

Syria Alert

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The Arab League Initiative: Prospects for a way out of the violence in Syria

Eight months after the Syrian people decided to struggle for freedom and reclaim their human dignity, the situation on the ground has changed dramatically. The scenario of peaceful transition has disappeared in the midst of the massive violence on the ground. The only hope on the table for a political way out is the Arab League plan.

In this Syria Alert policy brief, IKV Pax Christi recommends uniting efforts to bolster the Arab League plan as a means of protecting civilians in Syria and of de-escalating the violence on the ground in order to open the way for a political process for transition towards democracy. The international community should specifically promote: 1. An observers mission; 2. A targeted and effective sanctions mechanism; 3. Dealing with the rapid militarisation of the uprising and fostering unified action.

Reality on the ground has changed, but have the strategies of the international community?

Eight months after the start of the Syrian uprising, prospects for a peaceful transition to democracy have faded. Even if President Bashar al-Assad were to step down today, the country has been deeply damaged in recent months. Tens of thousands of people have been directly affected: more than 4000 killed, tens of thousands of injured, imprisoned or disappeared and thousands of displaced persons. This huge number of directly-affected persons, in combination with the effects of the sectarian mobilization by the regime, the proliferation of small arms, the deep polarization of society and the role of outside forces pose serious challenges for a transition period. Bashar al-Assad has succeeded in creating the scenario that he has always used as a threat: me or chaos.

In recent weeks the number of defections from the Syrian army has risen and the actions of the Free Syrian Army have become bolder. They feel forced to use military power to protect civilians against the attacks of the Syrian army, security services and *Shabiha* (militias supporting the Assad-family). At the same time, the leaders of the protests and the political opposition are calling for the preservation of the nonviolent character of the revolution. The Free Syrian Army has, however, become a fact on the ground that can no longer be ignored.

While, at the beginning of the uprising, the protesters were calling for reforms, the excessive violence with which they were confronted made their calls shift towards toppling the regime and today they are even calling for the execution of the president. This underlines the bitterness and pain inflicted on the people and the severity of the polarisation between government and opposition. While the objectives of the international community were initially to end human rights violations and promote reforms, various countries have now called upon President Bashar al-Assad to step down. There is, however, no clear unified stance, nor a clear objective of the pressure being put on the Syrian government.

- Given the reality on the ground, protection of civilians should be the focus of political action by the international community. All actions towards Syria should be measured and weighed on their contribution to the protection of civilians. This should be the prime agenda of the international community.
- A unified strategy by the Arab states, the Western states and the non-aligned countries is the only way to de-escalate the violence in Syria and prevent the deepening and expansion of the conflict. Their efforts should all be aimed at one shared objective: To mitigate violence, prevent further conflict and promote a political transition process that is as peaceful as possible.

The Arab League Plan

While the Western countries have not much political leverage left in Damascus and the non-aligned countries still hesitate to take a clear stand on Syria, the Arab League plan agreed upon on 2 November is the only political initiative on the table that could help to de-escalate the violence on the ground and open a political process towards transition. The Arab Peace plan that Syria accepted includes a number of measures, such as an end to all violence, the release of all prisoners arrested in connection with the uprising, clearing all cities and residential areas of all manifestations of military force and allowing Arab League observers and Arab and national media to move freely around the country and document what is happening.¹

With Syria's failure to implement the agreement, the Arab League moved on 12 November to suspend Syria's participation in the Arab League until it implements the above-mentioned agreement to work on ways to protect civilians, to consider political and economic sanctions against the Syrian government, to call on member states to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus and to engage in meetings with the Syrian opposition.

The recent actions by the Arab League towards Syria were significant. It is the first time that the Arab League countries have acted so decisively and with such a majority agreement towards a member. It is a sign that the Arab League has really been affected by the Arab uprisings and that its character is changing from "the club of dictators" towards a regional organization that is sincerely concerned about the people in, and the progress of, the region.

¹ <http://www.arableagueonline.org/wps/wcm/connect/e7f5aa8048ed17fdb35fd7abaae88c3/syria+11-2011.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

- The EU should cooperate with all relevant international actors, such as the Arab League, Turkey and the non-aligned countries, on a unified strategy for ensuring the implementation of the Arab League plan with the focus on the following issues.

Observers

One of the most promising elements of the Arab League plan is the deployment of observers to monitor the implementation of the plan. Deployment of such an observer mission could have a de-escalating effect on violence on the ground, if indeed the size of the mission is sufficient and if they get access to all regions in Syria. International efforts should now be aimed at ensuring such a mission gets off the ground.

- The EU and other international actors should support the Arab League Initiative to deploy observers in Syria. It is crucial though that the ownership stays with the Arab League, as the EU and the US are perceived in Syria as too confrontational and behind conspiracies.
- In addition to observers from Arab countries, the non-aligned countries such as South Africa, Brazil, India, China, could play a role in the promotion of an observer mission, since they still have credibility with the Syrian government.
- Agree on a plan to deal with non-compliance by the Syrian government and continuing reports of violence. This could include actions within the UN framework or with the ICC.

Sanctions

Another key element of the Arab League actions towards Syria is the threat of political and economic sanctions if Syria continues to fail to implement the Arab League plan. This would mean a serious escalation of international measures against Syria and therefore have to be targeted, limited in time, with clear goals and part of the above-mentioned overall strategy to protect civilians, mitigate violence and promote a transition process that is as peaceful as possible.

The sanctions that the EU has been stepping up since May against the Syrian leadership and those responsible for human rights violations seem to have had an impact. It has to be kept in mind, however, that sanctions are not an aim, they should be an instrument for enforcing political strategies. And as mentioned above, the political strategies they are supposed to enforce, lack clarity and unity.

At all times, the effect and impact of sanctions have to be monitored. This should include monitoring of undesired or unexpected side effects. It is crucial that the international sanctions regime is submitted to a transparent and impartial monitoring mechanism. There is a risk that the sanctions might affect civilians disproportionately or be used by the Syrian government to mobilize public support against the international forces imposing these sanctions. As we see now, for example, diesel (*mazot*) and cooking gas have become scarce. There are a number of reasons for this besides the sanctions, including an early winter season and distribution policies, but it can be easily framed and perceived as the sole effect of sanctions.

- The EU should work with the Arab League, Turkey and other relevant actors on a unified sanctions policy on the basis of an up-to-date shared strategic objective as proposed above. Sanctions are not a policy but an instrument for enforcing policy.
- When clearly linked to that strategic objective, sanctions have to be targeted and limited in time. They should serve to protect civilians, not affect them negatively. An exit strategy has to be developed to avoid a situation of years of sanctions without results, such as in Iraq, Zimbabwe or Cuba.
- The EU should establish a mechanism to periodically and independently review the effect and impact of sanctions. The EU should make these findings public.

Militarization of the revolution

The ongoing militarization of the Syrian revolution, i.e. the growing role of defected soldiers and armed supporters, is a risk. It can drag the country into prolonged armed conflict. While Syria was always one of the Arab countries with the lowest proliferation of small arms, numbers of small arms have increased significantly. The Baath party has armed and trained its supporters and the militias that are not under government control play an important role in the violence against civilians. On the other hand, people have been arming themselves over recent months in an effort to protect themselves or join the armed uprising. This means violence can easily get out of control and will pose a serious threat to the normalization of society in a post-conflict phase.

In addition, the militarization of the revolution adds to the risk of Syria becoming a battleground for the geo-political power struggle going on in the region. Iran and Russia are arming the government. The Free Syrian Army may get support from Turkey and other countries, Saudi Arabia may support parties in order to counter Iranian influence, etc. This can lead to a proxy war such as we have seen in Lebanon and Iraq and which will also likely have a sectarian angle.

- It is, therefore, crucial that the Syrian National Council and international actors such as the EU and NATO open military diplomacy channels with the Free Syrian Army with the aim of ensuring that the Syrian uprising stays under civilian, not military, leadership. The Syrian National Council should deal with the Free Syrian Army as a fact on the ground and coordinate strategies.
- The EU and other relevant actors should be aware and raise awareness of the risk of supporting armed groups inside Syria. This will start off a spiral of proliferation and militarization that could lead to a proxy war by regional and international forces inside Syria. Such a conflict would likely have a sectarian dimension.

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