

**POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND
THE MIDDLE EAST (VII): THE SYRIAN REGIME'S
SLOW-MOTION SUICIDE**

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POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VII): THE SYRIAN REGIME'S SLOW-MOTION SUICIDE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Desperate to survive at all costs, Syria's regime appears to be digging its grave. It did not have to be so. The protest movement is strong and getting stronger but yet to reach critical mass. Unlike toppled Arab leaders, President Bashar Assad enjoyed some genuine popularity. Many Syrians dread chaos and their nation's fragmentation. But whatever opportunity the regime once possessed is being jeopardised by its actions. Brutal repression has overshadowed belated, half-hearted reform suggestions; Bashar has squandered credibility; his regime has lost much of the legitimacy derived from its foreign policy. The international community, largely from fear of the alternative to the status quo, waits and watches, eschewing for now direct involvement. That is the right policy, as there is little to gain and much to lose from a more interventionist approach, but not necessarily for the right reasons. The Syrian people have proved remarkably resistant to sectarian or divisive tendencies, defying regime prophecies of confessional strife and Islamisation. That does not guarantee a stable, democratic future. But is a good start that deserves recognition and support.

Taken by surprise by the outbreak of unrest, the regime was lucky that protesters initially were unable to press their advantage. That gave the authorities time to regroup and put in place a multi-faceted response: stoking fear, especially among minorities; portraying demonstrators as foreign agents and armed Islamists; pledging limited reforms. Most of all, though, was brutal repression.

The violence that has ensued is clouded in some mystery. Crude propaganda from the regime and its policy of banning outside reporters has ensured this. Protesters claim they are entirely peaceful, but that assertion is hard to reconcile with witness testimony and with the vicious murder of several security officers. More plausibly, criminal networks, some armed Islamist groups, elements supported from outside and some demonstrators acting in self defence have taken up arms. But that is a marginal piece of the story. The vast majority of casualties have been peaceful protesters, and the vast majority of the violence has been perpetrated by the security services.

The regime had a purpose. By sowing fear of instability, it sought to check the extent of popular mobilisation and deter the regime's less committed detractors. But while it appears to have had the desired impact on some Syrians, the balance sheet has been overwhelmingly negative from the authorities' standpoint. The security services' brutal and often erratic performance has created more problems than it has solved, as violence almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalisation.

As the crisis deepened, the regime gradually recognised the necessity of reform. Playing catch-up with protester demands, it always lagged one if not several steps behind, proposing measures that might have had some resonance if suggested earlier but fell on deaf ears by the time they were unveiled. This was particularly true of Bashar's most recent (20 June 2011) speech. His suggestions of far-reaching constitutional reforms, including the end of Baath party rule, encapsulated much of what the protest movement, at its inception, had dreamed. By then, however, demonstrators had turned to something else. It is not regime reform they are pursuing. It is regime change. What is more, by giving a relatively free hand to security forces, the regime has become increasingly dependent on and indebted to its more hardline elements. This has made it far less likely that it ultimately will carry out what it has proposed; even assuming it truly wishes to.

Officials argue that many Syrians still see things differently, that they are wary of the protest movement, suspecting it is a Trojan horse for Islamists and that the fall of the regime would mean sectarian civil war. They have a point. Largely due to regime scare tactics – but also to some of the violence against security forces – the country has become more polarised. A growing number want to see the end of the regime; many still cling to it as better than an uncertain alternative, particularly in Damascus. The middle ground has been shrinking.

The result has been an apparent stalemate. Protesters gain ground but have yet to cross the crucial threshold that requires enlisting the capital. The regime scores some points by rallying its supporters, but the crisis of confidence with much of the population and loss of legitimacy is almost surely too deep to be overcome. But it would be wrong to bet on the status quo enduring indefinitely. Economic conditions are worsening; should they reach breaking point – a not unimaginable scenario by any means – the regime could well collapse. Predominantly Allawite security forces are overworked, underpaid and increasingly worried. Should they conclude that they ought to protect what still can be salvaged – their own villages – rather than try to defend what increasingly looks doomed – the existing power structure – their defection also would precipitate the end of the regime.

Under the circumstances, is there anything the international community can usefully do? Many commentators in the U.S. and Europe in particular believe so and are clamouring for a more muscular response. In truth, options are limited. Military intervention is highly unlikely; it also would be unquestionably disastrous. It could unleash the very sectarian civil war the international community wishes to avoid, provoke further instability in an already unstable neighbourhood and be a gift to a regime that repeatedly has depicted the uprising as the work of foreign conspirators. Sanctions against regime officials can be of use, though this instrument almost has been exhausted; going further and targeting economic sectors that would hurt ordinary Syrians would backfire and risk a repeat of the unfortunate Iraqi precedent of the 1990s.

International condemnation is valuable insofar as it keeps the spotlight on – and potentially deters – human rights violations. In this respect the visits by Western ambassadors to Hama, where the prospect of major violence threatens, were welcome. But there are limits to what such steps can accomplish. To do what some are calling for (denounce the regime as illegitimate, insist that Bashar step down) are feel-good options that would change little. Ultimately, what matters is the judgment of the Syrian people; while many clearly wish to topple the regime, others have yet to reach that conclusion. A premature determination by the international community potentially could be viewed by those Syrians as undue interference in their affairs.

The world's cautious attitude has been a source of deep frustration and even anger for the protesters. That is entirely understandable, yet such caution might well be a blessing in disguise. The regime is unlikely to respond to international pressures, regardless of their provenance. Ultimately, the burden lies with the protesters to counter the regime's divisive tactics, reassure fellow citizens – and in particular members of minority groups – who remain worried about a successor regime, and build a political platform capable of rallying broad public support. Already

their ability to transcend sectarian divides has confounded many observers. More importantly, it has given the lie to a regime that has made a business out of preying on fears of a chaotic or Islamist alternative to its own brutal reign.

Damascus/Brussels, 13 July 2011

POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VII): THE SYRIAN REGIME'S SLOW MOTION SUICIDE

I. INTRODUCTION

Had protests in Syria followed a pattern similar to Egypt's – where a strong youth movement, with prior experience of protests, rapidly took control of the symbolic centre of Cairo and reached out to other protesters throughout the country – or Tunisia's – where riots in underprivileged provinces quickly were echoed in the capital thanks to a relatively vibrant civil society – the regime might have met an identical fate. As described in a companion report,¹ a broad cross-section of society was deeply dissatisfied, and even the security services were frustrated with the status quo. The power structure, largely hollowed out, was poised to collapse. Arguably, the regime's greatest strength lay in the fact that the Syrian people did not realise how weak it was.

The Syrian uprising took an altogether different path. Demonstrators at first tentatively pushed the limits, progressively raised their demands and only gradually expanded the protest movement to most towns and cities across the country. This in turn created a dynamic that differed markedly from the Egyptian and Tunisian precedents. The regime seized upon the relatively small number of protesters to argue that it retained legitimacy in the eyes of the silent majority; took advantage of their concentration in the provinces to describe them as isolated phenomena and as a threat to vested interests in the capital; exploited sectarian fault lines to stoke popular fears and rally security services that are predominantly from the Allawite minority; and took advantage of the radicalisation of some elements of the protest movement to disparage it as a whole. Finally, the relatively slow pace of events gave the regime time to adjust, shifting from all-out repression to somewhat more sophisticated (albeit still brutal) means of control and from outright political denial to a belated reform process.

In so doing, the regime consolidated a minimal base of support among those Syrians who feared the consequences of

its collapse. Yet, the protest simultaneously and steadily grew, largely a result of the authorities' mix of uninhibited brutality, sectarian manipulation, crude propaganda and grudging concessions, all of which convinced many others that no fundamental change would occur as long as the regime survived. Predominantly socio-economic grievances became outright political demands that soon boiled down to toppling the existing power structure.

For the most part, this shift was of the regime's own making, as it engaged in a slow-motion suicide. Today it faces a daunting dual legacy that might well provoke its demise: its long-standing domestic mismanagement, for which there are no quick fixes, and its more recent gross mishandling of the ensuing unrest, which has precipitated a deep crisis of confidence.

¹ Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011.

II. THE FOG OF VIOLENCE

A. A MUDDLED PICTURE

From day one of the protests, violence has been a key ingredient of the regime's response. The number of civilian casualties whose names have been recorded by local human rights organisations has risen steadily, reaching around 1,500 in the first week of July. The security apparatus itself has suffered considerable losses, judging by the lists publicly released by authorities. That said, the dynamics of such bloodshed largely remain opaque, clouded by an abundance of unreliable claims and counterclaims. An observer summed up this confusion:

It's very chaotic on both sides. On the street, there is the youth and other genuine protesters, but in some cases you also have foreign agents, fundamentalists, criminals and the like. On the regime's side, the various security services don't necessarily coordinate among each other, and some appear to have armed civilians. To make matters worse, both sides lie about what is happening on the ground, each one depicting the other as solely to blame.²

According to its official narrative, the regime essentially has been blameless. Violence supposedly emanates from other actors, a result of a far-reaching international conspiracy aiming to divide society and subdue a leadership that dared defy Israel and the West. Plotters allegedly incited protest,³ flooded the country with weapons⁴ and insti-

gated attacks against security services by ill-defined armed groups. The state media tell a tale in which *agents provocateurs*,⁵ Islamists⁶ and criminal gangs are confronted by security forces committed to protecting ordinary people and restoring law and order.⁷ Initially, the regime acknowledged civilians had been victims as well, though it blamed snipers who were infiltrated into the country. The sporadic acknowledgment of civilian fatalities was entirely overshadowed by focus on its own casualties, reported daily along with extensive coverage of their funerals.⁸ The authorities openly admitted mistakes by their security services on three occasions only, regularly ignoring the routine use of torture against detainees, looting of private property and other systematic misbehaviour.

In contrast, the narrative put forward by those who sympathise with the protest movement emphasises its peaceful nature and the legitimacy of its demands. Internet-savvy members of the exiled opposition project the image of a Tunisia- or Egypt-like revolution,⁹ downplaying any Islamist agenda, confessional character or resort to violence. In particular, they edit out sectarian (i.e., anti-Allawite) slogans that at times are voiced on the streets in favour of those conveying a broader sense of community.¹⁰ Likewise, they have tended to highlight any sign of participation by women in what so far has been a predominantly (although not exclusively) male phenomenon.

² Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

³ Even before unrest broke out in Deraa, officials saw the hand of their enemies abroad in the nascent protest movement. A senior official said of a small, mid-March demonstration in Damascus: "I can confirm that yesterday's rally was partly inspired by text messages coming from Israel. This is not propaganda on our part. I am confident that Syria will remain strong and stable in the phase to come. People will behave responsibly. They know the threats to our country and will not let it fall prey to them". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 17 March 2011. A few days later, the regime claimed that a million text messages had been sent to Syrians, mostly from Israel, to encourage them to use mosques as a basis for rioting. Syrian Arab News Agency, 23 March 2011. A senior security official asserted that he, as well as other officials he knew, had received untraceable calls from abroad inviting them to betray the regime. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 March 2011. The interior ministry called upon Syrian citizens to ignore text messages and leaflets urging them to protest. Syrian Arab News Agency, 27 March 2011.

⁴ The regime first reported that arms were intercepted from Iraq "for use in actions that affect Syria's internal security and spread unrest and chaos". Reuters, 11 March 2011. It later alleged that boats loaded with weapons had been sent from Lebanon and prevented from reaching Syria's coasts (as if the land border were not sufficiently porous). Syria TV, 28 March 2011.

Another "huge weapons consignment" was blocked on its way into Syria from Iraq, 17 April 2011. In one instance, Lebanese authorities confirmed the existence of smuggling activity. "Lebanon stops weapons from entering Syria, sources say", Reuters, 14 April 2011.

⁵ The regime has been keen to claim that external elements within Syrian society were to blame. For instance, it staged the forced confession of an Egyptian activist engaged in documenting the protest movement, allegedly paid by Israel. Syrian Arab News Agency, 26 March 2011. The Syrian media mentioned a wide variety of foreign troublemakers, including Palestinians, Lebanese and even a fourteen-year-old Sudanese. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 27 March 2011.

⁶ Televised confessions of terrorists on state television began as of 13 April 2011.

⁷ State television regularly runs footage of popular celebrations that invariably break out in locations "liberated" from such troublemakers.

⁸ See, eg, Syrian Arab News Agency, 12-13 April 2011.

⁹ For details, see Anthony Shadid, "Exiles shaping world's image of Syria revolt", *The New York Times*, 23 April 2011.

¹⁰ An intellectual interviewed by Crisis Group remarked that many Syrians felt uncomfortable with some of the feelings that surfaced as a result of the crisis. "There is this suppressed hatred of Allawites that is coming out into the open. It remains a taboo, and most Syrians would rather not recognise it. People still try hard to conceal it, but it is increasingly manifest". Crisis Group telephone communication, 25 April 2011.

In both sides' accounts, the seminal, tragic events of the 1970s and early 1980s figure prominently, albeit in starkly different ways. The regime claims to be fighting a foe reminiscent of the deeply sectarian, well-armed, foreign-backed (notably by Iraq), Muslim Brotherhood-led rebellion that it crushed with ruthless force, even as it insists that its current response is comparatively moderate and restrained.¹¹ The opposition likens the security forces' actions to its infamous past behaviour; even as it stresses that this time they are solely facing unarmed civilians.

The mainstream foreign media's coverage has not clarified the picture. The crude propaganda and disinformation broadcast and published by official and semi-official outlets have wholly undermined their credibility. As a result, foreign journalists, denied access by the regime,¹² have based their accounts on unreliable material produced by on-the-ground protesters and circulated on the internet. In their effort to counter the state-imposed blackout, they have recruited local correspondents to serve as unvetted "eye-witnesses", flooding the country with satellite phones and modems. This has resulted in several cases of false testimony or misleading accounts – for instance of protests in places where Crisis Group could verify there were none.

Although most media now regularly caution they cannot confirm the authenticity of their information, it nonetheless circulates widely. In this fashion unsubstantiated reports of tanks shelling neighbourhoods or helicopter gunships mowing down civilians received wide coverage.¹³ Likewise, several front-page stories – notably the defection of Syria's ambassador to France and the detention of a charismatic gay teenager blogging from Damascus – turned out to be fabricated. By inevitably casting doubt

on other reporting, such blunders played into the regime's hands.¹⁴

Foreign NGOs also have been kept at bay, along with members of an independent UN team appointed to investigate the Deraa events – even though it reportedly was established at the regime's request.¹⁵ At the time of writing, only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – whose policy is not to publicise its findings – had been promised access to some restive areas.¹⁶ Damascus-based diplomats have seen their freedom of movement curtailed, as security services cordon off the more sensitive areas. Some of these diplomats also complain about their capitals' lack of interest for thorough fact-checking – notably, attempts to disprove specific accusations levelled by the opposition, such as tank or artillery shelling of residential areas¹⁷ – and fear being perceived as naïve or sympathetic to the regime if they challenge conventional wisdom.¹⁸

Under the circumstances, Damascenes' most reliable source of information has been telephone calls to relatives, friends and colleagues. Even then, the result is far from satisfying, as they tend to hear, and thus repeat, contradictory accounts. Some tend to confirm the presence of armed elements within the opposition; many others credibly blame the regime for the bulk of the violence. Instances of sectarian polarisation surface in certain areas, while examples of cross-community solidarity emerge in others. Neighbours often provide inconsistent accounts, while even individuals who share socio-economic backgrounds may react to similar events in dissimilar ways. Security officials who are present on the ground and see events through a narrow,

¹¹ A Syrian defence ministry official said, "if the objective today was simply to shoot into the crowds and mow them down, there would be tens if not hundreds of casualties at every single demonstration". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 May 2011. A U.S. official concurred to some extent: "Much of what has happened was due to indiscipline, security forces not knowing how to handle this kind of situation. This is a very far cry from Hama [in the 1980s] – this is not a regime that wants to massacre its people". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 27 May 2011.

¹² Syria all but stopped issuing visas to journalists, and expelled or detained several foreign reporters attempting to cover events on the ground. In late June, the regime finally allowed in some foreign journalists.

¹³ On 11 May, unverified accounts of tanks shelling residential areas in Homs were mentioned by Reuters, the BBC and France 24 among others. Embassies in Damascus saw no evidence to corroborate this allegation. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2011. On 10 and 11 June, unconfirmed reports of helicopter gunships firing on protesters in the governorate of Idlib likewise circulated widely.

¹⁴ On the alleged defection of Lamia Shakkur, see France 24, 7 June 2011. On the fictional Amina Abdallah, see "Gay girl in Damascus' blog revealed as hoax", Associated Press, 13 June 2011. After a U.S. man revealed he had imagined and embodied this character, Syrian media extensively showed his bearded face as evidence of Western duplicity. See, eg, Syrian Arab News Agency, 14 June 2011.

¹⁵ See *Le Monde* 26 April 2011. "Syria barring humanitarian mission to Daraa, UN says", Reuters, 9 May 2011.

¹⁶ "Syria Agrees to Give Red Cross Wider Access", Reuters, 21 June 2011. It was later promised unrestricted access. "ICRC has wider access in Syria, steps up aid role", Reuters, 8 July 2011.

¹⁷ This practice, to which the regime resorted in the 1980s to quell the uprising, was mentioned by the opposition and reported in the media. See, eg, Zeina Karam, "Syrian troops shelling residential areas", Associated Press, 11 May 2011. Others have refuted the reports. See, eg, Joshua Landis's post in the blog Syria Comment, 15 May 2011. Field work conducted by Crisis Group in Syria has yet to produce evidence supporting the claim.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Damascus, 21-23 May 2011.

localised lens themselves appear to have their own difficulty piecing together the larger puzzle.¹⁹

B. IDENTIFYING TRENDS

Although the situation remains highly unclear, some trends nonetheless are apparent. In particular, the regime's overall response to the uprising in Deraa is a useful template for what might well have occurred elsewhere.²⁰

To begin, the regime made every effort to deny responsibility for the unrest in the governorate of Hawran. The national news agency first accused "infiltrators" of carrying out acts of "sabotage" aimed at provoking "chaos".²¹ Some were said to have dressed as security officers who then ordered subordinates to open fire on protesters.²² A daily newspaper faulted Palestinians – specifically the defunct jihadi group, Fatah al-Islam.²³ State television accused terrorists manipulated by the Mossad, Israel's intelligence service.²⁴ Officials interviewed by Crisis Group pointed fingers, alternatively, at Kurds and Islamists,²⁵ elements backed by exiled dissidents such as former Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam,²⁶ Jordanian, Saudi or Lebanese *agents provocateurs*²⁷ and drug dealers.²⁸

¹⁹ One reached out to Crisis Group in an attempt to figure out where things were heading; he appeared to know very little about what was happening outside his narrow area of duty. Working non-stop, unfamiliar with the internet and having to deal with copious internal communications that both play up various conspiracy theories and claim that problems have been solved in specific parts of the country (only to be contradicted by subsequent developments), he felt bewildered in the face of a protest movement he had no time to comprehend and that gave no signs of relenting. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

²⁰ For a description of events in Deraa, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, op. cit.

²¹ Syrian Arab News Agency, 18 March 2011.

²² Reuters, 20 March 2011.

²³ *Al-Watan*, 21 March 2011. Palestinian factions issued a joint communiqué that day denying any Palestinian involvement.

²⁴ Syria TV, 23 March 2011.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 20 March 2011.

²⁶ "There are people, religious extremists and individuals close to [former vice president and now opponent] Khaddam, who want this to escalate. We talk to the protesters and respond to their demands, while they incite them. As soon as things calm down, someone stirs things up again". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

²⁷ "Ten Jordanians were captured after they shot at the crowds. We will put them on television if need be. The Saudis are also pouring money into Deraa. And there are Lebanese providing slogans and paying people to demonstrate". Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

As discussed in our companion report, the crisis in fact had deep socio-economic roots, and the trigger was the arbitrary arrest and alleged torture of a group of children. When their parents and tribal leaders attempted to obtain their release, they reportedly were snubbed. As a last resort, they took to the streets, where they promptly were shot at by members of the security services.²⁹ Protests escalated. When angry demonstrators destroyed public buildings and private property, the regime depicted them as arsonists and vandals, adding insult to injury.³⁰ The regime's many contradictory attempts to cover up its responsibility deeply alienated the protesters. A local journalist commented: "The regime is publicly accusing Rifaat Assad [a particularly reviled member of the ruling family who lives in exile and opposes the regime] for the troubles in Deraa. It's hard to think of a narrative more offensive to local residents".³¹

Beyond the specific issue of the detained children, whom the regime immediately pledged to release,³² numerous other grievances came to the fore. Reflected in the demands made by protesters to an official delegation sent from Damascus to engage in a dialogue, these included firing the governor of Deraa and local heads of security; presenting a formal apology for having insulted the martyrs and their relatives; holding security officers accountable for firing on protesters; ending the campaign of arrests; halting arrests of wounded protesters at hospitals; releasing all political prisoners nationwide; lifting the emergency law; eliminating the requirement that building in border areas be approved by security services; cutting taxes; reducing the price of foodstuffs and petroleum products; fighting corruption; reincorporating teachers fired for wearing the full veil; and authorising the return of exiled Syrians.³³

The regime partially addressed the demands. An official privy to the negotiations said, "we immediately endorsed some items, such as dismissing the governor and head of security. Others will require more, as is the case with the emergency law or the law concerning approval of building. But we realise we must implement important changes over time".³⁴ Yet, the regime simultaneously undermined any possible reconciliation by resorting to excessive force.

²⁹ See Hugh Macleod, "Inside Daraa", Al Jazeera, 19 April 2011. The detention of a woman from the prominent Abazid family – based on the fact that she had criticised the regime on the internet – apparently also formed part of the backdrop to the protest movement. Reuters, 20 March 2011.

³⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency, 21-22 March 2011.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 22 March 2011. "The regime is accusing Palestinians, saboteurs, whoever, even though protesters have legitimate grievances. This further provokes people". Crisis Group interview, journalist from Hawran, Damascus, 23 March 2011.

³² Reuters, 20 March 2011.

³³ *Al-Watan*, 21 March 2011.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

Hardly had the delegation left Deraa when security forces reportedly killed as many as fifteen protesters at the Omari mosque; authorities claimed they had routed an “armed group”, which it accused of forcing people to take to the streets, stocking weapons and targeting an ambulance during the raid.³⁵ Local residents denied all these charges. Other demonstrators came under attack from unidentified snipers.

The protest movement spread to nearby localities, where more violence occurred. According to some reports, security forces used live ammunition to suppress a peaceful protest in Sanamain (where demonstrators were said to be carrying olive branches), killing over twenty people.³⁶ The regime acknowledged three deaths only, arguing that weapons had been used in self-defence. This pattern progressively was replicated throughout Hawran province, prompting angry residents to destroy symbols of the regime and call for its demise.³⁷ Elsewhere, the coastal city of Latakia likewise became the scene of unrest; there too, snipers reportedly shot at protesters.

Facing a dangerous challenge to its legitimacy, the regime mobilised supporters. It organised rallies³⁸ and plastered posters glorifying the president; the efforts culminated in massive parades held on 29 March in Damascus and much of the country. Such steps inevitably exacerbated tensions in those locations that had suffered casualties.³⁹

From the outset, the issue of accountability plagued the regime's response. Deraa again provides an apt illustration. Authorities consistently downplayed the role of the local head of security, Atef Najib, even though he had failed to address escalating tensions within the governorate for the past several years, was responsible for the children's detention and mishandled the ensuing crisis. He was removed from office, and the authorities announced an investiga-

tion that was expected to deliver quick results;⁴⁰ yet to date nothing has come of it. Many Syrians attributed this relative impunity to the fact that he is the president's relative. A well-connected Syrian expressed a widely-shared frustration:

Atef Najib should be court-martialled. The children were so badly treated that he felt the need to prevent their families from seeing them. He even roughed up some of their mothers who came to plead for their release. He was sent to Deraa because of his incompetence – the regime wanted to keep him away from the capital. Putting him on trial would do much to solve the problem he created. But he is the cousin of the president.⁴¹

Over time, it became increasingly clear that he would not be meaningfully punished. An official lamented: “Incredibly, some are now claiming that Atef Najib was innocent, although it has been proven that the fingernails of the children – the eldest one of whom was fifteen – were pulled out during their detention”.⁴² In a matter of a month, a senior decision-maker interviewed by Crisis Group shifted from blaming Najib⁴³ to exonerating him.⁴⁴ In June, Assad, meeting with a group of citizens, reportedly argued there was no justification for punishing him insofar as no charges had been brought.⁴⁵ The only – belated – penalty was a travel ban.⁴⁶ In the eyes of many, Najib became a symbol of both unaccountable violence perpetrated by a corrupt,

³⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency, 23 March 2011.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, journalist from Hawran who lost two relatives in the tragedy, Damascus, 25 March 2011.

³⁷ On 25 March, protesters' slogans in Deraa were aimed at Assad's brother Maher, who was accused of leading the repression. Demonstrators in Deraa brought down his father's statue.

³⁸ Large pro-regime demonstrations were held in Aleppo on 25 March and in many other locations throughout the country the following day. For the official coverage, see Syrian Arab News Agency, 26 March 2011.

³⁹ Interviewed on the preceding day, a local journalist predicted that regime efforts would backfire: “How will people in Deraa and Latakia react to these parades? What are we celebrating? Their dead? A victory against whom? *Al-Watan* today claimed the regime had ‘won the battle’ in Latakia. For now, the regime is giving no indication that it understands that crimes have been committed and must be addressed”. Crisis Group telephone communication, 28 March 2011.

⁴⁰ Official sources announced on 19 March 2011 that an investigation would be launched into the Deraa events and that all those proved responsible would be held accountable. Syrian Arab News Agency, 19 March 2011. Two weeks later, the semi-independent daily *al-Watan* asserted that the committee investigating the events had “interviewed many witnesses and will soon end its work”. *Al-Watan*, 4 April 2011. According to an official interviewed by Crisis Group on 6 April, the investigative committee was due to deliver its conclusions within the following 48 hours. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 April 2011. As of this writing, it had still failed to do so.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, 5 April 2011.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, official, Damascus, 23 April 2011.

⁴³ In April the official said, “Atef is under investigation and, although there were a number of exaggerations, there also was a kernel of truth. Of course, he is a corrupt and arrogant officer. He should have been punished even before this incident”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

⁴⁴ A month later, the official said, “Atef is bad through and through. But he was not directly responsible for what happened. We don't believe in making scapegoats but rather in addressing the deeper issues”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

⁴⁵ An account of the meeting was published by a delegation member, Bashar Shaaban. See https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=214835005205706.

⁴⁶ See Reuters, 13 June 2011.

arrogant and inept security apparatus and the nepotism of family rule.

Such impunity toward official wrongdoing was all the more difficult to accept insofar as ordinary citizens were being shown no mercy. By late April, security forces were subjecting Deraa to forms of repression amounting to collective punishment – denial of basic services and medical aid; a sweeping arrest campaign; systematic use of torture against detainees; and indiscriminate use of live ammunition.⁴⁷ A local resident described a particularly deadly day when security forces besieging the city fired without warning on anyone venturing on the streets.⁴⁸ Evidence that security forces had disposed of victims in a shallow grave surfaced when citizens dug up and filmed the corpses; the regime responded by launching an official probe.⁴⁹

This cycle of escalating protests and repression repeated itself, to varying degrees, in most towns across the country. In Duma, north of the capital, the protesters' initial demands largely mirrored the types of reforms later announced by the regime.⁵⁰ They included an investigation into the use of force against local rallies, the release of political prisoners, lifting the emergency law, allowing demonstrations, ending the Baath party's monopoly on official appointments, adopting a new election law, ensuring freedom of the press and judicial independence, fighting corruption, permitting independent trade unions and improving living conditions. Protestors also requested a clear implementation timeline for the above. When dialogue broke down and renewed protests triggered greater repression, demonstrators shifted their slogans to toppling the regime. Soon, a pattern emerged: citizens in one city take to the streets to express solidarity with another; the regime reacts brutally; this in turn prompts additional demonstrations elsewhere.

C. VIOLENCE AND COUNTER VIOLENCE?

Despite the broadly peaceful nature of the movement, several credible reports surfaced of violence initiated by armed protesters. Security forces appear to have suffered casualties early on; according to a Syrian military spokesman, by late June they exceeded 400.⁵¹ Some officers, asserting they faced serious threats, would have preferred an even tougher

regime response.⁵² In April, authorities claimed that regular army troops travelling along the Latakia-Tartus road, in the vicinity of Banyas, were attacked without provocation;⁵³ although the opposition alleged that the victims had been shot by regime forces for showing signs of disloyalty,⁵⁴ independent sources corroborated the regime's version.⁵⁵ State media released pictures of the corpses of Allawite officers ambushed, killed and mutilated in Homs.⁵⁶ It is doubtful that the regime would have taken the extreme step of mutilating the bodies of its own security forces if only because of the cost to troop morale.⁵⁷

More generally, the opposition's assertion that most such casualties result from the summary execution of security forces that refuse to take part in the repression is implausible.⁵⁸ So far, overall, evidence of dissent within the security apparatus has been remarkably scarce.⁵⁹

⁵² Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

⁵³ Syrian Arab News Agency, 10 April 2011.

⁵⁴ Syrian Revolution News Round-up, 11 April 2011. This version was widely echoed by the foreign media. See, eg, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2011; Agence France-Presse, 13 April 2011. In fact, in several instances individuals identified by the media as having been killed or wounded by the security services later appeared on Syrian television to deny the claim. On 27 April, a soldier testified, contrary to media claims, that he had not been executed for disobeying orders; on 29 May a Baath party official denied having incurred gunshot wounds at the hands of security forces. Syrian Arab News Agency, 27 April and 29 May 2011.

⁵⁵ See Syria Comment, 11 and 13 April 2011.

⁵⁶ Syrian Arab News Agency, 25 April 2011.

⁵⁷ Officials apparently highlighted this particular crime in order to validate the claim that they faced brutal, violent Islamist groups. "This is a popular crisis sparked by various grievances. But there also is another facet, which is fundamentalism. In Homs, some Islamists killed and desecrated the bodies of security officers on the basis of their confession, importing methods we had seen only in Iraq. This fundamentalism represents the protest movement's hard core". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

⁵⁸ A defence ministry official dismissed the notion: "It is absurd to believe the security services would slaughter our soldiers. If I put myself in the shoes of our troops and reach that conclusion, I'd be quick to run away from duty and disappear. That's a recipe for undermining army cohesion". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 May 2011.

⁵⁹ For a rare example of confirmed defections, see Matt Weaver, "Syrian soldiers who defected to Lebanon are arrested", *The Guardian*, 16 May 2011. Syrians interviewed by Crisis Group have reported that in certain locations army units refused to suppress demonstrations, but these accounts could not be independently verified. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May and June 2011.

⁴⁷ "Syria: lift the siege of Daraa. Nationwide campaign of arrests continues", Human Rights Watch, 6 May 2011; "We've never seen such horror. Crimes against humanity by Syrian security forces", Human Rights Watch, 1 June 2011.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, resident of Deraa returning from a visit to his relatives, Damascus, 31 May 2011.

⁴⁹ "Officials investigate graves found near Syrian protest city", Reuters, 18 May 2011.

⁵⁰ See 7 April 2011 communiqué.

⁵¹ CNN, 27 June 2011.

Although it remains extremely difficult to ascertain who might be behind those attacks,⁶⁰ several possibilities suggest themselves. Criminal gangs and smuggling networks could be exploiting the chaos and then fighting back when cornered. As mentioned in our companion report, locations such as Deraa, Homs, Madaya, Telkalakh and Idlib have long witnessed thriving cross-border traffic, often abetted by corrupt security services. The latter could now be facing a well-armed enemy of their own making. In this respect, it hardly is surprising that a number of deadly clashes have occurred in border areas, where smuggling networks prospered under cover of the “police state”. Likewise, the suggestion that armed fundamentalist groups – of a Muslim Brotherhood or salafi-jihadi nature – are exploiting the situation cannot be ruled out either.

The regime has stressed the role of outside foes, and it is a fact that over the years it has earned itself a considerable number of them. Some could well be involved, sensing an opportunity to overthrow the regime.⁶¹ Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, for example, Syria has long confronted a hostile environment; it technically is at war with Israel, a feature that defines its relationship with the U.S. and much of the outside world; likewise, its exiled opposition enjoys a measure of domestic but also international support. Dissident former officials such as Rifaat Assad or Abdul Halim Khaddam could be seeking to stoke further instability, resorting to *agents provocateurs* to provoke armed clashes.

That said, it is virtually impossible to assess the nature and extent of covert action carried out by foreign parties. There is some evidence of enhanced arms smuggling as well as of funds being sent from abroad, not least by wealthy members of the diaspora expressing solidarity with their oppressed kin.⁶² When added to the influx of satellite phones and modems provided by media outlets, opposition networks and, presumably, foreign intelligence agencies, such signs of outside involvement almost certainly fuelled genuine belief among officials that they were fac-

ing a relatively extensive external conspiracy. Besides, Syria's security services likely played up any suggestion of foreign interference in internal communications to justify their extreme violence and cover up their frequent missteps.⁶³ Cumulatively, these factors probably provided a distorted picture to the leadership which, in any event, was predisposed to assume external responsibility for any domestic crisis. But whatever the case may be, no amount of outside involvement could explain a movement of this amplitude.⁶⁴

Some protesters likely have been taking up arms in self-defence or in retaliation for regime brutality.⁶⁵ Hawran is a case in point.⁶⁶ Residents interviewed by Crisis Group evoked fierce resistance against regime forces engaged in harsh repression; they claim that this resulted in a greater number of casualties than authorities acknowledged.⁶⁷ Similar occurrences have taken place elsewhere.⁶⁸ Tellingly, black market prices for weapons are said to have increased several fold in May.⁶⁹

⁶³ A security official confirmed that internal reports focused heavily on information that could suggest a foreign plot. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011. An analyst noted that, in similar fashion, U.S. troops in Iraq whose behaviour triggered considerable local hostility tended to blame all unrest on a foreign-backed, Islamist enemy. Crisis Group interview, June 2011.

⁶⁴ The exiled opposition might have sought to provoke unrest, but it has been notoriously unsuccessful. Its calls for demonstrations almost invariably amounted to little. For example, during the first week of April, exiled groups called for four distinct actions – a sit-in in Damascus's central Marja' square; a nationwide campaign to destroy regime symbols; a boycott of Syriatel, the telecommunications company; and counter-demonstrations on the Baath party's anniversary. All came to nothing. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, April 2011. In mid-May, exiles' calls for a general strike likewise had little resonance. See “Syrians ignore call for general strike as government claims unrest is over”, Agence France-Presse, 19 May 2011.

⁶⁵ “In many cases, the violence makes sense. When the security services arrest someone, they don't take him for a cup of tea. They beat the hell out of him. Then they turn him back out on the streets. It's no surprise that some, given a chance, would seek revenge”. Crisis Group interview, palace employee, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

⁶⁶ See “Syria: security forces barring protesters from medical care. At least 28 killed in bloody Friday crackdown in Daraa, Harasta, and Douma”, Human Rights Watch, 12 April 2011. Phil Sands, “Tribal justice blamed for deaths of 120 Syrian police and soldiers”, *The National*, 17 May 2011.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

⁶⁸ See, eg, “Armed citizens put up resistance to Syrian army”, Associated Press, 1 June 2011.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 24 May 2011. A Syrian businessman familiar with the black market, and who had just purchased munitions, confirmed that prices had risen. Crisis Group interview, 26 May 2011. A well-informed

⁶⁰ A U.S. official said, “honestly, we don't know. We are convinced that some of the protest movement is violent, but beyond that we know little – are these Islamist groups? Smugglers and criminals? It is just too opaque”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2011.

⁶¹ Unconfirmed accounts of highly sophisticated attacks against security forces are rife among Syrian officials. One said, “in a military hospital, I visited a wounded officer who was on patrol at night in full body armour, when he was shot in the face. He didn't even hear the explosion. That means that snipers are operating with night vision equipment and silencers. That can't be your regular protester”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 May 2011. For a convincing account of the possible involvement of outsiders in unrest in northern Syria by Alix Van Burén, an Italian journalist, see Syria Comment, 13 April 2011.

⁶² Many Syrian businessmen active in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf come from Hawran.

The most prominent case of violence against security forces so far reportedly occurred in June in Jisr al-Shughur, in the north-western Idlib governorate. Although circumstances remain obscure, scores of security officials appear to have been killed in an assault against a military intelligence headquarters. Authorities claim that some 120 officers were killed in the incident; Western diplomats who visited the location could not confirm the number, though they saw evidence of a brutal battle involving, they say, an apparently well-armed group of men that the security forces could not repel.⁷⁰ Other indications suggest the attackers were religiously conservative – which is true of much of the local population – and had connections in neighbouring Turkey – using Turkish mobile telephone sim cards and weapons seldom found in Syria. The regime blamed “armed Islamist gangs” and said some corpses had been decapitated.

In response, more troops moved to the area; authorities alleged they were coming to rescue besieged, ordinary citizens. Revealingly, the vast majority opted to flee, mostly to nearby Aleppo and Latakia. Thousands more crossed the border into neighbouring Turkey, where refugees and defectors told horrifying – albeit often unverifiable – stories of collective punishment, ranging from a scorched earth policy to rape.⁷¹ The regime acknowledged that crops and livestock had been destroyed, though in a rather convoluted explanation accused “armed groups” who allegedly were hoping the authorities would be blamed.⁷² Showing uncharacteristic self-confidence, the regime trucked diplomats and foreign journalists to the site of the massacre. Although some remained partly sceptical,⁷³ their as-

essment by and large confirmed the regime's version.⁷⁴ One well-respected journalist in particular published articles that gave credence to the notion of a foreign-backed Islamist insurgency.⁷⁵

Indeed, authorities played up the tragic events of Idlib governorate precisely because they came closest to their own narrative – a fact that speaks volumes about what likely happened in other parts of the country, where outside witnesses were not welcome.

Regardless of the extent of violence among protesters, and notwithstanding regime claims that it is facing a small number of “troublemakers”, there is little doubt that the vast majority have been peaceful. Some almost certainly have displayed thuggish, sectarian and violent forms of behaviour; yet, given the extent of the Allawite security services' own thuggishness, sectarianism and violence, what is striking is how restrained the reaction has been to date.

By the same token, regime claims that it is dealing with “isolated” pockets of sedition⁷⁶ have been thoroughly undermined by the fact that protests have spread in size and location to the extent that they now affect most towns and reach across various constituencies. Massive crackdowns – which authorities invariably describe as successful – repeatedly have failed to quell the unrest. Likewise, while there clearly is a strong Islamist element to the uprising – a reflection of longstanding trends within society at large – the regime's attempt to paint all protesters with a fundamentalist brush is belied by the involvement of minority groups: Ismailis in Salamiya and members of the Druze community in Sweida. In Damascus, various intellectuals have expressed support for the demonstrators, including many prominent Allawites. Popular mobilisation has expanded both horizontally and vertically, as an increasing number of professionals and middle-class neighbourhoods have joined in.

security official belonging to one of the Damascus-based Palestinian factions said that smuggling networks had refocused all their activities on weapons, given high demand. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 23 May 2011.

⁷⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency, 7 June 2011; Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, June 2011.

⁷¹ See, eg, Borzou Daragahi, “Syria Refugees Arrive in Turkey with Stories of Fearful Violence”, *The Los Angeles Times*, 10 June 2011; “Syrian army deserters raise alarm on regime's wanton cruelty”, Agence France-Presse, 11 June 2011; “Syrian troops storm rebel town of Jisr al-Shugour”, *The National*, 13 June 2011. The testimony of Abdul Razzaq Tlass – an officer and member of a family with close regime ties – in which he says he defected because of crimes committed by security services arguably reflects wider feelings within the military. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VaDmBX51TM&feature=player_embedded#at=83.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, Damascus, 26 June 2011.

⁷³ A journalist said, “as far as I can tell, in Jisr al-Shughur violence was not unprovoked. Provocations occurred at a funeral, and people were shot at from atop the post office. That is why it was burned down. The military intelligence guys shot back when asked to leave, and were then slaughtered”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 June 2011.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, diplomats and journalists, Damascus, June 2011.

⁷⁵ Hala Jaber, “Islamists battle Syrian regime”, *The Sunday Times*, 26 June 2011; Hala Jaber, “Syria caught in crossfire of extremists”, *The Sunday Times*, 26 June 2011.

⁷⁶ Deraa set the trend in this respect as well. As unrest broke out, the regime saw it as a problem it could solve in isolation. An official involved in managing the crisis described a blend of local factors, *agents provocateurs* and the regime's own mistakes but rejected the argument that Deraa was a symptom of a much broader predicament. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 March 2011. A local journalist commented: “The regime's approach to Deraa has deep roots. It has long considered the people of Hawran as uneducated, a fragmented group of tribes and families that are best dealt with through sheer force. The regime never suspected they would rebel and unite, even less so become symbols of national unity”. Crisis Group email communication, July 2011.

Even accepting the fact that the uprising has had a relatively significant armed component, the security services plainly have been striving to crush it in its entirety – notably its peaceful manifestations. Before the turning point of Deraa, non-violent protesters in Damascus – women and children but also people praying in the highly symbolic Umayyad Mosque – had been beaten and arrested. Regime repression reportedly has resulted in well over 1,000 dead,⁷⁷ as well as an untold number of wounded and detained. By mid-May, a military spokesman announced that in Deraa alone some 500 people had been arrested – almost certainly a conservative figure, yet one that exceeds the numbers that could be accounted for by a putative criminal gang, dormant cell or even the two combined.⁷⁸ Throughout the country, security forces have engaged in arrests without providing any clear justification; participation in a protest or use of Facebook often can be reason enough.⁷⁹ Videos of security forces beating civilians typically have them saying: “Here, take a little more freedom”.

Until recently, authorities never genuinely distinguished between legitimate protesters and those allegedly involved in violence. Even in late-March, at a time when the popular movement appeared manageable, the regime resorted to language suggesting that *all* protests represented a decisive threat. In a letter sent to most administrative departments in the capital, the governor of Damascus, following cabinet instructions, requested civil servants to draw up plans to contribute to the “war effort” (*al-majhud al-harbi*),⁸⁰ in a more or less contemporaneous speech, the president spoke at length of a global conspiracy, which helped shape the security services’ response.⁸¹

As unrest persisted, the regime finally acknowledged the legitimacy of some grievances and promised reforms to address them. Yet, it simultaneously decreed that there was, therefore, no more justification for the protests, once more labelling them as treasonous. On 16 April, in his second speech since the crisis began, Assad argued that the promise of future legislation removed any grounds for continued demonstrations: “With these laws, we draw a line between reform and sabotage”, he said.⁸² This coin-

cided with a significant rise in the level of repression, as security forces besieged and stormed the principal hubs of dissent, including Deraa and Homs.

Regime claims that it had to step in to restore law and order against dangerous armed groups (accused, *inter alia*, of seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate in Deraa and of perpetrating sectarian crimes in Homs) were belied by the behaviour of security services that essentially ran amok. Far from engaging in organised and narrowly circumscribed operations to rout out isolated troublemakers, they resorted to the kind of indiscriminate violence they claimed to be fighting.

Whereas they regularly accused their foes of using snipers, several videos showed sharpshooters on the rooftops of public buildings as well as uniformed troops firing at protesters from a safe distance. Syrians noted that sniper fire occurred only in places where security forces were present, never in areas where the regime had the most to lose from the unrest (in the volatile Kurdish northeast or in the Druze heartland of Sweida, for instance) and that it always spared pro-regime demonstrators. Many citizens likewise dismissed public television footage of an armed group in Deraa taking cover behind a wall and shooting at protesters,⁸³ arguing that if journalists could record the scene for so long, then surely security forces could have intervened, in a town that was entirely cordoned off.⁸⁴

Images of regime brutality have had wide resonance.⁸⁵ Several egregious examples stand out: special forces trampling, beating and insulting detainees in Bayda and the mutilation of the body of a young child, Hamza Khatib, whose body unexplainably was returned to his parents a month after he disappeared. In both cases, the regime issued weak

the Baath’s deputy secretary general declared that the situation called for “detering and decisive decisions”. Syrian Arab News Agency, 10 April 2011. Immediately after the president’s speech, the interior ministry called upon citizens to help restore stability and end all protests; the foreign minister briefed ambassadors, saying the regime must and would act against sedition. Syrian Arab News Agency, 19 April 2011.

⁸³ See Syrian Arab News Agency, 9 April 2011.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, April 2011. Over time, some protesters began removing much of their clothing and singing slogans such as “sniper, sniper, here’s my neck and here’s my head” (*ya qannas, ya qannas, hada rukbati, hada raasi*).

⁸⁵ A senior security official admitted that new technologies meant that regime violence automatically backfired. “Some of the security people leading this effort are 30 years behind their times. They believe that some of the methods used in the early 1980s still apply. Today, every Syrian with a mobile phone can turn himself into a live satellite television broadcaster. How can we resort to such means when we are facing 24 million satellite televisions in our midst?” Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

⁷⁷ Massoud A. Derhally, “Syria death toll exceeds 1,500 amid new army assault”, Bloomberg, 29 June 2011.

⁷⁸ Agence France-Presse, 2 May 2011.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2011.

⁸⁰ Document seen by Crisis Group during an impromptu visit to a local administration with no obvious ties to national security, Damascus, 20 April 2011.

⁸¹ Syrian Arab News Agency, 30 March 2011.

⁸² The president’s speech was the culmination of several identical pronouncements. A week prior, the interior ministry issued a statement insisting that there would be “no room for tolerance and complacency in the face of challenges to the rule of law and the security of the homeland”. Syrian Arab News Agency, 9 April 2011. The day following the ministry’s announcement,

and unconvincing denials of official involvement.⁸⁶ Regardless of what actually occurred, that so many Syrians, familiar with the security forces' infamous track record, were persuaded of their responsibility is an index of popular perceptions.⁸⁷

Perhaps most damaging to the regime was the belief among many that it was fostering the sectarian strife and civil war it claimed to oppose. Here too, there are grounds for this conviction. In Damascus, civilians belonging to Baath party-affiliated "popular organisations" have been armed with clubs to crack down on protesters, a sign of the regime's willingness to incite clashes among citizens.⁸⁸ The regime reportedly provided Allawite mountain villagers with light weapons;⁸⁹ some allegedly have attacked neighbouring non-Allawite localities.⁹⁰ As a regime insider admitted, "in Latakia, the regime clearly played the sectarian card, pitting armed villagers against the city's Sunni residents".⁹¹

True, some Christians have complained of intimidation by Muslim protesters.⁹² But, tellingly, there are more reports to date of unwarranted Allawite provocation in pre-

dominantly Sunni areas than of the reverse. More broadly, security services apparently have sought to sow fear among minority groups. On 22 April, for example, looting and prolonged gunshot salvos fired in the air occurred in a Christian neighbourhood of Damascus – a city in which policemen and intelligence officers of every denomination abound;⁹³ the regime accused fundamentalists who somehow succeeded in evading the security forces' vigilance.⁹⁴ The following day, a Damascus-based cultural centre received a call from the security services warning that "fundamentalists dressed as security officers" were about to attack.⁹⁵

Speaking of his colleagues, a security officer said, "some extremist elements among us are encouraging civil strife for a simple reason: fear of sectarian retribution is the only thing keeping the apparatus together. I couldn't care less at this stage if the regime fell. All I want is to avoid civil war".⁹⁶ Such suspicions run deep among ordinary Syrians.⁹⁷

D. THE IMPACT OF REGIME VIOLENCE

Ultimately, the security services' brutal and often erratic performance has created more problems than it has solved.⁹⁸

It arguably has checked the extent of popular mobilisation, deterring the regime's less committed detractors; likewise, fear of chaos and sectarian strife has convinced some minority group members and secular elements to

⁸⁶ The Bayda video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjZ-kcLjeUE&skipconinter=1. Official sources claimed it had been recorded in Iraq, but Syrians returned to film the site to prove it actually occurred in Bayda. The head of security responsible for the area was removed soon after the events, although it is unclear whether the two events are connected. Hamza Khatib was arrested and disappeared for a month, before his body was returned to his family, reportedly on condition it keep quiet. See for instance *The New York Times*, 30 May 2011. Assad met the child's parents and promised a swift investigation, even as the official television already had reached definite conclusions, claiming that terrorists murdered the child. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dvk7SjbaR-Y&feature=youtu.be.

⁸⁷ Dismissing the notion that serious crimes were being committed, a senior official nevertheless recognised that "in the eyes of the people, the security services are automatically to be blamed for all ills, even when they act in self-defence. Imagination is always more fertile than reality. Still, as the president himself says, whether perceptions are right or wrong is not the point". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2011.

⁸⁹ Reuters, 4 May 2011.

⁹⁰ Some reports have pointed to the resurgence of infamous criminal gangs known as the Shabbiha (ghosts) who are said to report directly to ruling family members; it is unclear whether these groups in fact exist. A local journalist said, "the Shabbiha were armed groups formed around Mundher and Jamil Assad, but they were fought by the regime – by Bashar's brother Bassem in fact – in the 1980s. The word Shabbiha has come to describe anyone who is seen as serving the regime in any capacity". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, 25 June 2011.

⁹² Alison Matheson, "Christians under attack from anti-government protesters in Syria", *The Christian Post*, 5 May 2011.

⁹³ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 22 April 2011.

⁹⁴ "Even some Christians now are having second thoughts. They wonder whether the regime is protecting them from sectarian retribution or making their prospects worse by playing this card". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, 23 May 2011. On the perception among some Christians that the regime may be threatening rather than protecting them, see the testimony of a priest from Squalbiya, west of Hama, www.facebook.com/notes/yassin-al-haj-saleh/العظم-جلال-صادق-عن-نقلا/10150191224774158. Christians in Syria are dispersed across the country, and although some are unequivocally supportive of the regime, that is not true of all.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, employee, Damascus, 23 April 2011. See also Delphine Minoui, "Syrie: Bachar el-Assad attise les divisions confessionnelles", *Le Figaro*, 9 June 2011.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

⁹⁷ Prior to the outbreak of significant protests, a former security official speculated: "I can't be sure, but based on what I hear from former colleagues, I fear the regime is about to resort to dirty tricks. They are contacting criminals and fundamentalists, whom they may be thinking of manipulating. I suspect the idea is to stir up sectarianism in order for the regime to step in as a saviour". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 18 March 2011.

⁹⁸ On their uncoordinated and disorderly behaviour, see for instance Anthony Shadid, "Signs of Chaos in Syria's Intense Crackdown", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2011.

stick with the regime. A senior Syrian official remarked: "We have tried to keep the number of protesters down both through political means and by discouraging the silent majority from joining in".⁹⁹ Yet, at the same time, violence almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalisation. In the words of an official who had lost faith in it, "the regime has been betting that bloodshed will subdue society. But society can withstand more bloodshed than the regime. It is increasingly losing support and will end up with none".¹⁰⁰

Other officials agreed. A senior official said, "this crisis has opened our eyes to many problems. When I travel the country, all those I talk to complain about the security services. I hadn't realised it was quite that bad".¹⁰¹ The security forces' behaviour likewise is said to be a central issue raised whenever Assad receives a delegation of citizens.¹⁰² Yet, at this point, most Syrians see little of the regime other than its ugliest face, given the virtual absence of both local government and the Baath party – and given the fact that, in large areas of the country, security forces accordingly have become the leadership's sole remaining instrument of control. In short, the regime increasingly depends on a dysfunctional and widely reviled security apparatus.

This dilemma partly explains the regime's extreme reluctance to impose any credible disciplinary measure on the institution upon whose loyalty and actions it most depends. A defence official explained that, as long as troops came under attack, the regime would have to show leniency: "The security services are being shot at and sometimes overreact. How could we forbid it? These people have families, friends and colleagues. Leaving them exposed and powerless would break their morale. Punishing every mistake and misdeed is impossible for the same reason".¹⁰³ A senior official put it more bluntly: "We cannot reform the security apparatus at the very moment we need it most".¹⁰⁴

More recently, the regime appeared to have curbed some of its security forces' more provocative forms of behaviour. Casualties resulting from sniper fire – which the regime claimed were caused by foreign enemies –, once

ubiquitous during demonstrations almost entirely disappeared. Security forces were more likely than in the past to shoot in the air rather than aim at protesters. Although confrontations still took place, numerous demonstrations occurred peacefully. As a defence ministry official remarked, "the numbers of victims is decreasing even as the numbers of protests is on the rise".¹⁰⁵ Damascus-based diplomats concurred that the overall policy appeared to have shifted:

The regime is showing more restraint in dealing with the protest movement. Many demonstrations now go unhindered every weekend. On any given Friday, there are 80 demonstrations that go well and two where everything goes wrong. It looks like they shoot when shot at, when provocations occur or when party buildings are destroyed. Of course, there still are massive deployments and collective retaliation whenever the regime believes a real crackdown is needed. Still, I see an evolution overall.¹⁰⁶

Interpretations of this trend vary. Both officials in the field and the leadership in Damascus arguably reached the conclusion that they were losing more as a result of reckless repression than they were gaining. A senior regime official said, "part of the explanation is a measure of on-the-ground learning by the security services, which initially didn't have a clue about how to deal with such protests. Besides, they now have clear orders not to shoot other than in legitimate self-defence".¹⁰⁷ Under this view, whatever mishaps occur reflect a failure to follow instructions rather than their absence.¹⁰⁸

In contrast, some take a more sceptical view, attributing the drop in casualties to the security forces' inability to be everywhere at all times. A Damascus-based Western diplomat said, "I see no particular improvement on the part of

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, Damascus, 22 May 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 June 2011. This view was echoed by a U.S. official. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Another diplomat said, "the security services are making greater efforts not to simply kill people." Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 26-29 June 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

¹⁰⁸ On at least two occasions, authorities claimed that "definitive presidential orders" not to fire on protesters had been issued, but to unconvincing effect. See Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria's Assad reported to have ordered no shooting", Reuters, 12 May 2011. In the fog of violence, the origin of any given showdown typically is impossible to substantiate. A businessman, some of whose employees hail from Keswa, in the suburbs of Damascus, alleged that many civilian casualties occurred after an Allawite shop owner shot at a peaceful demonstration and was killed in retaliation by angry crowds which in turn prompted the security services to open fire indiscriminately. The Syrian media reported the incident as being entirely the protesters' fault. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 June 2011.

the security services. They are increasingly overstretched and, insofar as they are more focused on specific areas, tend to be laxer elsewhere".¹⁰⁹ Taking a midway stance, an employee at the presidential palace argued that "the security services are perhaps displaying greater skill, but I doubt that their overall rationale – containing and ultimately rolling back the protests – has changed in any way".¹¹⁰

But whatever optimism resulted from this was short lived. Hama, where authorities had taken the unique step of withdrawing their security forces and which has been the scene of the country's largest protests to date, gave the regime a preview of the massive demonstrations it would face were it to display similar restraint elsewhere. In early July, in the wake of these large yet entirely peaceful protests, it reversed course.¹¹¹ It fired the governor of Hama¹¹² and unleashed its security forces, suggesting that whatever decision might have been made to curb the crack-down and focus instead on so-called armed groups was at best temporary. At the time of writing, news from Hama was extremely worrying, with reports of deaths and large-scale arrests. Should this continue, there could be an extraordinarily violent showdown.

A more restrained and consistent approach from the outset almost certainly would have put the regime in a far stronger position to address popular grievances politically. Instead, its harsh security measures radicalised the protest movement and systematically undermined the steps it took to respond to its initial demands.

III. THE HAZE OF REFORMS

A. POLITICAL CONCESSIONS

Just as violence was an immediate and constant feature of the regime's response, so too in their own way were political concessions. They gradually grew beyond the small step – a new municipal election law – that had been offered before unrest broke out in Deraa.¹¹³ However, as the regime sought to play catch-up with the protest movement, its proposed reforms always were a case of too little, too late. They reflected a systematic denial of the depth and breadth of the crisis, of the damage wrought by indiscriminate repression and of the ensuing radicalisation of popular demands. More than that, they betrayed the regime's inability to break with some of its most pernicious traits: a condescending, patronising leadership; an unaccountable ruling family; and unchecked security services.

Overall, reforms occurred in three distinct phases. The first resulted from the mid-March crisis in Deraa, which sent shock-waves through the regime and intensified both the scope and speed of the internal debate about necessary changes, even as – officially – external plotters were blamed for the unrest.¹¹⁴ At the time, a senior official said:

We are confronted with demands to which we are not use to and for which we are unprepared. They are multiple and not always reasonable. We will respond to many, but we need time to enact change. Many deep, candid discussions are taking place. The problem is in coming up with concrete proposals and in setting priorities.¹¹⁵

In a 24 March press conference, presidential adviser Buthaina Shaaban evoked a foreign conspiracy, but also was at pains to announce an imminent package of "practical measures" and "political initiatives". Among the former was the formation of a "committee to study needs, redress failings and respond to legitimate demands", including a salary increase for public service employees,¹¹⁶ generalised health insurance, an immediate job-creation program and an overall government performance review. She promised setting up an anti-corruption mechanism, reconsidering the emergency law, enacting new party and

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 June 2011.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

¹¹¹ See Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Tanks surround Syrian city of Hama after protests", Reuters, 5 July 2011; Anthony Shadid, "Restive City of Hama Tests Will of Syrian Government", *The New York Times*, 5 July 2011. For background on the situation in Hama before the crackdown, see Anthony Shadid, "Syria pulls its armed forces from some contested cities", *The New York Times*, 29 June 2011. Regime officials had pointed to the decision to allow peaceful protests as a sign that they were solely targeting violent demonstrators. Ibid.

¹¹² Agence France-Presse, 2 July 2011. His successor, Anas Abdul Razzaq Na'im, is a Baathist figure from Hama. Syrian Arab News Agency, 11 July 2011.

¹¹³ See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, op. cit.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 20-23 March 2011.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Baath official, Damascus, 20 March 2011. One immediate measure was to reduce compulsory military service to eighteen months. Syrian Arab News Agency, 19 March 2011.

¹¹⁶ On 25 March, a presidential decree ordered a 30 per cent raise for public sector employees. Syrian Arab News Agency, 26 March 2011.

media laws, amending legislation restricting building in border areas, strengthening the judiciary and halting arbitrary arrests. Although she complained that foreign media had exaggerated the scope of the protests and said they had been funded from abroad, she recognised that there were genuine grievances, offered condolences to the people of Deraa and insisted that the president had issued orders not to shoot at protesters (“not one shot”, as she put it).¹¹⁷

Bashar's 29 March dismissal of the government appeared to augur rapid change. By then, many Syrians, frustrated with his virtual silence and invisibility since the crisis began,¹¹⁸ were desperate for him to speak out and invest his significant political capital to defuse the crisis by implementing deep and immediate reforms.¹¹⁹ Damascus was rife with rumours: his brother, Maher, commander of the Republican Guard, supposedly had neutralised the president and taken command;¹²⁰ at the other extreme, Bashar was said to be on the verge of mounting a revolt against his own more hardline entourage.¹²¹ The regime organised spectacular demonstrations of support on 29 March; hundreds of thousands if not millions of Syrians marched throughout the country; although partly orchestrated,¹²² the rallies nevertheless seemed to show that Assad enjoyed the necessary public backing to take decisive steps.

¹¹⁷ Al Jazeera, 24 March.

¹¹⁸ A Syrian intellectual said, “Bashar is silent and doesn't seem to understand that silence is not neutral. In the people's eyes, his silence is either a sign of complicity with the repression, of arrogance or of powerlessness, or it is the silence of someone who has nothing to say”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 19 March 2011.

¹¹⁹ See Crisis Group Conflict Risk Alert, “Syria”, 25 March 2011. A regime insider said, “my only hope lies with the president. So many of the people around him are full of themselves and believe in crushing all protests. And many of the people he needs to get rid of are the very ones upon whom his security depends. What is going on does not fit with what I know of him. With every day that goes by, I ask myself: Is he still in command?” Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 March 2011.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, 23-29 March 2011. “People ask where is Bashar? Where is the vice president? They think Maher and Rami are in command. That is discouraging even to those who want to believe in the president”. Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 26 March 2011. See also Syria Comment, 26 March 2011.

¹²¹ This belief was reflected in an editorial by a prominent U.S. columnist who is well connected with regime insiders. See David Ignatius, “Bashar al-Assad stages his own coup”, *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2011.

¹²² Aside from Syrians who genuinely support the regime, participants included civil servants and students drafted *en masse* for the event, as well as workers employed in factories owned by regime cronies and people bussed in from the surrounding countryside. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, 29-30 March 2011.

His speech the following day dealt a devastating blow to popular expectations and largely set the course for subsequent events. In a rambling lecture delivered to an audience of parliamentarians whose constant interruptions to praise and extol him were a display of sycophancy unseen since his father's rule,¹²³ Bashar focused almost exclusively on the global conspiracy targeting Syria “under cover of regional events”. Not only did he fail to endorse and flesh out the political gestures suggested the previous week, he also stressed that the regime would not respond to pressure and therefore would implement reforms at its own chosen pace. Corruption, he added for good measure, was a problem that already had been addressed.¹²⁴

It is unclear what motivated the speech. Officials pointed out that it had been difficult to convince Bashar of the need to speak at all; this had been the approach of Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak, and it hardly worked well for either.¹²⁵ As a regime insider said, “addressing the people directly would be to repeat the Tunisian and Egyptian models. It would signal to protesters that they were having an affect on the leadership and, in any event, it would not, in itself, get rid of this problem. Resisting pressures has always worked well for this regime”.¹²⁶ The outcome was a speech that intended to project the image of a strong leader, unshaken by domestic unrest or international pressure and determined to stay the course. Assad possibly also was persuaded by the regime's own propaganda and the previous day's massive demonstrations, which may have led him to believe he already had won over the people.¹²⁷

The net result was to dash hopes that had been invested in Assad. Rather than being in tune with his people, he played the part of a run-of-the-mill despot, referring to plots and basking in the adulation of the institution least representa-

¹²³ During the speech, a parliamentarian from Latakia, where several casualties had been reported, said, “the souls of the martyrs of Latakia cry ‘yes to Bashar Assad’”. An elderly parliamentarian proclaimed: “The Arab world is a small thing for you, our dear leader Bashar, and you should rule the world”, to which the president smiled modestly.

¹²⁴ Syrian Arab News Agency, 30 March 2011.

¹²⁵ During his lecture, the president acknowledged that he had been putting it off, allegedly in order to gather the necessary information. Prior to the speech, a senior official said, “it will be difficult to convince the president to speak to his people directly. I already have tried, and his answer was: ‘Why now and under what pretext?’ Many people around him seem to resist the idea”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 February 2011.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 20 March 2011.

¹²⁷ A similar phenomenon of self-intoxication reportedly occurred during the 2007 presidential plebiscite, according to his then-biographer, David Lesch, who spent that day in Bashar's company and was convinced he took it all seriously. See “The Syrian president I know”, *The New York Times*, 29 March 2011. On the pageantry surrounding the plebiscite, see Syria Comment blog, 4 June 2007, www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=274.

tive of popular feelings. By endorsing and echoing the regime's previous narrative, he put to rest prospects that he might rein in the security services; instead, he gave them every reason to persevere in the way they had begun.

Some undoubtedly reacted positively, not only regime loyalists but also those ordinary citizens receptive to Assad's self-confident assertion of power in the face of outside threats; they dismissed as "illusory" the notion that Syria might have a better choice.¹²⁸ But impressions collected in Damascus were overwhelmingly negative;¹²⁹ in Deraa and Latakia, frustration reached new heights, and protests picked up immediately. The anti-regime demonstrations that followed embarrassed the authorities, who nevertheless sought to describe them as expressions of support for national unity or calls for speeding up reforms.¹³⁰

The speech was a useful eye-opener nonetheless. On the one hand, it dispelled the perception of Assad as a saviour who somehow would side with the people against his own regime. On the other hand, it convinced many within the regime that the president's supposed popularity alone would not resolve the crisis.¹³¹ An official said, "there is an understanding at the leadership level that the speech didn't go down well";¹³² another admitted: "I was frustrated by the president's speech, as were most of my friends. Those intellectuals who want Bashar to turn into their providential leader had better start working hard on a way forward".¹³³ To many, the conclusion was inescapable: only a credible, substantive reformist project might turn the tide. Days after Assad's speech, a senior official reflected:

The most difficult part for us was to understand what was going on. Now we are getting there. Many people have real grievances: declining services, neglect, corruption, and so on. Others simply want to topple the regime and are manipulating those grievances. Then you have sheer troublemakers, such as criminal networks. But the bottom line is that serious reforms are

needed: the way forward is a determined, radical shift to get our house in order and then isolate the agitators. We know that bloodletting only leads to a vicious circle which it is very difficult to break.¹³⁴

During this phase, the reformist agenda took the shape of three committees, one to work on replacing the emergency law with modern anti-terrorist legislation; the second on investigating events in Deraa and Latakia; and the third on normalising the status of Kurds denied citizenship under the 1962 census.¹³⁵ In addition, Bashar appointed a new prime minister.¹³⁶

At the same time, the regime sought to placate several key constituencies. In particular, Bashar met with Kurdish representatives,¹³⁷ authorised the release of Kurds detained during the 2010 Nowruz celebrations and the government pledged to make the celebration an annual national holiday.¹³⁸ The regime also reached out to Islamist opinion leaders, enrolling their support¹³⁹ in exchange for several concessions: establishment of a fully independent Islamic teaching centre, creation of an Islamic satellite television channel, reintegration of women fired from the education ministry for wearing a full veil and closure of a controversial casino.¹⁴⁰ The moves were deeply troubling to secular

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, April 2011. See also Syria Comment, 30 March 2011.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, 30 March 2011. Phil Sands, "Syrian president Bashar al Assad dashes expectations of political reforms", *The National*, 31 March 2011. See also Peter Harling, "Syria following the script", *Foreign Policy* blog, 30 March 2011.

¹³⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency, 1 April 2011.

¹³¹ Trust in the president's popularity as a panacea ran deep. "A number of things are keeping us together as a nation. Key is the president's popularity. That provides us tremendous political capital that must be invested". Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Damascus, 17 March 2011.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, official at presidential palace, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, son of prominent general, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 7 April 2011. This position was shared by others. "We face three basic phenomena rolled into one: the regional democratic wave, our many internal problems and foreign attempts at exploiting them. A fourth issue is bloodshed, which causes people to forget everything else". Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 7 April 2011. "We need to shift from a security-based management to a political one. I can't tell if it will work, but that is what we must do anyway. Meanwhile, protests will continue, and it will be very hard to prevent clashes. Pressure will continue to build up. In this context, the regime cannot afford to bluff. If it lies, it will be the last time". Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, 6 April 2011.

¹³⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency, 1 April 2011.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 3 April 2011.

¹³⁷ Some Kurdish leaders declined the invitation, arguing that they wanted to discuss political rights and not simply cultural or citizenship ones. That said, none of the Kurdish opposition parties took a particularly hard line against the regime, refraining from calling for an uprising. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 April 2011.

¹³⁸ The Syria Report, 10 April 2011.

¹³⁹ Said Ramadan Buti and other prominent clerics appeared in the media to support the regime and condemn foreign-led dissent. See, eg, Buti's address on Syria TV, 24 March 2011; the meeting of religious leaders to express loyalty to the regime, Syrian Arab News Agency, 28 March 2011; and sermons condemning *fitna* (strife among Muslims), Syrian Arab News Agency, 1 April 2011.

¹⁴⁰ The casino reportedly was partly owned by Assad's so-called "artistic adviser". Buti publicised these concessions and argued that the regime needed time to implement reforms. *Al-Watan*, April 6, 2011. See also Phil Sands, "Assad government enlists

Syrians and minorities. A Christian intellectual commented: "I am deeply shocked at the reincorporation of veiled teachers. It will do nothing to stop the protests and only shows that the Islamists are winning".¹⁴¹ A senior official explained:

It was a decision taken at a time of crisis. We need the moderate Islamist opinion leaders to prevent this conflict from taking a sectarian turn.¹⁴² There was considerable popular pressure, and mistakes had been made that undermined the initial move: thus, some of the expelled women wore only a veil, not a *niqab*. We reached a compromise: they would be reincorporated but could not wear a *niqab* while on school grounds.¹⁴³

In late March and early April, Assad met with numerous other citizen delegations. Other gestures were narrowly tailored to placate specific constituencies. As Deraa's new governor, he appointed someone enjoying a measure of local credibility;¹⁴⁴ in the same spirit, he removed a notoriously corrupt friend from the governorship of Homs.¹⁴⁵ More broadly, local officials were encouraged to proactively address popular needs.¹⁴⁶ Official media began to express more reform-minded views, even as propaganda blaming a global conspiracy for the unrest continued. For the first time, for example, national television aired discussions regarding the emergency law.¹⁴⁷

This was followed by a second wave of reforms. A new cabinet was announced on 14 April, a mere two weeks after the prime minister's appointment – a record in a country where government formation typically takes months.¹⁴⁸ The same day, the government issued a general amnesty for those who had been arrested during recent events. The

following Friday, security forces showed visible restraint; both sides reported relatively few casualties.¹⁴⁹ As a sign of the times, the official news agency and several regime-affiliated websites such as Syria News openly acknowledged the existence of anti-regime protests.

On 16 April, Assad delivered a second speech, this time to the new cabinet. A clear improvement over the first in both style and substance, the performance was more solemn and modest, shorn of pageantry. The president clearly distinguished between illegitimate sedition and genuine grievances, admitted there had been civilian casualties and apologised for the loss of life. He shifted his focus from an international plot to the need to bolster national unity by addressing legitimate demands. He called upon his government to assess and suggest ways to address what he called a "legacy of neglect" and to close the gap that had grown between the state and ordinary citizens. Finally, he set a deadline for lifting the emergency law and introducing legislation governing the right to demonstrate.

The rhetoric was not without practical effect. In a matter of days, the authorities lifted the emergency law,¹⁵⁰ disbanded state security courts, promulgated a law regarding public demonstrations¹⁵¹ and released a draft local government law for public discussion.¹⁵² The cabinet also announced rapid movement on the party and media laws and launched an ambitious job creation plan involving recruitment of young graduates into the public sector.¹⁵³

The announcement lent some credibility to the regime's reformist drive. Still, reactions on the street chiefly betrayed indifference. Many mocked the new government as a carbon copy of its predecessors,¹⁵⁴ more significantly,

Syrian imams to calm Sunni majority", *The National*, 8 April 2011.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Christian intellectual, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

¹⁴² From the outset, the regime described the unrest as *fitna*. See Buthaina Shaaban and Mufti Ahmad Hassun, Syria TV, 24 March 2011. It was important for the regime to show that respected Sunni opinion leaders were on its side against a seditious minority to avoid projecting the image of a conflict between Sunnis and Allawites.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Syrian Arab News Agency, 4 April 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 7 April 2011.

¹⁴⁶ The governor of Sweida pledged rapid implementation of development projects designed to provide services and employment opportunities. Syrian Arab News Agency, 7 April 2011. The government likewise introduced measures to help the agricultural sector. For details, see *The Syria Report*, 14 April 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Syria TV, 9 April 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Government formation usually involves time-consuming efforts by the president to strike a balance between various constituencies and regime factions.

¹⁴⁹ Security services withdrew from some of the more sensitive locations; these steps apparently were discussed over previous days between Assad and various citizen delegations speaking on the protesters' behalf. Crisis Group telephone interview, regime insider, Damascus, 15 April 2011.

¹⁵⁰ For fear of popular discontent, the decision to replace the emergency law with an anti-terrorism law was suspended, although the latter was ready to be enacted. Crisis Group interview, government adviser, Damascus, 22 April 2011. See also Sami Moubayed, "Syria's government rushes in reforms", *Asia Times*, 22 April 2011.

¹⁵¹ Here too, the pace was far quicker than usually had been the case. Less than two weeks prior, presidential advisers had been translating and studying French and British laws governing the right to demonstrate "to come up with the best one". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 7 April 2011.

¹⁵² Syrian Arab News Agency, 21 April 2011.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 19 April 2011.

¹⁵⁴ A source close to the regime argued that Assad had no choice but to select loyalists, since genuine independent personalities likely would soon have resigned in light of the worsening crisis. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2011. An official complained: "The government was picked on the basis of two

that so few incidents occurred during Friday protests was seen as further evidence that the regime could control the level of – and therefore was responsible for – the bulk of the violence.¹⁵⁵ This conviction was bolstered by the roughly simultaneous release of footage in which security forces were shown filming themselves while insulting and beating protesters.¹⁵⁶

Most people interviewed by Crisis Group had not bothered to watch the speech. Those who did noted the contrast with his previous performance, which added to their confusion as to who Bashar really was.¹⁵⁷ Some complained that he had referred to corruption only in passing and remained silent on the behaviour of security services, which by then had come to be seen as the central issue.

Arguably, the president's second public intervention could have had a real impact if delivered in late March. By mid-April, however, demands had grown and trust subsided. In parts of the country that had experienced the worst of the security forces' brutality, decisions of the kind announced in the capital were virtually meaningless. At that point, only concrete, tangible changes on the ground might have made a difference. In Damascus itself, scepticism had risen considerably. "Lifting the emergency law" was a mere rhetorical pledge; what mattered was what would be done in practice.

That has remained the regime's Achilles heel. Indeed, following a brief lull, repression soon grew dramatically.¹⁵⁸ This escalation carried several possible explanations. The political concessions might have been designed in part to justify a subsequent crackdown, by drawing a distinction between what authorities considered legitimate demands – which, the regime argued, it had addressed – and what they depicted as subversion – which it then claimed every right to suppress. Alternatively, the authorities might have

or three names provided by an adviser to the president, a senior Baath official and so forth. As usual, they promoted their friends. The result is plain for all to see". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 May 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 16 April 2011.

¹⁵⁶ See "Syria: rampant torture of protesters. Activists and journalists also arrested and mistreated", Human Rights Watch, 15 April 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, 17-22 April 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Although this period was dominated by repression, it also witnessed some follow-up regarding the promised reforms. Authorities set up a committee to combat corruption, see Syrian Arab News Agency, 10 May 2011, and another to devise a new media law; the committee in charge of drafting a new electoral law announced its work would be completed within two weeks, see Syrian Arab News Agency, 12 May 2011. Additionally, the government pledged assistance to families returning to areas recently hit by the drought, a break from its prior indifference to the matter. Syrian Arab News Agency, 11 May 2011.

been reacting to the concessions' minimal political impact and concluded that only a firm take-it-or-leave-it approach would halt the slide toward snow-balling demands. Many officials also genuinely believed that elements within the protest movement were getting out of hand, that it was dominated by armed groups and fundamentalists and, therefore, that a crackdown was imperative.¹⁵⁹

Perhaps most importantly, peaceful protests were beginning to cross a perilous threshold. Shortly before the cabinet was formed, Friday demonstrations had engulfed virtually all provincial towns, including in sensitive areas such as Sweida (whose majority Druze population once was considered wholly aligned with the regime) and the Homs governorate (whose sectarian and tribal composition made for potentially explosive dynamics). Most significantly, demonstrators from the rebellious towns and neighbourhoods surrounding Damascus made their first attempt to converge on the capital, nearly reaching the central Abbasiyyin square.¹⁶⁰ Such trends spread panic throughout the regime.

The increased levels of repression that began on 22 April arguably curbed the numbers of protesters for a time, yet they also helped expand the movement's geographic and social reach – Ismailis in Salamiya, residents of Dayr ez-Zor in the north east and the *Nazihin* (people displaced from the Golan in the course of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war) of Damascus in particular joined the fray – consolidated anti-regime solidarity and intensified efforts to establish opposition coordination structures.

B. POLARISATION

The failure of regime violence gave way to a third wave of reforms. Launched in late May, its rhythm and modalities bore striking resemblance to its predecessor. There was comparatively limited bloodshed on Friday 27 May,¹⁶¹ as if to set the appropriate stage for imminent political moves. What followed was a sweeping general amnesty, publication of a draft election law, formation of a national dialogue committee, the inaugural meeting of the committee tasked with drafting the media law and announcement of Assad's third speech aimed at providing details

¹⁵⁹ "The escalation was to be expected. They can't make numerous concessions on one hand, and tolerate just about anything from the street on the other". Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 20 March 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 16 April 2011. Damascus itself had just witnessed nascent, albeit to the regime worrying student protests.

¹⁶¹ Nada Bakri, "Security forces restrained as Syrian protests spread", *The New York Times*, 27 May 2011.

on an upcoming “national dialogue”.¹⁶² The government likewise formed a committee to draft and submit within a month a party law designed to introduce a multiparty political system¹⁶³ and abolished the security services’ oversight over an array of administrative procedures.¹⁶⁴

The breadth of these steps suggest that the regime, more than at any moment over the preceding weeks, recognised it faced a national political crisis rather than a medley of localised problems linked to specific grievances and foreign-sponsored agitation. Even then, however, some within it seemed to reject the possibility of fundamental reform. The deputy secretary general of the Baath party ruled out any amendment to Article 8 of the constitution, which enshrines Baath party rule.¹⁶⁵ None of the bold, comprehensive reform plans that had been discussed internally,¹⁶⁶ and in some cases shared with diplomats,¹⁶⁷ saw the light of day.

This wave of reform announcements likewise was punctuated by another presidential speech on 20 June to a select audience at Damascus University. Once more, to many Syrians it proved anti-climactic. Although he downplayed the role of foreign plotters, Assad nonetheless failed to address the behavior of the security services, the issue that had come to define the crisis in the eyes of many citizens. Instead, he reiterated the various reforms that had been launched, explained that longer-term decisions would be discussed within the promised national dialogue and implied that protesters’ “legitimate demands” essentially had been met.

¹⁶² Syrian Arab News Agency, 31 May and 1 June 2011. The national dialogue committee, chaired by the vice president, comprised two Baath Party members, two representatives of the Progressive National Front (a grouping of nominal parties subordinated to the regime) and three independents, picked among loyalists. Their official mandate was to hold meetings in preparation for a national congress to be held later in the year.

¹⁶³ *Al-Baath*, 6 June 2011.

¹⁶⁴ *Tishreen*, 9 June 2011. This exemption did not apply to procedures initiated by foreigners.

¹⁶⁵ *Al-Watan*, 31 May 2011. Article 8 states that “the leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Baath Party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people’s masses and place them at the service of the Arab nation’s goals”. For a translation of the Syrian constitution, see www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html.

¹⁶⁶ “Many far-reaching ideas have been circulating, but all were turned down. I for one have suggestions on how to amend the constitution, but why even waste my time?” Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 23 May 2011.

¹⁶⁷ In early May, two Western ambassadors were invited to examine a plan of proposed reforms that they found encouraging. In mid-May, an official told another Western ambassador that a comprehensive plan he dubbed “The New Syria” would be released within the next 48 hours. Both proposals reportedly included reforming the security services. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Damascus, 21-23 May 2011.

For many, the speech was yet another signal that Bashar would neither rein in security services nor take the lead in an orderly democratic transition. In truth, in the many parts of the country where regular citizens had met brutal repression, mere rhetoric or even the promise of political reform – however far-reaching – no longer could have an impact. They had passed that point; nothing short of regime change was viewed as an acceptable outcome and, at this late stage, it is hard to imagine what Assad could have said to rally their support. Indeed, for protesters the most significant part of the speech was Bashar’s depiction of conspirators as “germs” against which Syria needed to immunise itself. In the speech’s aftermath, new slogans quickly appeared: “The Syrian germs want a new doctor” – a reference to Assad’s medical background – and “Syrian germs salute Libyan rats” – a reference to Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi’s description of his own critics.

Still, and as a reflection of a divided society, popular reactions were far from being monolithically negative. In Damascus in particular, Bashar’s suggestion that the constitution could be entirely rewritten – and that Article 8 in particular no longer was a taboo – was seen by many as groundbreaking. Coming on the tails of the Jisr al-Shughur tragedy, which dramatically raised the fears of sectarianism and civil war; it also convinced some wavering Syrians that even moderate reforms were preferable to the perils of revolution. The regime, at this stage, has made no commitment that would force it to go beyond a political system akin to Mubarak’s Egypt – including a legalised yet tame opposition; slightly more competitive elections; a measure of freedom of speech in the media; marginally improved security services; enduring high-level corruption and persistent family rule. However, a range of Damascus residents told Crisis Group they could live with such an outcome. The alternative, they worried, would leave the country in ruin.

In most cases, their reaction seemed driven less by confidence in the scope of reforms than by panic at the thought of perilous change.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the regime has been making conspicuous attempts to mobilise support on the basis of its presumed reform agenda – which it now treats as a new source of legitimacy – notably by organising massive loyalist demonstrations.¹⁶⁹ To bolster its case, the

¹⁶⁸ Many pro-regime Syrians hold alarmingly aggressive views of the protest movement, berating it as a conspiracy and openly calling for it to be crushed. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, June 2011. Similarly hostile sentiments toward protesters also were witnessed during the Egyptian revolution before the tide turned decisively against the regime. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa report N°101, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, 24 February 2011.

¹⁶⁹ See, for instance, Syrian Arab News Agency, 24 June 2011. Participants in such demonstrations include some who are genuinely committed, civil servants who are told to attend and

regime has provided the official media with somewhat greater license to be critical¹⁷⁰ and, as seen, allowed some foreign journalists back in briefly. By late June, it had authorised an unprecedented gathering of dissident intellectuals in Damascus.¹⁷¹

The net effect of this third wave of reforms was to polarise the situation, deepening the gap between regime critics and supporters and reducing the ranks of the undecided to a small minority. An official summed up the overall dynamic that prevailed in the capital and explained his own ambivalence:

Damascus now is very polarised between those who don't believe a word of what the regime says, whatever it says, and those who gobble it all up. A minority is ambivalent, and for me that is the healthiest reaction. We have reason to give the regime a chance to deliver, and reason to be sceptical that it will. I am not fully convinced by the regime's talk of reform; it holds it almost as a dogma never to give an inch more than it needs to. Still, for lack of any clear alternative, I would like to see the president move on his promises. I'd rather we didn't have to leap into the unknown.¹⁷²

Some officials pointed out that Bashar by then was in a no-win situation. He was blamed for being vague and indecisive and for delegating decisions to various committees, yet he also likely would have been criticised for taking decisions on his own. An official said:

The president faces a Catch-22. People want him to be decisive but they also want him to open up the political system to broad participation. They want a consultative process but also instant changes. They want the regime to restore order now, and they want it to pull

workers who are drafted by their regime-friendly private employers. An intellectual explained why the regime could take the risk of allowing such massive – and therefore uncontrollable – crowds to take to the streets: “People who are part of the bureaucracy, popular organisations led by the Baath and members of professional associations are expected to participate. These days, they receive text messages encouraging them to do so, and they fear the consequence if they do not. People like me just ignore the call. Others, who are more undecided and apprehensive, tend to obey. So the process is self-vetting and limits the possibility that anyone would try to turn pro-regime into anti-regime demonstrations. Once the group is formed, anyone tempted to shout anti-regime slogans would likely be outnumbered at his peril”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 25 June 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, June 2011.

¹⁷¹ See Anthony Shadid, “Syria allows opposition to meet in Damascus”, *The New York Times*, 27 June 2011; Deborah Amos, “Syria permits vigil for slain civilians, soldiers”, National Public Radio, 30 June 2011.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

its troops off the streets. Bashar has to contend with millions of contradictory demands and preferably address them yesterday. A reform drive that takes three to four months, as he suggested, is seen by many as an eternity. But how could the regime have moved any faster?¹⁷³

It is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine how this regime can still convince its critics. The recurrent contradiction between words and deeds has undermined its credibility and accordingly led a growing number of Syrians to discount or ignore its promises. A local journalist lamented:

Bashar speaks of reforming the media yet nominates a stooge of the security services to be information minister. He speaks of making changes to the security apparatus yet selects as interior minister someone many consider a criminal. He speaks of improving agriculture yet his newly appointed prime minister was an utter failure as agriculture minister. They still are acting as if the people didn't understand or see what was happening. Most importantly, there is no consistency between what the regime says and does.¹⁷⁴

At a broader level, the regime routinely contradicted in practice the spirit of its proposals. It floated a multi-party law at a time when it was demonstrating the importance of civilian institutions. It authorised demonstrations even while stating they no longer were needed and labelling them as acts of betrayal. It lifted the emergency law, but security services continued to enjoy immunity from prosecution and were allowed to behave more ruthlessly than before, thereby proving how irrelevant the concept of legality was in the first place; besides this, the vague and flexible provisions of an antiquated Civil Code rendered the emergency law superfluous anyway.¹⁷⁵ Although authorities launched investigations into some events that occurred during the crisis,¹⁷⁶ not a single official is known to have been punished.¹⁷⁷

Protesters continue to face absurd charges such as “degrading the state”¹⁷⁸ levelled by what is widely considered an

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group telephone communication, local journalist, Damascus, 19 April 2011.

¹⁷⁵ For details on both accounts, see “Syria: rein in security Services. Allow peaceful protests to proceed this Friday”, Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2011.

¹⁷⁶ The scope of the committee in charge of investigating events in Deraa and Latakia was extended to include all governorates. Syrian Arab News Agency, 11 May 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Three local security chiefs were removed.

¹⁷⁸ See Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Syria charges hundreds with ‘degrading the state’”, Reuters, 3 May 2011.

incompetent, corrupt and subservient judiciary.¹⁷⁹ Sweeping amnesties appear to have little practical impact. In one illustrative example, a dissident intellectual said:

The amnesty decrees have had little to no effect. A friend from Hawran was picked up a month ago and detained for carrying pictures and footage documenting what had happened. Based on latest reports, he still apparently is being held at the detention centre in Kafar Susa where daily torture is a rule. But his family has had no access. They cannot even be sure he is alive.¹⁸⁰

The same has been true of regime pledges to open up the media. Promises notwithstanding, the regime fired the loyal editor-in-chief of an official newspaper for straying from the official line,¹⁸¹ denied access – until recently – to almost all foreign journalists, detained citizens for expressing their views on the internet, tracked down satellite telephones used by “eye-witnesses”,¹⁸² and extracted numerous forced testimonies. Although the president assured artists and intellectuals that all opinions would be respected “as long as they were held with the homeland’s interests at heart”,¹⁸³ the local media has aired relatively few dissident views¹⁸⁴

and continues for the most part to put forward the conspiracy theory.¹⁸⁵ The semi-independent Dunia TV and *al-Watan* daily newspaper, whose coverage potentially could have symbolised the beginning of a new era, proved more aggressively pro-regime than the state media.¹⁸⁶ By late June, internet speed had been slowed down to the point of making the use of “authorised” community-websites such as YouTube or Facebook virtually impossible.¹⁸⁷

So, too, when it came to the matter of corruption. The regime consistently downplayed the most notorious cases, including that of Rami Makhoul – the most prominent symbol of crony-capitalism. Many expected he would pay a heavy price,¹⁸⁸ yet ultimately he largely was spared.¹⁸⁹ An official said, “many ideas have been discussed regarding Rami. One of them was to rescind Syriatel’s contract. Yet it all came to nothing”.¹⁹⁰ In mid-June, three months after the onset of a crisis in which he immediately became a lightning rod, he announced on state television that he would voluntarily donate all profits to charities, a step ordinary citizens widely dismissed and ridiculed.¹⁹¹

¹⁷⁹ A legacy of the great repression of the 1980s, the judicial system is weak even by regional standards; it would take years to rebuild, even assuming the regime was willing to do so. As a general matter, lawyers and judges hardly are expected to know the law in a system where corruption and personal influence routinely determine the outcome. A word from the security services typically plays a far greater role than any legal requirement. A lawyer said, “the security services routinely sign executive orders that disregard the law, often contradict it, automatically supersede it and go unpublished. They are addressed to senior bureaucratic echelons, and employees are used to blindly following instructions that flow from orders of which they know neither the content nor the rationale. An arbitrary and secret body of regulations has thus developed. As a result, people are disinclined to even pay attention to real legislation, as they are unsure how it applies”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 January 2010.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Syrian intellectual, Damascus, 28 June 2011.

¹⁸¹ Samira Masalma, editor-in-chief of the official daily *Tishreen*, hails from Deraa. In an interview on Al Jazeera, she said that security forces in her hometown had contravened presidential orders not to shoot and should be held accountable. Agence France-Presse, 9 April 2011. Authorities likewise briefly banned *al-Akhabar*, a Lebanese daily sympathetic to Hizbollah, after it argued for serious reforms.

¹⁸² Anthony Shadid, “Syria broadens deadly military crackdown on protesters”, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2011.

¹⁸³ *The Syria Report*, 16 May 2011.

¹⁸⁴ In fairness, some of the criticism that has been aired on state television would have been unthinkable prior to the crisis. For example, a parliamentarian said that the reign of the *Mukhabarat* (secret police) was over, while another called for national dialogue to solve the crisis long before the regime had come around to the idea. Syria Comment, 29 April 2011. Such com-

ments still lagged far behind the public mood after weeks of repression.

¹⁸⁵ See, eg, Syrian Arab News Agency, 1 July 2011.

¹⁸⁶ A local journalist remarked: “People are now demanding that they be shut down. It makes sense to them that state television would attack them. But that the private media also would do so is beyond their comprehension” Crisis Group telephone interview, Damascus, 17 April 2011.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, June 2011.

¹⁸⁸ Many among the elite harboured such expectation. Indeed, Makhoul had done everything to warrant harsh punishment, especially after his long interview to *The New York Times* that was seen as hugely damaging to the regime. He suggested that Israel’s stability was a function of the regime’s, asserted that the ruling family took decisions collectively and warned that it would fight till the bitter end. Anthony Shadid, “Syrian elite to fight protests to ‘the end’”, *The New York Times*, 10 May 2011. A member of the regime offered this interpretation: “He feels the heat and is fighting back. He knows Bashar will not defend him the day the regime regains control”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 25 May 2011.

¹⁸⁹ Small moves reportedly have been taken that affect his interests, though they are hard to interpret. For example, the public was offered more shares of Syriatel, the telecommunications company, and his duty-free business was put up for sale. Strategic Research and Communication Centre, Weekly Briefing, 16 May 2011. Lina Ibrahim, “Kuwaiti investors acquire Syria duty free’s border outlets”, Bloomberg, 24 May 2011. For background, see also <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/05/28/rami-makhoul-inaugure-la-saison-des-soldes-en-syrie/>.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

¹⁹¹ Syria TV, 16 June 2011. Just days before, he had denied rumours that he planned to sell his shares in Syriatel or intended to leave the country. Syria Report, 13 June 2011. Soon after his

Finally, and although it has engaged in numerous talks with local representatives – including some conducted personally by Assad – there is reason to question the genuineness of the dialogue and representative quality of the delegations. In some cases, conversations appear to have been frank and led by credible groups.¹⁹² But others were questionable. An official said, “some of the delegations met by the president are vetted by security services. They send whoever suits them. Criminals can end up representing one town or another because they have long partnered up with the security forces. So even the dialogue is corrupted”.¹⁹³ More generally, and although the regime opened other, discreet channels to the opposition,¹⁹⁴ unrelenting violence, superficial reforms and widespread perception that decision-making lies in the hands of uncompromising elements severely undermined the process¹⁹⁵ and cast doubt on the national dialogue even before it began on 10 July.

Any potential dialogue is further complicated by difficulties on both sides. On the one hand, popular distrust toward regime representative ran deep even before the crisis erupted; this makes it hard to imagine constructive discussions occurring with the additional baggage of brutal violence. Moreover, there remain regime redlines that inevitably will skew the process. As a senior official said, “we are not willing to open all topics for discussion. For instance, some want to raise the issue of those who disappeared in the 1980s, when we believed that we were fighting a legitimate battle against sectarian forces. Others want

to blame us for losing the Golan to Israel. We cannot let this happen”.¹⁹⁶

On the other hand, the security forces' brutal repression and large-scale arrests clearly discourage participation by representatives of the protest movement. In the early stages of the uprising, the legacy of decades of a stifling political order meant that the opposition lacked organisation, authentic representatives or a clear platform. Regime protestations that it could not find credible interlocutors thus ring particularly hollow.¹⁹⁷ As an official remarked in May, “having long suppressed all political life in this country, the regime now has the nerve to complain there is no organised opposition with clear demands and a concrete agenda”.¹⁹⁸

With time, however, the protesters organised a loose and secretive network known as the “local coordination committees” and issued increasingly elaborate political platforms. In stark contrast to the relatively narrow socio-economic grievances aired in the early stages, these called for a full-fledged transition to an entirely new political order.¹⁹⁹ However, leaders of these committees understandably are loathe to identify themselves publicly for fear of regime retaliation,²⁰⁰ Indeed, even Damascus-based civil society

announcement, he was accused by U.S. financial authorities of attempting to protect his assets by removing them from Syria. See “Syrian businessman is moving wealth to evade sanctions, Treasury says”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 July 2011.

¹⁹² A member of a delegation from Jawbar, near Damascus, described one such encounter as candid and said his group was made up of self-appointed representatives. See https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=214835005205706. Assad, however, apparently didn't seem to realise the depth of the crisis, repeating empty words such as “shooting on protesters is a mistake”, “torture is unacceptable”, “state television is not doing its work properly”, and “if it appears that the people reject me, I will resign and go home to my family and childhood friends”.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 24 May 2011. A regime insider mentioned that, in other cases, a palace official ended up picking the delegates. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, April and May 2011.

¹⁹⁵ In one instance, efforts by an official to reach out to local leaders in the outskirts of Damascus resulted in a significant decrease in the number of demonstrators yet were soon undermined by regime hardliners, who took advantage of this decline to undertake a harsh crackdown against the smaller protests. The demonstrations immediately regained momentum. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 26-28 June 2011.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 21 April 2011.

¹⁹⁷ From the outset, a senior official complained: “There are no credible and reliable interlocutors, so with whom should we initiate a dialogue?” Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 20 March 2011. See also Nicholas Blanford, “Syria wants to talk to opposition leaders, but there aren't any”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 May 2011; Anthony Shadid, “Protests across Syria despite military presence”, *The New York Times*, 6 May 2011; Phil Sands, “Dialogue but no meaningful discussion with Assad regime say Syrian dissidents”, *The National*, 20 May 2011.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

¹⁹⁹ See, for instance, the roadmap to a “dialog-based peaceful transition towards a pluralist democracy” issued by some elements of the protest movement. Vision of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) for a political solution in Syria, 12 June 2011. Even the more pragmatic strands within the domestic opposition are demanding the regime's gradual but thorough dismantling. Louai Hussein and Maan Abdul Salam, “Roadmap for the Syrian authorities for a peaceful and safe transition toward a democratic and civil state”, 16 June 2011 (draft circulated for discussion). By contrast, the opposition in exile has not floated a clear agenda beyond supporting protests and defending vague principles. See “Final Conference Statement of the National Coalition to Support the Syrian Revolution”, Brussels, 6 June 2011; The Final Declaration of the Syria Conference for Change”, Antalya, 4 June 2011.

²⁰⁰ See Phil Sands, “Anti-Assad protests ‘accelerating’ say Syrian activists”, *The National*, 31 May 2011; Anthony Shadid, “Coalition of factions from the streets fuels a new opposition in Syria”, *The New York Times*, 30 June 2011.

figures faced risks of detention until recently.²⁰¹ Although they finally were authorised to organise a public meeting in June, they themselves acknowledge they do not genuinely represent the protesters. In short, and due to its own actions, the regime has few effective interlocutors with whom to negotiate. While it could talk to dissident intellectuals, Kurdish parties, Islamist opinion leaders and the exiled Muslim Brotherhood, none of them appear to be in a position to decisively shape or influence the protest movement.

As a result, the “national dialogue” promised by Bashar has every chance of turning into an empty exercise, a conversation essentially between the regime and itself.²⁰² Both the local coordination committees and most credible intellectuals have refused to attend in light of ongoing repression and the regime’s unwillingness to offer more than its package of reforms.²⁰³ In this context, they feel that agreeing to the dialogue would mean ratifying and legitimising the authorities’ overall response to the crisis.²⁰⁴ Even as it was being held, regime thugs attacked the French and U.S. embassies in response to a visit by their ambassadors to Hama;²⁰⁵ the U.S. State Department summoned the Syrian ambassador in connection with alleged efforts by his diplomatic staff to identify participants in anti-regime demonstrations in the U.S.,²⁰⁶ and reports circulated that a popular singer whose powerful lyrics had targeted Bashar had been killed.²⁰⁷

IV. A DEEPENING CRISIS

Far more than a unified or coherent strategic vision, the regime’s behaviour reflects a combination of numerous, at times contradictory, impulses and outlooks. These include a determination to defend individual interests,²⁰⁸ reformist tendencies, sectarian prejudices and ploys devised by the security services, as well as sheer panic. As a result, even were the authorities to decide on a clear policy, there is reason to doubt it could be carried out reliably. As a businessman put it, “there are questions as to whether this regime is willing to reform, but there also are questions as to whether any decision at the top would ever be implemented. The regime is so dysfunctional that Assad’s possible goodwill, assuming it exists, might well be largely irrelevant”.²⁰⁹ This partly explains why regime practices have been marked by an odd blend of long term, consistent trends and manifold contradictions.

It also explains the image of incompetence projected by the regime and its early failure to address head on what, at its inception, arguably was a manageable crisis. With the stakes higher than ever, the regime was in desperate need of a forward-looking, self-effacing and effective leadership. Instead, it appeared from the outset arrogant, amateurish and brutal. Its handling of the crisis almost certainly will shape popular perceptions for the foreseeable future, whether it survives or falls.

Assad arguably lost the most in the process. The personalisation of Syrian politics is no coincidence. The regime systematically has hampered both the construction of functioning, genuine state institutions and the emergence of a sense of citizenship; that combined with the existence of deep communal fault lines has led many to bank on personalities. In this respect, the hope that Syrians had invested in Bashar was only the flip-side of the distrust with which they had come to view the regime.²¹⁰ Public

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, militants and diplomats, Damascus, May 2011.

²⁰² The conference opened on 10 June. Vice President Sharaa, who chairs the “national dialogue” committee, explained that a third of the invitees were from the Baath and affiliated parties that comprise the “Progressive National Front”, another third would represent “the various social strata, currents and spectra” of the opposition, and the last third would consist of “independents”. *Al-Hayat*, 7 July 2011. In reality, hardly any “opposition” or “independent” figures who attended enjoy any credibility with the protest movement.

²⁰³ See, eg, Phil Sands, “Activists launch coalition for change in Syria”, *The National*, 1 July 2011. An official involved in the national dialogue committee said, “our dialogue proposal has been rejected by both the local coordination committees and the Damascus-based intellectuals. But we will forge ahead nonetheless with the reform program outlined by the president. In August, the outgoing parliament will ratify the laws that have been drafted, on parties, the media, the elections and so on”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 June 2011.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2011. See “Communiqué by the Local Coordination Committees on the national dialogue conference”, 5 July 2011.

²⁰⁵ Associated Press, 11 July 2011.

²⁰⁶ “Syria envoy summoned over filming of US protests”, Agence France-Presse, 9 July 2011.

²⁰⁷ “Syria: Secret journey around a nation in revolt finds protesters are not flagging”, *The Telegraph*, 10 July 2011.

²⁰⁸ “Many people are reacting on the basis of individual interests and fears. They feel threatened and that determines their behaviour”. Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 7 April 2011.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, businessman, Damascus, 28 June 2011.

²¹⁰ “People have lost trust in the state’s traditional representatives, such as ministers, governors and the like. And many officials lack awareness and imagination. They act against decisions that have been taken and against decrees that have been adopted”. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 27 February 2011. Even deep into the crisis, some staunch regime critics clung to the hope that Bashar might turn around, Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Damascus, 21 May 2011, or that he at least would pay genuine attention to their demands. Crisis Group interviews, protesters from Meidan and Qadam, Damascus, June 2011.

eagerness for the president to dissociate himself from his entourage potentially could have been an asset had he been willing and able to do so. As discussed in our companion report, it is at least conceivable that, had he spoken early and directly to his people, displayed understanding and addressed core issues – even, or rather especially, if it meant tackling entrenched elite interests – he could have contained the crisis and rebuilt a stronger popular base.

Then again, the expectations regarding Bashar almost certainly were unrealistic. By incrementally overhauling the power structure inherited from his father, he had already taken an important step; indeed, this was key to his popularity. But to go beyond that, as many hoped, meant turning against the regime of which the president is a product and upon which his power depends. That probably was a bridge too far. Early on, an official at the presidential palace reflected:

Implementing the necessary reforms automatically would undermine the president's entourage because it would mean curtailing their power. Can the president act against them? This presents a structural impediment to change, since he belongs to the very apparatus he would be combating. Then there is the cultural impediment, which is that a leader in this part of the world cannot afford to appear weak.²¹¹

In the end, many Syrians blamed Assad for failing to take a stand in the internal power struggle between a pragmatic minority willing to make significant concessions²¹² and a majority bent on preserving their prerogatives at all

costs.²¹³ In practice, he tried to satisfy both, a strategy that has proved self-defeating. Indeed, by giving a green light to intensified repression, he allowed the revival of the brutal, sectarian-minded centres of power with which at one time he seemed to have broken.²¹⁴ As a result, he has become more dependent than ever on the most unpromising elements of the power structure. In turn, this likely will make it all the more difficult – assuming he survives this crisis – for him to carry out gradual reforms in the future, let alone far-reaching ones.

Some speculate he might follow in the footsteps of his father who, after the showdown of the 1980s, shifted from being considered a (relatively) open-minded ruler to being seen as a ruthless and paranoid tyrant.²¹⁵ Notably, pro-regime elements have been resurrecting Hafez's picture, displaying it provocatively on their cars and Facebook pages; this in turn has fuelled a sense of national regression and exacerbated fears of ordinary citizens.²¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, many protesters are persuaded that the regime's survival would entail a future of widespread arrests, torture, disappearances and collective punishment through the denial of basic services – a fate already experienced by residents of Hama and Jisr al-Shughur in the wake of the 1980's great repression. A journalist with extensive contacts within the opposition said, "protesters believe that, if the regime pulls through, they will be picked off

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview, official at presidential palace, Damascus, 24 March 2011. "The regime is based on a balance of power that reform would compromise". Crisis Group interview, official at presidential palace, Damascus, April 2011. In 2009, an Allawite businessman and regime insider presciently said, "trust in Bashar, within the inner circles of power, is not a function of his qualities and skills, but rather of his ability to defend and promote that elite's interests. That is why I am a bit concerned when I see so many people who court and invest hope in him. He will not make significant concessions, and their expectations will be disappointed". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, August 2009.

²¹² One of the more pragmatic officials said: "at this point, there is no willingness within the regime to pay the required price. My view is that we need to go all the way, immediately, but I am only one player among many. To put it simply, in a debate in which some people claim that the house will fall on our heads in the next two days, and others say it will hold up another two years at least even without repairs, if the house is still standing after a week, the latter camp will come out on top. Meanwhile, the house may still collapse the next day. Besides, there are many interests at stake; how can all these people be convinced that they have to give up any of their privileges?" Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

²¹³ Asked whether the ruling elite had a plan to defuse rising domestic tensions, a business partner of one of the most powerful men in the country said, "there is no plan. They will never have a plan. As the saying goes, the need creates the solution. These people have everything. They believe they own the country. What is the need?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 March 2011.

²¹⁴ See Peter Harling, "La double dynamique du conflit syrien", *Le Monde*, 1 June 2011.

²¹⁵ When he first took power, Hafez curbed the role of security services, lifted travel restrictions, reached out to the diaspora, opened up the economy and initiated other reforms that were surprisingly similar in spirit to what Bashar did some three decades later. When the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency erupted, Hafez reportedly was convinced that he was wrestling with a large conspiracy, "abetted by Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the United States". Sabotage and subversion were the means to bring "the entire Arab world under joint U.S.-Israeli domination". The regime was profoundly transformed in the wake of the great repression. "Asad's nature became tougher, harder, more suspicious about scheming enemies at home and abroad.... Habits of arbitrary rule acquired in the struggle for survival proved addictive, and the relatively liberal atmosphere of the beginning of his presidency could not easily flourish again in the shadow of the powerful instruments of repression which had grown up". Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1989).

²¹⁶ Crisis Group observations, April-May 2011.

one after the other. For them there is no turning back. They cannot afford to lose this struggle".²¹⁷

As said, the regime's most potent argument – and, increasingly, one of its few remaining – is that it represents the only alternative to chaos.²¹⁸ Rather than articulating a clear way forward, it developed an essentially negative discourse. It played up the risks of civil war and society's sectarian and fundamentalist elements and the ugly face of the exiled opposition, as well as a purported international conspiracy, all of which it identified as reasons why Syrians should stick to what they have for fear of ending up with something far worse.²¹⁹

In the early stages, the approach appeared relatively successful, enabling the regime to rally large segments belonging to minority groups (who shiver at the idea of a hegemonic Islamist agenda), the middleclass (whose current status owes much to its ties to the state, especially under the current regime) and the business establishment (whose interests are deeply intertwined with those of the ruling elite).²²⁰ These three constituencies comprise much of the "silent majority" that refrained from taking to the streets, thus enabling the regime to refute claims it had lost legitimacy. The staging of large pro-regime demonstrations has served the same purpose.²²¹

How effective this strategy ultimately will be remains unclear. At first, the overriding sense of anxiety seemed to play to the regime's advantage, deterring people from taking to the streets. Over time, it began to backfire.²²² In-

²¹⁷ Already, many regime loyalists blame the people of Hawran for the crisis, berate them as fanatics and openly claim they would gladly see the security services crush them once and for all. Crisis Group observations and interviews, June 2011.

²¹⁸ Mohideen Miftha, "Bashar or chaos: Syrian regime's new mantra", Agence France-Presse, 5 May 2011.

²¹⁹ Symptomatically, Assad's key argument in his third speech was that unrest compromised potential positive developments and could trigger an economic collapse.

²²⁰ In late April, a prominent businessman, whose interests were considerably affected by the crisis, found solace in the belief that the regime's heightened levels of repression would put an end to all problems "in a matter of days". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 April 2011.

²²¹ A large, mostly Allawite demonstration was held in Tartus in mid-June. Syrian Arab News Agency, 17 June 2011. Around the same time, the inauguration of a 2,300 metre-long Syrian flag drew significant crowds in Damascus. Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 June 2011. Factory owners with close ties to the regime drafted their employees for the occasion. Crisis Group telephone interview, businessman, 16 June 2011.

²²² A Syrian intellectual said, "the overall uncertainty initially hampered the popular movement. But confusion surrounding the regime's attitude increased popular agitation. A clear vision possibly would have reassured them. Ambiguity ultimately bred anxiety". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 March 2011. A

creasing numbers of citizens perceived the regime as incapable of restoring law and order or, worse, as a primary instigator of chaos. Its futile attempts to project a sense of normalcy²²³ and repeated unfounded claims it was gaining the upper hand²²⁴ further sapped popular trust. As a result, the silent majority gradually began to turn against the regime,²²⁵ a fact some officials acknowledged.²²⁶

To be sure, the regime's narrative continues to enjoy significant resonance in Damascus and a few other areas; if anything, opinion has become more polarised, chiefly in the capital, where pro- and anti-regime feelings have hardened, as discussed above. But broader trends bode ill for the authorities. Indeed, beyond the narrow base of Syrians who belong to or have profited financially from the current power structure, support reflects intense albeit fickle feelings that already have waxed and waned over time.

The emotional arc of a secular-minded, Sunni, middle-class journalist aptly illustrates these shifting emotions. After being gripped by a sense of euphoria following the 21 March beginning of the uprising,²²⁷ her mood turned to panic a month later as she was told of reports of rising fundamentalism, sectarianism and chaos supposedly prompted by protesters. As a result, she briefly sided with the regime,²²⁸ only to part ways again as she witnessed the brutality with which it handled the crisis. "This cannot go on. The

local journalist captured this ambivalence: "The regime is offering no answer to popular aspirations and questions. It is stoking fear and exacerbating a sense of uncertainty. People are in a state of confusion and switch from one view to its opposite". Crisis Group telephone interview, local journalist, Damascus, 29 March 2011. Anxiety reached regime ranks as well. An official at the presidential palace said, "I still have no idea what the plan is, and it has been two months since the crisis began". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 May 2011.

²²³ In numerous articles, the official media painted the picture of a situation getting "back to normal". See, eg, Syrian Arab News Agency, 10-11 May 2011; *al-Baath*, 19 May 2011; *al-Watan*, 19 May 2011.

²²⁴ Anthony Shadid, "Syria proclaims it now has upper hand over uprising", *The New York Times*, 9 May 2011.

²²⁵ See, eg, Phil Sands, "Syria suffers 'another bloody Friday'", *The National*, 21 May 2011; Jocelyne Zablit, "Syrian capital's residents on edge", Agence France-Presse, 24 May 2011.

²²⁶ Crisis Group interview, official at the presidential palace, Damascus, 23 May 2011. "In terms of popular support, the delays in carrying out political changes have cost us greatly. People have become very sceptical". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

²²⁷ "I am very happy despite the risks. It's the pride and dignity factor. We have endured so many humiliations". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 March 2011.

²²⁸ "No matter how bad the regime is, it's still better than being ruled by those people! How could I – or for that matter my children – live in this country if they take over?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 20 April 2011.

regime hasn't done a thing to work out a real solution and save the country. I am still afraid of fundamentalists, but the regime has disappointed me. If it has nothing to offer, it must go".²²⁹ By late June, events in Jisr al-Shughur and the loss of a relative – a colonel killed in the Damascus suburb of Qadam – prompted her to accept the wildest conspiracy theories and once again to embrace the prospect of even cosmetic reforms as a lesser evil.²³⁰

In the longer term, the regime faces several critical challenges. First, as Assad mentioned in his third speech, is the risk of an economic meltdown, which could unsettle and alienate some of the regime's firmest backers among the middle-class and business establishment. The economy faces an ever-growing list of woes: a sharp drop in consumption,²³¹ massive cash withdrawals,²³² capital outflow, unpaid loans, a falling currency, a tumbling stock market,²³³ a string of postponed or cancelled investments,²³⁴ a slowdown in growth,²³⁵ inflation, rising unemployment²³⁶ and more.²³⁷ Even in Damascus, which has been among the least affected by the protest movement, business is visibly reduced, as evidenced by overall lack of activity on the streets in general and in shopping areas in particular.²³⁸

In an effort to assuage the population, the regime resorted to stopgap measures that have had little immediate impact and could in fact deepen the crisis over time. After years during which it sought to reduce public spending, the government came full circle and increased its deficit in

every conceivable way, raising public sector salaries,²³⁹ expanding an already bloated bureaucracy,²⁴⁰ promising huge investments,²⁴¹ increasing subsidies²⁴² and lifting wheat procurement prices to support agriculture.²⁴³ It also announced a review of recently signed free trade agreements.²⁴⁴ In so doing, it reversed almost every aspect of its previous policy, reviving elements of a socialist-era legacy that it considered unaffordable until recently.

Yet, it offered no overarching vision to justify this dramatic shift, ascertain its sustainability or reassure economic actors. Only in late May did it form a committee tasked with charting a new policy;²⁴⁵ prior to that, there had been little coordination with either local banks²⁴⁶ or businessmen. Over two months into the crisis, a businessman lamented:

We had a meeting with the minister. We explained our predicament. We've lost 95 per cent of our business. Some of us have to repay loans. All the minister told us was that we should explore new markets. In this environment?! The president of our chamber of commerce wrote three letters, one to the minister, the other to the prime minister and the third to the president. Not one received so much as an answer.²⁴⁷

Even were the protest movement to recede, it is hard to see how the economy can recover in the foreseeable future. Iraq may provide cheap petroleum products, Iran may inject liquidity to support the state budget, and some Gulf states may consider investing, but there has been no indication that any of them are willing or able to do so on a

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 23 May 2011.

²³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 June 2011.

²³¹ In a rare exception, cement sales and activity in the construction sector have expanded, as many Syrians seize the opportunity created by unrest to illegally build or expand buildings. The Syria Report, 25 April 2011. The Syria Report, 4 May 2011.

²³² "Unrest causes withdrawal of SYP 32 billion [around \$600 million] from banking sector", The Syria Report, 23 May 2011.

²³³ "Stocks continue losing streak, shed 37 percent from 2011 peak", The Syria Report, 20 June 2011.

²³⁴ See, eg. Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Unrest chills investment in Syria, economy falters", 26 May 2011; "Gamesa postpones deal over wind power plant", The Syria Report, 6 June 2011.

²³⁵ The World Bank's forecast for 2011 now is a 1.7 per cent growth rate, down from 5.5 in its previous estimates. The Syria Report, 14 June 2011.

²³⁶ Companies have been laying off employees as local industry and trade comes to a halt. Phil Sands, "Syria's political crisis puts it on edge of economic precipice", *The National*, 6 May 2011.

²³⁷ For a good overview, see Abigail Fielding-Smith and Lina Saigol, "Uprising exposes Syria's economic weaknesses", *The Financial Times*, 26 April 2011; "Syria: if protesters don't get Assad, the economy will", *Time Magazine*, 27 May 2011.

²³⁸ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, March-May 2011. That said, there appeared to be a partial rebound in June. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, June 2011.

²³⁹ The cost of raising salaries alone was estimated at \$2 billion. Crisis Group interview, economic journalist, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

²⁴⁰ The government planned to hire 50,000 young employees in the public sector. Syrian Arab News Agency, 25 May 2011. A decree also granted civil servant status to an estimated 174,000 individuals working for the government on a contractual basis. The Syria Report, 20 June 2011.

²⁴¹ Including \$2 billion invested in sewage plants and close to \$8 billion to be spent on the electric grid over the next five years. The Syria Report, 4 May 2011; Bloomberg, 13 June 2011.

²⁴² See "Syria reduces gas oil price, raises subsidies bill to USD 3.9 billion", The Syria Report, 25 May 2011.

²⁴³ The Syria Report, 5 May 2011.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 9 May 2011.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 30 May 2011.

²⁴⁶ Banks reportedly were not consulted on dramatic measures taken by the Central Bank. Economist Intelligence Unit, 16 May 2011.

²⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, businessman, Damascus, 23 May 2011. Some prominent businessmen have been visibly distancing themselves from the regime, presumably out of fear of being targeted by international sanctions and, more generally, because they feel the best option is to hedge their bets. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May-June 2011. See also "The squeeze on Assad", *The Economist*, 30 June 2011.

sufficient scale. Certainly, the massive foreign direct investment on which Syria counted to cover its needs over the next five years will fall short. Until recently, the country compensated for its relatively small size and cumbersome red tape with its promise of political stability and efforts at economic liberalisation; this translated into low investor risks and significant potential for growth given the underdeveloped nature of large swaths of the economy. But the sense of predictability and opportunity that had been among its key economic assets are now things of the past. A businessman summed up the prevailing feeling:

Companies are making huge losses already and will soon be massively laying off. That means the government will have to create even more jobs than it did prior to the onset of the crisis. Local businessmen are thinking of reinvesting abroad, and foreign investors are discouraged. Everybody knows that this regime could collapse a year from now even if it holds on today. The concept of stability has disappeared.²⁴⁸

The second challenge relates to the loss of legitimacy. Assad almost certainly cannot recover his prior reputation as a reformer with a relatively clean record. The endless stream of foreign delegations visiting Damascus to meet him – almost always the top story in the Syrian media and a key source of domestic legitimacy – has dried up. More importantly, the regime's claim to stand for something larger than itself – namely, a sense of Arab pride and dignity – has been shattered. Shorn of any genuine principle or ideology, the regime now appears even in the eyes of many former supporters to be intent strictly on preserving at all costs the prerogatives of a narrow elite.²⁴⁹

Even some of the alliances upon which it relied to buttress its legitimacy have been frayed. This apparently is the case with Hamas, which found itself both embarrassed and angered by regime demands that it provide political and, according to some sources, practical support to quell the protests.²⁵⁰ By contrast, widespread perceptions that Iran²⁵¹

and Hizbollah had come to the regime's rescue turned much of public opinion against them. Hizbollah's satellite channel, al-Manar, at first ignored the protestors altogether; it subsequently embraced the regime's depiction of them as agents of a foreign conspiracy.

Coming from an external, Shiite organisation, such coverage generated huge resentment among Syrians who traditionally had been very supportive of the resistance movement. A regime insider complained that such a policy was self-defeating: "Hizbollah always has had some room for manoeuvre. For instance, on Libya and Bahrain, their positions were not identical to those of the regime. Why not on Deraa?"²⁵² The end result is that popular back-

24, 9 May 2011. See also Ethan Bronner, "Tensions rise as Hamas refuses to take sides in Syria", *The New York Times*, 2 May 2011.

²⁵¹ U.S. officials claimed that Iran was providing material support to Syria's apparatus of repression. See Adam Entous and Matthew Rosenberg, "U.S. says Iran helps crackdown in Syria", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2011; Borzou Daragahi, "Some see the hand of Iran in Syria's crackdown", *The Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2011. The claim is credible inasmuch as Syrian security forces have little if any experience in crowd control, much to learn from others and few partners to whom to turn other than Tehran. Besides, Iran reportedly has developed extensive networks within Syria's security sector; its assistance likely goes beyond sharing expertise and modern technology. "Iran has a big say in what is going on here more generally. They have made serious inroads with this president, unlike his father". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 24 April 2011.

²⁵² Crisis Group interview, regime insider, 5 April 2011. In late May, after over a month of relentless regime repression, Hizbollah's secretary general, Hasan Nasrallah, spoke in support of the regime, describing the unrest as a foreign plot and assuring that Assad would reform if given time. See Associated Press, 26 May 2011. The following day Syrian protestors were burning Hizbollah and Iranian flags in various parts of the country. A month later, commenting on Assad's third speech, Nasrallah went further: he asserted that Bashar was serious about reform, assured that popular demands had been met and equated protests with an attempt to destabilise Syria in the service of Israel and the U.S. Syrian Arab News Agency, 24 June 2011. Asked why Hizbollah would take the risk of alienating large swathes of Syrian society by interfering so blatantly in domestic affairs, a senior Syrian security official said, "they are reacting like our Christians in Baba Toma [a Damascus neighbourhood whose residents have gone to extremes to display their love for Assad and loathing of the protest movement]. This is an emotional reaction, not clear-headed political thinking". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 June 2011. A Lebanese analyst with close ties to Hizbollah offered the following explanation for the contrasting reactions of Hamas and the Shiite movement: "We are in Lebanon; that is an entirely different story. We cannot afford to do anything that would alienate the Syrian regime". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, April 2011.

²⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, businessman, Damascus, 22 April 2011.

²⁴⁹ This was a central message of Rami Makhoul's *New York Times* interview. So deep was the suspicion that many Syrians were convinced that Israel had given a green light to the regime's decision to dispatch tanks to the immediate vicinity of the occupied Golan to suppress demonstrators. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 17-19 April and 13 May 2011.

²⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, 26 April 2011. Hamas leaders, in coordination with Hizbollah counterparts, reportedly sought to convince the regime of the need for more far-reaching reforms; however, they quickly were rebuffed. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas official, 26 April 2011; Hizbollah official, Beirut, April 2011. In an interview with France 24, Khaled Meshal, Hamas's leader, described the Arab Spring as "beautiful" and said freedom and democracy are needed in Syria. France

ing derived from Syria's membership in the "resistance camp" has been durably diminished.

This was starkly illustrated when the regime encouraged Palestinians and *Nazihin* to breach the Israeli fence and enter the occupied Golan-heights in commemoration of the 1948 Nakba ("catastrophe" – the term used to refer to the flight and expulsion of Palestinians from the territories of what became Israel), in mid-May,²⁵³ and the 1967 Naksa (designating the defeat of Arab armies by Israel), in early June. Under different circumstances, such moves probably would have been endorsed and enthusiastically backed by ordinary Syrians. This time, however, they came across as cynical attempts to shift attention back to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Few Syrians displayed interest in the events themselves, or in Israel's bloody response. And, in the refugee camp of Yarmuk, in Damascus, relatives of the victims directed their anger at a Palestinian faction involved in orchestrating the march, accusing it of perverting the cause to serve the Syrian regime's interests.²⁵⁴

A despairing official lamented the loss of regional prestige: "The regime can no longer claim to be standing up for resistance. It cannot claim to stand for secularism when it exploits confessional fault lines. It has crossed so many red lines".²⁵⁵ More generally, Syria's domestic woes will make it a poor candidate as the standard bearer of Arab resistance to U.S. or Israeli designs, all the more so if Egypt can develop a more assertive, independent foreign policy, more in tune with popular feelings region-wide. Assad's comparison to the predicament he faced in 2005,²⁵⁶ when Syria was isolated and subjected to intense pressure, in this respect is wide off the mark. It overlooks the fact that, at the time, the regime was effectively confronting a foreign enemy and, for that very reason, enjoyed wide-ranging domestic support.

The third challenge relates to the security forces' dependability. For now, its Allawite-dominated branches have proved loyal and determined. However, as described in our companion report, as time goes by, a combination of exhaustion, a growing sentiment of futility and the absence

of any sense of purpose could test their reliability. Their defection, should it occur, almost certainly would spell the regime's demise.

²⁵³ See "Israeli troops clash with protesters on hostile borders as Palestinians mark 1948 uprooting", Associated Press, 15 May 2011. Syria mounted a media campaign designed to stir outrage at Israel's conduct. Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 May 2011.

²⁵⁴ The militia – known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command – reportedly fired at the crowd, and then blamed "armed gangs" for the bloodshed. See Phil Sands, "Up to 12 killed as Palestinian refugees are drawn into Syria revolt", *The National*, 8 June 2011.

²⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

²⁵⁶ In all three speeches, Assad referred to an ongoing conspiracy going back decades, but he put particular emphasis on the 2004/2005 crisis that led Syria to withdraw from Lebanon.

V. THE INTERNATIONAL POSTURE

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where events were too sudden and unexpected to involve significant international involvement, the Syrian crisis had every reason to draw in outside players.²⁵⁷ Besides the fact that the uprising has now lasted for months, Damascus stands at the crossroads of several critical strategic issues: the Arab-Israeli conflict; the struggle over Iran's regional influence; the inter-Arab cold war; Turkey's emerging role; and, more generally, the balance of power in a region that, arguably for the first time in its contemporary history, is devoid of any clear organising paradigm.²⁵⁸

For Israel and the U.S. in particular, the stakes are huge. The regime's collapse would significantly hurt its allies, whether Iran, Hizbollah or Hamas, possibly auguring a profound shift in the regional strategic balance of power – far more significant than a policy of sanctions or pressure against Tehran could possibly bring about.²⁵⁹ Popular sentiment almost certainly would remain pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli and probably anti-American, but the ripple effects across the region would be vast.

The effect on Hizbollah arguably would be most visible and immediate. Iran might well continue to supply the resistance movement with arms by air or by sea, but the flow inevitably would be curtailed, making it more difficult for Hizbollah to sustain its current military posture, deter an Israeli attack or restock in the event of an actual armed confrontation.²⁶⁰ Although it enjoyed broad and genuine popular backing within Syria, where the need to resist perceived Israeli and U.S. hegemony is widely shared, Hizbollah's blanket endorsement of the regime when it cracked down on its own population considerably lessens the odds that a future regime would provide the same level of support.

Yet, despite these considerations and although the regime from the outset claimed it was facing a foreign conspiracy, what is striking is how little international pressure there has been. Politically at least, the regime enjoyed a remarkably lenient reaction even from some of its sworn enemies. Instead of an early, harsh and wholesale condemnation of the its response to the protests, what occurred was a very gradual shift.

Paris and Doha were rare exceptions, somewhat surprisingly. France, which had been at the forefront of engagement with Syria, quickly gave up on the regime and pushed for EU sanctions on Syrian officials in general and Assad in particular.²⁶¹ President Nicolas Sarkozy's taste for flashy leadership, the recent embarrassment caused by France's belated and less than enthusiastic reactions to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the superficial nature of Franco-Syrian relations – a partnership that produced few political or economic dividends –, and widespread frustration among some French officials at a rapprochement that was entirely directed from the Elysée – all contributed to the sudden volte-face. Other EU governments slowly followed in France's footsteps.²⁶²

Qatar's U-turn in many ways was similar. At first, it extended political support to the regime²⁶³ and kept anti-Syrian attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated, Islamist opinion leader Yusef Qaradawi off Al Jazeera's airwaves.²⁶⁴ Soon, however, changes were afoot. Al Jazeera, which initially barely covered the protests at all, shifted course and, by the second half of April, had become one of their foremost promoters; Qatar also cancelled major investments in Syria.²⁶⁵ The reasons behind Doha's evolution are not entirely clear, though likely involve a desire to assume a leadership position in the region, notably by backing (Sunni) protest movements,²⁶⁶ irritation over the

²⁵⁷ For different reasons and in different ways, this also was the case in Libya (where a NATO-led military intervention is underway to depose Colonel Qaddafi); Bahrain (where Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are engaged in a concerted effort to salvage the ruling family); and Yemen (where the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the U.S. and others are seeking to mediate a managed transition).

²⁵⁸ See Robert Malley and Peter Harling, "Beyond moderates and militants", *www.foreignaffairs.com*, 27 August 2010.

²⁵⁹ Elliott Abrams, an official in the George W. Bush administration, summed up the strategic upsides for the U.S. as follows: "Iran's loss of its only Arab ally, its Mediterranean port, its border with Israel via H[i]zbollah; Hamas's loss of its headquarters in Damascus; the end of an enemy regime that has the blood of thousands of Americans on its hands in Iraq". "Hillary is disheartened", *The National Review*, 1 July 2011.

²⁶⁰ On the Israeli-Hizbollah mutual deterrence, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, 2 August 2010.

²⁶¹ *Le Figaro*, 3 May 2011.

²⁶² The EU imposed its first set of targeted sanctions on 9 May 2011; these left out Assad, who was included in a second round on 23 May. It later suspended all aid programs in the country. Economist Intelligence Unit, 1 June 2011. A third round focused on individuals related to Bashar and suspected of corruption, as well as on allies of his brother, Maher. "EU applies sanctions on Hamsho Group, Bena Properties", *The Syria Report*, 27 June 2011.

²⁶³ Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 April 2011.

²⁶⁴ Qaradawi began harshly criticising the regime on 25 March 2011 at a sermon uncharacteristically delivered on Orient TV rather than Al Jazeera.

²⁶⁵ *The Syria Report*, 8 May 2011.

²⁶⁶ This principle extended to Libya, where Qatar is involved in military actions against Qaddafi's regime, but not to Bahrain. In that case, together with its GCC colleagues, the Qatari regime has stood firmly with the royal family against (predominantly) Shiite protesters. Many believe there is an Islamist – and par-

slow pace of government formation in Beirut and the general flexibility of its foreign policy, known for being more reactive than coherent.

By contrast, and despite a legacy of at times fierce disputes,²⁶⁷ most Arab regimes have proven by and large supportive of Assad. The Arab League issued a meek statement condemning repression only belatedly,²⁶⁸ in June, a relatively moderate comment by its secretary general, which expressed concern at the “great tumult” in Syria,²⁶⁹ stood out sufficiently to draw a strong rejoinder from Damascus.²⁷⁰ Fear of civil war in an already unstable region no doubt is one reason for the subdued reaction, as is the potential that disorder in Syria could spread beyond its borders – either naturally, or by dint of regime efforts. Some Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, also may be wagering that a weak regime in desperate need of economic and political support would distance itself from Tehran in exchange for greater Gulf Arab backing.²⁷¹ Finally, many – Riyadh first and foremost – are leery of yet another successful revolution that could then inspire similar uprisings in places like Jordan or the Gulf.²⁷²

ticularly Muslim Brotherhood – agenda behind Doha's positions. Crisis Group interview, Arab analyst, June 2011.

²⁶⁷ On Syria's relations with Arab regimes, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009.

²⁶⁸ Reuters, 26 April 2011.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 13 June 2011.

²⁷⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency, 14 June 2011.

²⁷¹ Overall, Saudi-owned al-Arabiya's reporting on Syria has been less critical – and, some would say, more balanced – than Al Jazeera's. Riyadh has also offered material assistance; the Saudi finance minister pledged the Kingdom's support in the field of electricity. Syrian Arab News Agency, 6 April 2011. U.S. officials described Saudi policy as “ambiguous”, with some officials banking on regime change, while others hoped to see Assad reorient his foreign policy. As for the latter camp, “as best as we can tell, some Saudis want Assad to come to them and ask for help, in exchange for which Saudi [Arabia] would expect Syria to distance itself from Iran”, Crisis Group interview, Washington, 27 May 2011. According to U.S. officials, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offered the most significant support to Damascus, again – in their view – in an attempt to entice it away from Iran. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2011. At the height of the repression, a delegation of Kuwaiti investors inexplicably came to meet Assad. Syrian Arab News Agency, 20 May 2011.

²⁷² Oman, like Bahrain, has expressed ostensible support to the Syrian regime, reflecting a form of solidarity between regimes that are on the defensive. Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 June 2011. Damascus, initially an outspoken critic of Bahrain's repression of its own protest movement, subsequently flaunted the Kingdom's support as it faced its own unrest. See Alain Gresh, “Syrie-Bahrain, cause commune”, *Nouvelles d'Orient*, 10 May 2011.

Turkey, a country that has assumed a pivotal role in Bashar's international strategy, adopted an incremental approach. As the crisis broke out, it came out strongly in favour of reform,²⁷³ gave the regime the benefit of the doubt and sent technical delegations as late as the end of April.²⁷⁴ But, hedging its bets, it also was relatively quick to engage the opposition. On 1 April, important figures from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood held a press conference in Istanbul in the course of a visit that was neither hosted nor obstructed by the government.²⁷⁵ In early June, representatives of opposition groups met in Antalya for an inaugural coordination meeting sponsored by the ruling AKP party. The foreign ministry and intelligence establishment reportedly were reluctant, fearful of its impact on bilateral relations at a time when they believed Assad still deserved a chance.²⁷⁶ As violence escalated in Jisr al-Shughur and refugees began to arrive, Ankara's rhetoric noticeably hardened. In particular, Prime Minister Erdogan accused the regime in general, and Maher Assad in particular, of inhuman behaviour.²⁷⁷

Analysts and Syrian officials attributed much of this to political considerations; with parliamentary elections around the corner, the Islamist AKP could not afford to alienate Turkish Sunnis by siding with a regime that was killing their Syrian counterparts. This interpretation appeared to be validated when, having won a third term on 12 June, Erdogan seemed to soften his stance. Turkey expressed impatience at the slow pace of reforms,²⁷⁸ criticised Assad's third speech as insufficient,²⁷⁹ yet appeared to tolerate extensive Syrian military operations against alleged armed groups along the border. Still, there is little doubt that Ankara's patience is running short; ever the pragmatic actor, it will know if and when to shift stances, as it did in the Libyan case, once it concludes it has more to lose by siding with the regime than by opposing it. Indeed, in the broader context of its role in the Arab world, Ankara needs Syria more than it does the Syrian regime, meaning that it

²⁷³ See, for instance, Delphine Strauss, “Erdogan urges Assad to hasten reform”, *The Financial Times*, 28 March 2011. On 6 April, the Turkish foreign minister travelled to Damascus to offer Ankara's help in the matter.

²⁷⁴ See *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 April 2011.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 1 April 2011.

²⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, 26 May 2011.

²⁷⁷ *Today's Zaman*, 10 June 2011. Erdogan said, “I say this clearly and openly: From a humanitarian point of view, his brother [Maher Assad] is not behaving in a humane manner. And he is chasing after savagery. Out of necessity, this is putting the UN Security Council into operation. There are preparations going on there. In the face of this, we as Turkey cannot continue [to speak in favor of] Syria”.

²⁷⁸ “Turkey says Syria only has a few days left to get its act together”, *Today's Zaman*, 17 June 2011.

²⁷⁹ “Turkey's Gul says Assad speech is ‘not enough’”, Reuters, 21 June 2011.

can only go so far in supporting the latter against its own people.²⁸⁰

Some of the more curious and intriguing reactions came from Israel and the U.S. At the outset, neither appeared eager to support or push for the regime's downfall, despite the potentially extensive strategic payoff described above. In part, this reflected a belief that its collapse was highly unlikely and thus that they would have to continue to live with Bashar anyway. Israel, for all its complaints, also had become used to stability on its Syrian border which, many officials are quick to remark, has been the most stable and quiet of all its Arab borders since 1973. What is more, a regime collapse could have unpredictable consequences, potentially leading to a civil war – and the targeting of Syria's many minority groups, Christians included – regional instability, spill-over into fragile neighbouring countries and, possibly, a takeover by a more militant Islamist current that might adopt an openly belligerent attitude toward Israel.²⁸¹

Overall, the U.S. saw reason to tread cautiously,²⁸² all the more so since it felt that a more openly hostile attitude could well play into regime hands, allowing it to invoke an international conspiracy and mobilise domestic support on an anti-US agenda.²⁸³ U.S. officials also argued that, unlike in the case of friendly regimes, Washington had little leverage with Damascus.²⁸⁴ Accordingly, it urged the regime to reform, keeping the door open for improved relations and even renewed attempts to broker an Israeli-Syrian peace deal; privately, some officials likely hoped for a weakened regime that would have to moderate and reorient its foreign policy.²⁸⁵ In late April, a U.S. official said:

²⁸⁰ In the aftermath of Assad's third speech, a U.S. official said, "for now, Turkish officials are telling us and – they say – telling Bashar, that he has one more chance, which will be measured by whether they end violence and begin a serious dialogue. They tell us that, if he misses the chance, they will publicly say he needs to go". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 21 June 2011. A French official was less certain, saying he had detected a distinct softening of Erdogan's attitude after his reelection. Crisis Group interview, 22 June 2011.

²⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, March-April-May 2011.

²⁸² Andrew Quinn, "Clinton says reform still possible in Syria", Reuters, 6 May 2011.

²⁸³ See David Sanger, "U.S. faces a challenge in trying to punish Syria", *The New York Times*, 25 April 2011; Mark Landler, "U.S. moves cautiously against Syrian leaders", *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011. When the U.S. ultimately imposed sanctions, the regime was quick to depict them as evidence of a conspiracy. Syrian Arab News Agency, 20 May 2011.

²⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, April 2011.

²⁸⁵ A senior Syrian security official said, only partly in jest, "if their objective is the same regime weaker, please let them know

My main concern now is to avoid complete chaos in an environment that is ethnically and religiously fractured. The worst case scenario is not likely. But it is possible, and consequences would be catastrophic: who will take over the state? When? After what amount of bloodshed? We just don't know much at all about the opposition, so how can we bank on a smooth transition? If the cost of engaging in some kind of process is that Assad stays in power a bit longer, I am prepared to accept it: better than thousands more dead. Besides, what about the regional repercussions: what will happen in Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq if instability or chaos reigns in Syria?²⁸⁶

However, he conceded that those views were far from unanimous and that, as regime repression intensified, casualties mounted and the prospects of meaningful reforms dwindled, pressure on the administration to toughen its stance – from Congress and the media among others – was growing. In mid-May, it imposed a first set of sanctions; by mid-June, in response to events in Jisr al-Shughur, administration officials hardened their rhetoric,²⁸⁷ though still falling far short of France's posture, for example, and of what critics demanded – including such steps as proclaiming that Bashar had to go, withdrawing the U.S. ambassador, seeking referral of regime officials to the International Criminal Court and sanctioning the energy sector.²⁸⁸

Until recently, the administration had refrained from declaring Assad "illegitimate", a move many within the Syrian opposition and protest movement urged it to take.²⁸⁹ In response to the attack by regime supporters against the U.S. embassy, that changed. On 11 July, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the first to state that Bashar had "lost legitimacy", that was followed the next day by President Obama who asserted: "You're seeing President Assad lose legitimacy in the eyes of his people".²⁹⁰

that is impossible. The same regime weaker ... automatically falls". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2011.

²⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2011.

²⁸⁷ See Hillary Clinton, "There is no going back in Syria", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 June 2011.

²⁸⁸ See Jay Solomon, "U.S. pushes to try Syria regime", *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2011; Madeleine Albright and Marwan Muasher, "Assad deserves a swift trip to The Hague", *The Financial Times*, 28 June 2011.

²⁸⁹ A Syrian intellectual explained: "Many people are just waiting for the U.S. to declare Bashar illegitimate. Because of the widespread belief in U.S. omnipotence, that would in a sense be read as the beginning of the end." Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

²⁹⁰ On 11 July, in the wake of the attack by pro-regime demonstrators on the U.S. embassy, Secretary of State Clinton said, "from our perspective, [Bashar] has lost legitimacy ... President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing in-

Syria undoubtedly presents a conundrum for the international community. Tools are limited. Military intervention would be extremely risky and – given the potential for civil war in Syria and an expanded conflict region-wide – highly inadvisable. Besides, the protracted Libyan conflict – coming atop the Iraqi experience – clearly has diminished any appetite for another military adventure. Sanctions have been imposed and, wisely, have remained relatively narrowly focused on regime-affiliated persons; going beyond that would threaten to harm ordinary civilians, an outcome that almost certainly would be counterproductive, as witnessed in Iraq.

A UN Security Council resolution denouncing regime practices potentially could increase pressure on the regime and accentuate its isolation; however, it would be essentially of symbolic value and, in any event, efforts to that end deployed by France and the UK, with U.S. backing, have been stymied.²⁹¹ Stark splits remain between members who argue that the Security Council cannot sit idly by and those who assert that NATO has far exceeded its mandate under Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising the use of force in Libya and voice concern that a Syria resolution could be a first step toward a similar escalation.²⁹² In addition to opposition from Russia, which

has close ties to the Syrian regime,²⁹³ resolution sponsors could not guarantee the backing of China, Brazil, India and South Africa, all of whom referred to the Libyan precedent as strongly influencing their position, or of Lebanon.²⁹⁴

In short, although the regime's downfall almost certainly would have dramatic repercussions on the regional balance of power – indeed, far more dramatic than Mubarak's ouster, at least in the short term – members of the international community by and large have adopted a wait-and-see approach. Regime assertions notwithstanding, this remains a domestic crisis whose dynamics are not predominantly determined by foreign interference. Indeed, this situation has prompted many participants in the protest movement and their supporters to lament what they consider to be the international community's pusillanimity, as they feel left to their own devices.

Although their frustration and even anger are understandable, the world's attitude – its motivations aside – might well be a blessing in disguise. Feeling its survival at stake, the regime is unlikely to respond to international pressures, regardless of their provenance. Ultimately, the burden rests on the protesters to counter the regime's divisive tactics, reassure citizens – and in particular members of minority groups – who remain worried about a successor regime, and build a political platform capable of rallying broad public support.

As the crisis unfolds, accordingly, the international community should be guided by the following broad principles:

Keeping the spotlight on human rights violations. To the extent this can act as a deterrent, it is of course desirable. In this regard, visits by the U.S. and French ambassadors to the embattled city of Hama, even as fears of a regime crackdown grew, were welcome, possibly discouraging the regime from going too far. The further step, advocated by many, of declaring the regime illegitimate and calling on Bashar to leave might well be emotionally satisfying but politically questionable. To begin, it begs the question of whence this regime (or most others in the region) derived its legitimacy in the first place; it also inevitably would

vested in him remaining in power". *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2011. For the President's remarks, see *The New York Times*, 13 July 2011. A Syria-based analyst commented: "It's a mistake for the U.S. to decree that Bashar has or lacks legitimacy – and even more mistaken for the U.S. to do that not on the basis of the regime's treatment of its own people, but on the basis of its treatment of the U.S. embassy". Crisis Group interview, 12 July 2011.

²⁹¹ On 25 May, France, Germany, Portugal and the UK circulated to Security Council members a draft resolution condemning the government crackdown. While explicitly condemning the "systematic violation of human rights . . . by the Syrian authorities" and calling for an "immediate end to the violence" and the "launch [of] a credible and impartial investigation" into attacks on demonstrations, the draft resolution did not refer to international sanctions. It did, however, call on states to "exercise vigilance and prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to the Syrian authorities of arms and related materiel of all types" and requested the Secretary-General to "report on implementation of this resolution", thus keeping Syria on the Security Council agenda". Copy of the draft Security Council resolution obtained by Crisis Group, New York, 25 May 2011.

²⁹² A Security Council Ambassador explained: "If Libya had not happened, there would have been a resolution on Syria straight away". Many Security Council members, he argued, were afraid that the P3 would push for escalation if the Council took such a step on Syria, while also fearing that they would be getting involved again in a situation "with those who have no end game in mind." Crisis Group interview, New York, 29 June 2011.

²⁹³ See "Nuclear report on Syria may augur punitive action", *The Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 2011; *The New York Times*, 9 June 2011.

²⁹⁴ Despite attempts to water down the resolution's language in order to satisfy the concerns of its detractors and intensive efforts on the part of the EU to lobby Brazil and South Africa, no further support was forthcoming, and the resolution eventually was withdrawn without a vote. Further attempts by some Council members to have the body condemn the violence through other mechanisms, such as a non-binding Security Council presidential statement, also have failed thus far, notably because of Lebanon's position (presidential statements must be adopted unanimously).

lead many to ask about the next step – if the regime must go, what is the international community prepared to do to achieve this?

Ultimately, what matters is the judgment of the Syrian people; while many clearly wish to topple the regime, others have yet to reach that conclusion. A premature determination by the international community potentially could be viewed by those Syrians as undue interference in their affairs.²⁹⁵ Likewise, the question of the International Criminal Court must be dealt with extremely carefully; as the Libyan case illustrates, precipitate action could well limit the possibility of a negotiated political settlement.

Ruling out any type of military intervention, including the provision of weapons to the opposition. Indeed, inasmuch as the protest movement's best chance is if it remains peaceful – the regime being far more adept at dealing with an armed than an unarmed opposition – Syria's neighbours should step up efforts to prevent any weapons smuggling.

Ensuring that sanctions remain targeted and focused on regime officials, avoiding any harm to ordinary citizens. The international community also should consider articulating a forward-looking program of assistance to support economic recovery in the event the regime were to collapse or in the unlikely scenario that it were to implement far-reaching reforms deemed acceptable by the protest movement.

Seeking greater consistency. Although no two cases are alike, discrepancies in the international community's treatment of various instances of human rights abuses in the region unquestionably undercut its moral stance and thus reduce the effectiveness of its policies. Damascus is quick to depict Western attitudes as oblivious to the Palestinians' plight, and others highlight excessive Western – and in particular U.S. – complacency toward Bahraini repression of its citizens.

VI. CONCLUSION

The tug of war between regime and protesters has taken on the appearance of a prolonged stalemate. The protest movement has grown but has had difficulty crossing the next, critical threshold – namely, reaching Damascus. The regime has settled into a pattern of continued repression and the promise of reform that, it hopes, might help it gradually regain control, but its loss of credibility and the degree of popular opposition make its victory highly unlikely. Still, that both sides are encountering difficulties does not mean the status quo can long be sustained. The economy is experiencing a severe crisis; as discussed, its collapse could well precipitate the regime's demise. Alternatively, the power structure might crumble from within, as the security services reach the conclusion that they must defend what can be defended – Allawite villages where their families already have sought refuge – rather than what cannot – a power structure that offers no clear or realistic prospect that it will prevail.

If and when this moment arrives and the regime falls, Syrians will have no option but to start almost entirely from scratch. A weak and demoralised army, whose role in the current crisis has earned it no respect, cannot constitute the backbone of an emerging state. The police are notoriously corrupt and unpopular, as is the justice system as a whole. Elected members of parliament are wholly unrepresentative. Much of the opposition in exile will remain distrusted by those who stayed inside. Within Syria there are no pre-existing, fully-fledged political parties. Ethnic and sectarian fault lines run deep in a highly divided society. With powerful and, so far, determined security services, feeble state institutions and fragile social structures, Syria offers a stark contrast with Egypt and Tunisia, where weak regimes coexisted with relatively strong states – in terms of their institutions – and relatively strong societies – in terms of their degree of cohesion and organisation.

Reacting to this reality, many observers have concluded that civil war is the most likely outcome in the event of the regime's fall. One ought not dismiss this scenario outright, but it is far from inevitable. Syrian society has proved remarkably able to resist the temptation of sectarian strife. Sectarian feelings have surfaced strongly during the crisis, but so have kinship ties, local identities and an unprecedented sense of national unity.

In a country whose historiography has long been dominated by Baathist propaganda, it is striking to witness protesters rediscovering and reclaiming, through their slogans, the full range of national symbols. In a sense, Syrian patriotism no longer is merely a tedious and dogmatic exercise imposed by the authorities; it is also the signal of a rising and increasingly assertive popular culture. This

²⁹⁵ The regime's almost hysterical and wholly unacceptable reaction to U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford's and French Ambassador Eric Chevalier's visits to Hama – in particular the organisation of demonstrations in front of the U.S. and French embassies – certainly suggests its belief that it can gain politically by claiming Western and in particular American interference. The Syrian foreign ministry denounced Ford's trip as unauthorised, though U.S. officials denied this. Syrian Arab News Agency, 8 July 2011. Authorities accused him of meeting with saboteurs and attempting to sow "destruction" and "*fitna*" (sectarian strife). Syrian Arab News Agency, 9 July 2011.

clearly has put the regime on the defensive, as demonstrated by its use of the national flag in ever greater numbers and sizes. The challenge, if the regime collapses, will be to ensure that national pride in this collective achievement and the ensuing sense of responsibility overcome whatever centrifugal tendencies might exist.

Syrians and others look with anxiety at what happened in Iraq and Lebanon, cautionary tales that feed the sense sectarian strife is inevitable. Yet these precedents can be highly misleading. In both, the disastrous outcome was less the product of innate antagonisms than of deeply flawed political systems and massive – and counterproductive – external interference that led, in the Iraqi case in particular, many citizens to forsake any sense of responsibility and to rely entirely on the occupying force.²⁹⁶

Nor is the absence of a clear, identifiable alternative to the current regime necessarily a recipe for chaos. In this regard, the prolonged nature of the uprising as well as its decentralised, provincial character could prove an asset. A local leadership has had a chance to emerge and, during a future transition process, could well develop and consolidate its role in towns and cities across the country, taking upon itself the responsibility of running municipalities, while resisting attempts by returning exiles or Damascus-based elites to hijack the political process.

Risks abound, to be sure, as question marks still surround the reactions of ordinary Syrians, the shape of the protest movement and the role of some of its more violent or Islamist elements. But if Arab uprisings are the story of societies taking their future into their own hands and governing themselves, the Syrian people deserve no less than any other respect for their right and ability to do so.

Damascus/Brussels, 13 July 2011

²⁹⁶ Tellingly, in a society as divided as Iraq's, where all institutions had been thoroughly gutted by a combination of mismanagement, international sanctions and extensive looting, hardly any reprisal killings took place in the early stages of the 2003 U.S. occupation. The first instances of sectarian violence occurred in mid-2004, after a full year of political and security vacuum. A skewed transition process set the stage for broader confrontation as of 2006. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006. The lack of a sense of responsibility among Iraqis, who expected the occupying forces to assume theirs, was a key factor in generating this outcome.

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates nine regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in fourteen additional locations (Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Bujumbura, Damascus, Dili, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Seoul). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka,

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