Nevertheless, there are still those strategic groups – from fear of losing their privileges – whom are not ready to openly stand against a regime which is willing to engage in extreme repression. The regime also enjoys the support of the security forces in Damascus, and it is not conceivable that in the foreseeable future something should change that relationship, especially considering it has managed to tie the Alawite elite so closely. Finally, Assad's regime is – despite increasing external pressure from the West, Turkey and the Arab League – spared from global isolation due to the persisting support of some influential actors – namely the veto powers in the UN Security Council, Russia and China, as well as Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>28</sup> Yet, even if such isolation were achieved, it could not be guaranteed that a sanctions policy below the threshold of a military intervention would be sufficient to overthrow Assad.

*Scenario 3: Indefinite perpetuation of the status quo – and then?*

Given these circumstances, it is most likely that the current situation will continue *sine die*. The opposition succeeded to confer

<sup>28</sup> Bittner, Jochen/Thumann, Michael (2011): Kann er stürzen? ZEIT Online, 11 Aug. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/2011/33/Syrien-Assad> (accessed October 24 2011); ZEIT Online (2011): Freie Armee Syriens gründet Militärat, 16 Nov. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2011-11/syrien-armee-deserteure> (accessed November 14 2011).

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permanence to their resistance. At the same time, the regime has not offered any incentives to relinquish their uprising: The regime does not seem, in the slightest way, willing to carry out substantial reforms; however, the opposition must assume that those involved in resistance will face systematic persecution without respect for human rights if they were to surrender. Furthermore, the repressive apparatus of the regime functions as before and especially the dominating Alawites have no incentive to abandon Assad: The Syrian security apparatus rather appears to be prepared to defend the regime down to the last man. The Egyptian path, i.e., a departure of the military from the rulers, is just as improbable as a Libyan solution. In contrast to the situation with Libya, a foreign military intervention in Syria is not foreseeable.

It is neither prudent to predict how long the status quo will be sustained nor to anticipate which of the two sides will eventually hold sway. Statements can be made, however, on which essential factors determine this question. The decisive factor will be whether the regime is capable of preserving its remaining legitimacy with the Sunni (and Christian) middle class. As military defeat without external intervention is hardly possible, it is crucial to the regime's survival to prevent an economic collapse. Economically, Syria is under significant pressure due to the sanctions policy from the West, Turkey, and the Arab world. Yet, this would only initiate a fall of the regime if all developmental and economically relevant actors in Syria, including the elites of the private sector, refused allegiance.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bakri, Nada (2011): Sanctions Pose Growing Threat to Syria's Assad. *The New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/world/middleeast/sanctions-pose-growing-threat-to-syrias-president-assad.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed October 27 2011).  
Gehlen, Martin (2011): Nur die syrischen Eliten können Assad stoppen. *ZEIT Online*, 3 Aug. 2011. <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2011-08/syrien-assad-sicherheitsrat> (accessed October 24 2011).