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Rosiny, Stephan

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rosiny, S. (2013). *Syria: power sharing as an alternative to regional conflagration*. (GIGA Focus International Edition, 9). Hamburg: GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies - Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-367679>

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Syria: Power Sharing as an Alternative to Regional Conflagration

Stephan Rosiny

On 21 August 2013, an estimated 1,400 people died in a poison gas attack in the suburbs of the Syrian capital Damascus. As a result, the United States and its allies were faced with the decision of whether to use direct military intervention in Syria, 30 months after the outbreak of the uprising and two years after it had escalated into bloody civil war.

Analysis

An external military strike against the Syrian regime would have permanently shifted the complex nexus of local, regional and international actors and interests in Syria. Such an action would have been unlikely to resolve the conflict, but would have quite possibly exacerbated it.

- In the third year of the uprising in Syria, there is no sign of a solution. Neither the regime nor the broad spectrum of opposition forces appears capable of winning this destructive power struggle. There are strong indications that there will (almost) only be losers in the end.
- There are numerous external actors involved in the Syrian conflict who financially, diplomatically and militarily support either the regime or the various opposition camps. This is what saw the initial insurrection turn into a civil war; and the civil war, into a proxy war. Today, Syria is center stage of the struggle for the reconfiguration of the Middle East after the Arab Spring.
- An alternative to military intervention would be to exert political pressure on the participants to resolve their conflict through nonmilitary means and to develop a negotiated power-sharing arrangement.
- The accession of Syria to the Chemical Weapons Convention on 14 October 2013 has presented an opportunity for further negotiated solutions by bringing the previously isolated Bashar al-Assad regime back to the international negotiating table. Now, regional and international actors must push both the regime and the opposition to engage in serious talks. Achieving this in the context of Geneva II negotiations (for which have been scheduled for 22 January 2014) may be unrealistic considering the extensive preconditions of both sides. Without a negotiated compromise, however, the most likely outcome will be regional conflagration.

Keywords: Syria, post-Arab Spring, civil war, proxy war, Geneva II

Syria in the Context of the Arab Spring

By early November 2013, there were an estimated 120,000 deaths – of which more than 40,000 were civilians. Two million refugees, including more than one million children and young people, have fled to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. In addition, there are over four million internally displaced persons. Thus, almost one-third of the total population of 22.5 million has had to flee their homes. Moreover, 1.2 million residences have been destroyed.¹ How did the Syrian war reach this incredible level of violence and destruction? What effect would an international military strike have had, and what options are there to stop the fighting?

The uprising in Syria can only be understood in the context of the Arab Spring, which has been disrupting the existing system of authoritarian rule in the Middle East since December 2010. With the ousting of the Tunisian and Egyptian leaders in January 2011 and February 2011, respectively, and the massive protest movement demanding the overthrow of the autocratic rulers in Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, regimes appeared to be falling like dominoes.

Syria was initially an exception. And although the call for a “day of rage” on 4 February 2011 through the social networks of Twitter and Facebook proved popular (achieving 12,000 “likes” on the latter), noteworthy demonstrations – unlike in most Arab countries – remained absent in Syria in early 2011. Two contrasting explanations can be found for this. First, Bashar al-Assad still enjoyed relatively high popularity compared to other Arab despots because he took a clear stand against unpopular US policies in the Middle East and the Israeli occupation of Arab territory. Along with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon (and the Palestinian Hamas until 2011), Syria belongs to the “axis of resistance,” whose leaders had high approval ratings in the Middle East up until 2010. Second, Bashar’s father, Hafez al-Assad, brutally quelled an armed revolt in Hama in February 1982, which resulted in a high degree of reluctance to carry out protests.

In mid-March 2011, the first major protest rallies also occurred in Syria. As feared, the regime reacted with heavy-handed force, which – as had

already been seen in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya – had the opposite effect of what was intended: it continually created new “martyrs,” whose funerals were used as occasions for renewed protests and repression. The government crackdown alienated the population and drove more people to side with the insurgents; young people (children, in fact, in the Syrian case) protested alongside their parents, extended family and neighbors, as well as other residents in their villages and districts.

For a long time, the protests were restricted to peripheral areas such as Dar’a and cities like Homs and Hama (Leenders 2012). The opposition in Syria is deeply divided into ideological and political schools of thought as well as ethnic/confessional groups that greatly differ in their methods, allies and goals. The only thing they have in common is their call for the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. Unsurprisingly, there are a multitude of visions for the post-Assad period, including liberal-democratic, nationalist and socialist designs, as well as various plans for radical Islamic rule and separatist projects.

However, Assad can still rely on the support of a significant part of society and the state apparatus. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the army and the security apparatus have remained on the side of the ruler – even though desertions have been a particularly frequent occurrence since mid-2011. The ardent supporters of the “Arab socialist” Baath ideology and the “axis of resistance” see the insurrection as an attempt by the United States and Israel to divide Syrian society and to break resistance against the “US-Zionist project” in the region. Beneficiaries of the regime, to which some sections of the Sunni bourgeoisie belong, are worried about the privileges with which they are rewarded in Syria’s dirigiste economy for their loyalty. Members of religious and ethnic minorities in particular are fearful that a rebel victory would lead to a rise in radical Islam and Sunni Arab chauvinism.

Sectarianism and Regionalization

Syrian society exhibits a particular ethnic/confessional diversity. In addition to the Sunni Arab majority (60–65 percent), there are Alawite Shia (12 percent), followers of various Christian churches (10 percent), Kurds (10–15 percent), Druze (3

¹ Current refugee numbers can be found at: <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>>.

percent), Twelver Shia (2 percent), Ismailis, Yazidis, and many other small ethnic and confessional communities. In the state and security apparatus, members of the Alawite community are overrepresented, whereas the revolt is mainly supported by Sunni Arabs. This reinforces sectarian enemy stereotypes and emanates a pattern of conflict in the region. Syria is closely linked to Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies through ethnic/confessional, kinship and political ties, as well as through labor migrants and refugees. Members of ethnic/confessional communities, tribespeople, and supporters of Islamist ideologues across the borders are providing money, weapons and fighters to “their” brethren. The events in Syria are inversely affecting neighboring countries, where the differences between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, and Islamists and secularists mark partly identical political poles.

A key factor in this development is that those residents identify primarily with their own “community of fate” (usually an ethnic, a kinship or a confessional community, or an exclusivist political ideology like ethnic nationalism and Islamism) and much less so with the common nation-state. They form strong sub- and trans-national “we groups.” Such groups offer their members identity and protection in times of crisis, while interpreting criticism and attacks from outside as (often existentially) threatening. Even followers of various ideological schools of socialism, nationalism and Islamism frequently treat each other as essentialist enemies and regard themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of their groups.

These identity communities are relevant in the Middle East since both states and societies are comparatively underdeveloped. They lack formal structures that treat inhabitants, irrespective of their origin and religious beliefs, as equal citizens and that integrate them into a reliable framework of rules and institutions. Many regimes in the Middle East perform functions of the modern state – such as security, justice and conflict mediation, education, social services and the regulation of the markets – in only a rudimentary manner. State security forces are more an instrument of control than of ensuring the public’s safety, while the judiciary is obedient to the regime and inaccessible to many residents. State charitable aid is dependent on the good behavior of the receiver.

The political and economic elite is composed of only a few families.

People gain access to opportunities, resources and information not so much through government institutions, open-to-all civil society organizations and critical media, but rather through closed networks in their respective “we-groups”. Tribes, clans, and religious communities, as well as ruling parties such as the Syrian Baath Party, act as collectives that seek power and that produce and promote their own respective “truth.” In this context, the state is the “prey” and not a counterbalance within society. In the Syrian uprising, these structures clearly manifested themselves and contributed to the violent escalation. Thus in a worst-case scenario, the civil war in Syria could be the precursor to a new regional crisis. Evidence of this can be found in the overthrow of the Egyptian government in early July 2013 and its violent repercussions; the fragile state-building processes in Libya, Tunisia and Yemen; continued unrest in Bahrain; the threats of civil war in Lebanon and Iraq; and the domestic political crises in many other countries in the region, such as in Algeria and Turkey.

The course of the Arab Spring reflects the ambivalence of this situation. On the one hand, the majority of people are disappointed and angry about the unjust, corrupt and degrading access to resources and opportunities under authoritarian regimes. “Bread, freedom and dignity” was the main slogan of the protesters. On the other hand, they interpret the causes of the structural problems as the personal failure of a ruler, as the collective discrimination of their own community or as the moral misconduct of other faiths. As soon as the corrupt leaders are overthrown, the own group enjoys more privileges and the “true” doctrine is in power, they expect an immediate improvement in their condition. The current developments in Egypt show how quickly this can lead to disappointment and renewed regime change.

From Peaceful Protest to Civil War and Proxy War in Syria

With a few exceptions, the protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime remained peaceful during the first half-year. From the very beginning, however, the regime used disproportionate force against civilians in the hope of nipping initially lo-

calized protests in the bud and deterring further unrest elsewhere. The protests witnessed their first peak in summer 2011, when some members of the security forces refused the order to fire and deserted. They and other volunteers came together to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which began an armed rebellion. Despite increased repression through the use of tanks, artillery, combat aircraft, missiles and chemical weapons, the regime enjoyed less and less success in quashing the erupting armed uprisings in various parts of the country. This power shift was due in large part to the battle-hardened foreign militias, radical Islamic jihadists in particular, who had been intervening against the regime since the beginning of 2012 and increasingly providing the uprising with a religious character (International Crisis Group 2012). They have an estimated 6,000–15,000 fighters – though they themselves claim to be 30,000 strong.² These militias come from various Middle Eastern countries, Turkey, Afghanistan, the Caucasus and Southeast Asia, while about one-tenth (600–1,000) come from Europe. For these rebels, Syria is currently the center of their global “holy war,” in which they are fighting against “un-Islamic” regimes, “renegade Shiites,” “the West” and more generally against everything and everyone that contradicts their ideologically narrow, militant, radicalized ideas of Islam.

Since mid-2012, fighting between opposition militias has been increasing – above all, between members of the FSA, jihadists and Kurdish militias. Syria has been divided into a patchwork in which various armed groups and warlords control their own territories and have established their own quasi-governmental regimes. In mid-2013, there were an estimated 1,200 armed groups. They quickly recruit new members, whom they could potentially lose to other groups that are more efficient, better equipped and better remunerated. This is how “moderate” rebel groups of the FSA lost fighters to jihadist networks like Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front. Since claiming autonomy in the summer of 2013, northeastern Kurdish associations have been attacked by FSA and Nusra Front groups. The regime – which consists mainly of Alawites – has also contributed to sectarianization by using the Alawite militia Shabiha (“ghost”) to carry out its brutal counterinsurgency dirty work.

² Syria’s Western Jihadists, in: *The Daily Beast*, 4.8.2013, <www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2013/08/04/western-jihadists-head-to-syria-to-fight.html>.

The conflict has long since met the criteria of a civil war. Through the extensive participation of foreign actors, it has escalated more and more into a proxy war:

- between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey over regional hegemony;
- between Sunnis and Shiites over denominational dominance;
- within the Sunni camp between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt under Mursi over the role as the leading “Sunni” power;
- between different schools of Sunni Islam over religious interpretational sovereignty;
- between Israel and Iran over Israel’s and Palestine’s “right to exist” and over Iran’s (and Israel’s) nuclear program;
- between Arabs, Kurds, Turks and Persians over cultural privileges;
- and between the United States and Russia (the two world powers) and the United Kingdom and France over regional and global influence.

In Syria, these actors are struggling for the fundamental reorganization of the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The Syrian regime is supported by Russia, China and Iran, as well as the non-state Lebanese Hezbollah. Active on the rebel side are Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Jordan and Libya (and also Egypt until Mursi’s fall). In addition, there are foreign private financiers and Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish parties supporting different political factions in Syria with weapons and militiamen. Israel intervened directly in the fighting, launching several air strikes against suspected government military installations and weapons convoys on their way to Lebanon.

Conversely, the conflicts are more frequently encroaching on neighboring countries. Syrian refugees, for instance, bring with them their traumatic experiences and their view of things. They reinforce political differences and ethnic/confessional resentment in the host countries. Foreign fighters return to their home countries with extremist political and religious enemy stereotypes and experience in guerrilla warfare, which militarizes political controversy. In Lebanon and Iraq, members of similar ethnic/confessional communities confront each other as in Syria. Both countries have already witnessed bombings and armed violence, which are associated with the Syrian civil war.

Both the regime and the rebels still seem determined to decide the conflict militarily. Both sides

are still too strong to be defeated, but too weak to secure victory. Each time one side receives reinforcements from its supporters, the other side is also upgraded as its allies follow suit. Furthermore, a “win solution” of one side over the other would only lead to further ethnic/confessional polarization in the region. For example, a Sunni-rebel victory would prompt Sunnis to encourage power corrections in other countries like Iraq and Lebanon; a victory for the “Shiite Alawite” regime, however, would strengthen anti-Shiite resentment in the region.

The Use of Chemical Weapons as a Turning Point

The civil war and the proxy wars would have presumably continued unabated had the use of poison gas in the suburbs of Damascus not occurred on 21 August 2013. This act led the US president, Barak Obama, to declare that a “red line” had been crossed, while several Western leaders proclaimed their determination to launch a military strike against the Syrian regime. Such action was probably prevented by a rhetorical “mistake” made by the US secretary of state, John Kerry, during a press conference on 9 September 2013. In responding to a question, he claimed that only Syria’s complete surrender of chemical weapons to the international community would prevent a military strike – a solution he himself did not expect. However, probably due to Russian pressure, the Syrian foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, announced on the same day that Syria was prepared to comply with the proposal. On 14 September 2013, Syria declared its readiness to join the UN Chemical Weapons Convention, and on 21 September 2013 – as required – it submitted a list of warehouses and production facilities for chemical weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). On 27 September 2013, UN Security Council Resolution 2118 confirmed the demands on Syria to chemically disarm, and OPCW inspectors began to oversee the destruction of chemical weapons and their production facilities in October.

A War with Nothing but Losers

External military intervention, even executed “surgically,” would not have reduced the suffering of the civilian population; rather, it would have prolonged the war, complicated the supervision of chemical weapons, impaired negotiations on a political settlement and encouraged a regional escalation of violence. Even territorially dividing Syria into small states to protect ethnic minorities – as has been put forward as a possible solution – would lead to new minority problems, if not internal ethnic cleansing and long-lasting border conflicts between the new units. It would also bring into question the territorial integrity of neighboring states whose minorities might feel encouraged to claim autonomy rights. The Syrian uprising has already intensified the Kurdish autonomy movement. The area inhabited by Kurds in northern Syria is now being referred to as “West Kurdistan” and maintains privileged relations with the autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq – something that could encourage Turkish Kurds to join this irredentist alliance.

The continued fighting and even a rebel victory could prove to be something of a boomerang for the supporting countries. The ideological radicalization of political Salafism into militant jihadism threatens even the conservative Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have promoted Salafism for decades. This is because the religious enemy of jihadism includes not only the “apostate” Shiites and the Western “crusaders” but also the “corrupt” Gulf monarchies. A “stage win” in Syria will inspire the jihadists to fight for (as they understand it) the “victory of Islam” in other countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, as well as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Consequently, the continuing war in Syria is having a negative impact on neighboring countries. An overspill of ethnic/sectarian tensions threatens Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan (International Crisis Group 2013). Many Turks are unhappy with the unilateral positioning of their government in the Syria conflict, as reflected in the protests and riots against the Islamist AKP government. Other supporters of the rebellion fear a strengthening of Islamism. For instance, Egyptians backed the military’s decision to depose President Mursi on 3 July 2013 following his call for jihad on 15 June 2013 to join the rebels against the Syrian regime.

The Syrian regime's external supporters, notably Russia and Iran, also face setbacks irrespective of whether the regime is victorious or defeated. Russia is interested in the preservation of the regime for geostrategic, military and economic reasons. Should the regime fall, Russia would be faced with a fundamental change in the Syrian alliance policy given that Putin is seen to be a close ally of Assad. Following the military regime changes in Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, Syria would be the latest case of a Middle Eastern country reorganizing its government structure without Russia's input – something that would constitute a severe loss of influence for Moscow. Furthermore, numerous arms deals, a stake in Syria's oil and gas production and Russia's naval base in the port of Tartus would all be under threat, as would be the repayment of substantial debts. Nevertheless, Russia's interests extend far beyond the economic; this is evidenced by Putin turning down a deal allegedly offered by Saudi prince Bandar bin Sultan that included a 15 billion USD weapons deal and a hedge for Russian gas supplies to Europe in exchange for Moscow reducing its support for the Syrian regime.³ However, such a "deal" would have undeniably cast doubt on Russia's credibility as a political partner.

The traumatic defeat in the war in Afghanistan in 1989 – which the Islamists at that time celebrated as a "victory over communism" – the war in the North Caucasus and the attacks by Islamist terror groups in Moscow explain Russia's fear of a strengthening and expansion of jihadism should the Syrian rebels come out on top. Nonetheless, Moscow's unconditional support of the Assad regime could backfire given that the brutality employed by the Syrian regime to fight the insurgents will only radicalize further. As a consequence, jihadists could increasingly come to view Russia as its main opponent instead of the United States.

Iran's motives, as well as the limits of its support of the Syrian regime, lie elsewhere. In Tehran's case, strategic reasons (Syria is the bridgehead to Iran's Lebanese and Palestinian partners) play a role alongside moral and religious reasons. During the First Gulf War (1980–1988), Syria was Iran's only Arab partner. Now, Tehran wants to

reciprocate by assisting its ally in difficult times. The Shiite "Islamic Republic of Iran" also considers itself, despite its pan-Islamic rhetoric, to be responsible for the protection of Shiites. In Syria, there are various Shiite shrines that have become the targets of attacks. Radical Sunnis see Shiites as apostatized "idolaters" – a belief from which they derive a legitimacy to kill Shiites. For that reason, Iran trains and equips Shiite militias that are deployed to Syria to support the regime and protect Shiite shrines and residential areas.

Yet, Iran's commitment is in danger of bringing about the opposite of what was intended. The country has seen itself as a protector of the "deprived" since the "Islamic Revolution" and has recognized the sequel to its own revolution in the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Its support, however, for the violent crackdown on the Syrian rebellion has undermined this revolutionary image. Also, the escalation of sectarianism in the Syrian civil war has seriously harmed Iran and its Shiite allies because most of the victims of the sectarian war in the region are Shiites, who only account for a minority. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has lost a significant amount of respect in Lebanon due to its military engagements on behalf of the Syrian regime. Sunni radicals have threatened revenge attacks, and bomb attacks on Shiite targets on 15 August and 19 November 2013 in southern Beirut resulted in the deaths of 22 and 30 people, respectively.

Power Sharing as an Alternative

It is high time for the blocking attitude of the regime *and* the opposition, as well as both sides' supporters, to be put aside and for a negotiated political solution to be sought. The key to bringing Assad to the negotiating table and getting him to make concessions lies with Russia and especially Iran, which alone could exert the necessary pressure on him. There are signs that the United States is prepared to recognize Iran's role in a possible solution. Russia and Iran should make it clear to the Assad regime that for them there is also a "red line" and that they are no longer prepared to offer unconditional support. Both countries have shown a keen interest in resolving the Syrian conflict politically. They will, however, only put pressure on the Syrian regime if their interests are taken into account. Conversely, they will

³ Saudi offers Russia deal to scale back Assad support – sources, in: Reuters, 7.8.2013, <www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/07/us-syria-crisis-saudi-russia-idUSBRE9760OQ20130807>.

demand that the opposition's Western and Middle Eastern partners urge the rebels to also engage in a negotiated solution without making Assad's renunciation of power a precondition. Moreover, Turkey and the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar should deprive the jihadists of any support, such as weapons, money and safe passage.

The complex web of actors and interests in Syria resemble the skill game Mikado: move one stick too vigorously, and it can have far-reaching consequences for all others and bring the entire structure to collapse. In conflict management, it is therefore necessary to consider the interactions of the individual parts. Only then can sustainable solutions be developed. There are no panaceas for this, but there are examples, experiences and experts (such as the UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi) that could prove helpful for the negotiating partners. In this deadlock, Syria and the external actors could learn from neighboring Lebanon, where a 16-year civil war (1975–1990) was ended with the compromise formula of "No victor, no vanquished."

A proportional power-sharing agreement between ethnic/confessional communities, such as in Lebanon, is not a cure-all to overcome the social divide in communities of origin. In the medium term, such a deal would threaten to solidify social fragmentation and make the state quarry to patronage networks. Therefore, power sharing can only serve as a tool of immediate crisis intervention to ease communities' fear of exclusion and extermination, to guarantee participation in power and to regulate political competition. A further step should be the establishment of integrative state institutions and the promotion of NGOs, which would promote interdenominational cooperation and gradually restore confidence between the adversaries. With time, a more developed, more functional state should emerge – a state that treats its citizens as equals with the same rights and obligations (Rosiny 2013).

The war in Lebanon – in which numerous external actors meddled via proxies, much like in Syria today – was ended in 1989/1990. The majority of stakeholders, both internal and external, had come to the conclusion that the risk of continued war exceeded the benefits of an improbable victory. Given the huge losses of the Syrian war, it is to be hoped that the local, regional and global actors arrive as quickly as possible at the same realization.

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■ The Author

Dr. Stephan Rosiny is a research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies. His research interests include Islamism, ethnic/confessional conflict and political systems in the East Arab region. He is head of the “New Power-Sharing Arrangements in Multi-Ethnic Arab States” research project, which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

E-Mail: <stephan.rosiny@giga-hamburg.de>, Website: <<http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/rosiny>>

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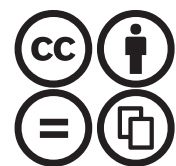
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