

Wadlow, René (2012): Syria: To Break the Downward Spiral.

It is necessary to consider what role NGOs might now play in Syria – particularly to support the mediation efforts of former UN secretary-general, Koffi Annan – in order to break what seems to be a continual downward spiral, with real dangers of civil war.

Mid-March 2011 in Syria, nonviolent protests and demands for limited reforms began and then were increasingly met by government violence. Discussions on what the United Nations could do to help the Syrian people and to speed up necessary reforms started quickly in both New York and Geneva. The appointment of the former UN secretary-general, Koffi Annan, as a joint UN-League of Arab States moderator at the end of February 2012 is the most recent efforts as we mark this one-year anniversary.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also been concerned, some acting directly – such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – others as members of the Observer Mission of the League of Arab States. Other NGOs, both Syrian, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and international have provided information and have proposed mediation.

It is worth while to analyse these efforts, to outline some of the strengths and weaknesses and to consider what role NGOs might play now to break what seems to be a continual downward spiral with real dangers of civil war, as fighting with heavy weapons continues and flows of arms from outside Syria to the opposition seems to be growing.

The protest movement in Syria began with a series of nonviolent actions inspired in part by the changes in Tunisia and Egypt. While there has always been opposition to the Ba'th-led government, the wide use of nonviolent techniques and the outline at least of a nonviolent strategy were new. At first, the government of Bashar al-Asad did not know how to react. There were some unilateral government measures to reduce the social-economic base of the opposition, in particular by granting citizenship to a quarter-million Kurds who had been denied citizenship and who were barred from voting, owning property, going to state schools or getting government jobs. The government had argued that they were not Syrians but Kurdish refugees who had fled from Turkey and Iraq. In fact, many were born in Syria, but the government did not want to add to the largest ethnic minority in Syria – some 15 percent of the country's 23 million. The government's hope was to keep the Kurds from joining the opposition and also to show some willingness to deal positively with long-standing demands. Although the Kurds have not been central to the continued opposition, they have not been supporters of the government either.

The Ba'th political movement – whose philosopher founder was Michel 'Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian – was an effort to be a secular, Pan-Arab revival. 'Aflaq had been educated at the Sorbonne in Paris and, in the spirit of the European Enlightenment, saw that political independence from France was not enough. There

was a need for an Arab rebirth with minds and attitudes radically reshaped – Ba’th meaning rebirth. ‘Aflaq’s nationalism was not based on any supposed purity of an Arab race nor was it narrowly chauvinistic. He defined the shackles of Arab society as tribalism, sectarianism, the oppression of women and the supremacy of landowners. In seeking to break these shackles, he turned to the enlightened face of Europe which educated Arabs admired. The chief ideological rival of the Ba’th was the Muslim Brotherhood with a pan-Islamic focus rather than just pan-Arab.

When Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970, while he shared the Ba’th philosophy, he decided to build his support on a sectarian base of minorities: his own Alawite along with Druzes, Isma’ilis and Christians. As a military man who had been part of the 1963 to 1970 Military Committee regime, he took measures to control the military, with minority members given generous allowances of all kinds – duty-free foreign imports, loans, and opportunities to speculate in very lucrative real estate. His son, Bashar, inherited and continued the system – one of the reasons for the devotion of much of the military and security leadership today.

After two weeks of demonstrations in March 2011, governments and UN Secretariat members discussed different possibilities of action against the backdrop of the UN Security Council resolution on Libya and the continued fighting in Libya then.

The representatives of China and Russia who had not blocked the resolution to use “all necessary force” to protect the civilian population in Libya, but who had grown increasingly ill-at-ease with the NATO-led attacks, did not want to open the door to a possible repeat over Syria. Thus, all possibility of action within the Security Council was blocked with the insistence on the part of China and Russia that the situation was an internal affair of Syria and did not pose a danger to regional peace.

Thus, the UN focus moved to Geneva and the UN Human Rights Council, for if events in Syria did not pose a danger to peace in the area, events were an open violation of UN human rights standards. Syria is a party to all the major UN human rights conventions. On Friday, 29th April 2011 a path-making Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council was held. A Special Session is the “highest profile” which the Council can give to a situation. It can be called on short notice, but before a Special Session is held, there are usually intense negotiations among governments. The representatives of non-governmental organizations also have a short time to prepare common positions and statements for a Special Session. Since NGOs speak after the governments, there is usually time for only a few statements prior to voting on the outcome resolutions. However, for this Special Session, government representatives stuck to their time limits, and 16 NGOs were able to speak even if few said anything which had not already been said by governments.

The human rights situation was well set out at the start by the deputy high commissioner for human rights, Ms. Kyung-Wha Kang from Korea:

“Information gathered since mid-March paints a disturbing picture: the widespread use of live fire against protestors; the arrest, detention, and disappearance of demonstrators, human rights defenders, and journalists;

the torture and ill-treatment of detainees; the sharp repression of press freedoms and other means of communication; and the attacks against medical personnel, facilities and patients.

Yet even these deplorable practices have been exceeded over the past week. According to reports, entire towns have been besieged. Tanks have been deployed and shelled densely-populated areas. The delivery of food has been impeded. Access to electricity has been cut. And transportation systems have been shut down. There have been reports of snipers firing on persons attempting to assist the injured or remove dead bodies from public areas.

We have noted with concern that military and security officers have been among those killed. Still, the preponderance of information emerging from Syria depicts a widespread, persistent and gross disregard for basic human rights by the Syrian military and security forces. Syrian and international human rights organizations have already documented more than 450 killings and around four times that number of injuries...

Let me conclude by emphasizing the importance of holding perpetrators of serious human rights violations accountable, and in this regard, the urgent need for an independent, impartial, effective and prompt investigation into recent events in Syria. The convening of this Special Session should not only convey to the people of Syria that the international community is aware of their plight and supports their struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms. It should affirm to people everywhere that the Human Rights Council will be resolute in ensuring justice for victims of human rights worldwide."

As with all serious UN meetings, the decisions have been negotiated before the meeting starts. There was broad agreement that the Human Rights Council would vote the creation of a Working Group for an independent, impartial investigation to be named by the president of the Council after consultation. Such a Working Group has been named but has not been able to enter the country to carry out interviews and other investigations. This had also been the case of the Working Group on the situation in Darfur which was not able to enter Sudan, and Israel did not allow the Working Group chaired by Justice Goldstone to enter Israel. Nevertheless, Working Group fact-finding is an important instrument in UN procedures and can be important in follow-up situations, especially if information is passed on to the International Criminal Court.

On 20th July 2011, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon called upon president Bashar al-Asad to organize an immediate inclusive dialogue so as to respond concretely to pressing grievances and longer term concerns of the Syrian people. President Asad himself on 20th June had called for such a national dialogue but presented few specifics as to what topics such a national dialogue would cover or how the participants would be chosen.

With the UN Security Council blocked by the veto of Russia and China and the General Assembly only able to make broad recommendations, the focus on Syria moved to an "all-Arab" approach. The League of Arab States – with a new dynamic

secretary-general, Nabil el-Arabi – took up the challenge and created an Observer Mission led by the Sudanese general Mohammed al-Dabi. The League of Arab States with the agreement of the Syrian government sent a 160-member Observer Force with a fact-finding mandate. Its presence could also have served in a peace-making role. The Observer Mission from the start had to work under difficult conditions. Some of the NGO members of the Observer Mission withdrew quickly saying that it was impossible to work objectively under the conditions imposed by the Syrian government and the continuing violence. Shortly afterwards, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States withdrew its observers. The Observer Mission was for practical purposes “dead”.

On behalf of the Association of World Citizens, I had proposed that the Saudi and Gulf States observers be replaced by Arab-speaking NGO representatives, but the League of Arab States had already decided that nothing could be carried on without Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. General al-Dabi had given up his command of the Observer Mission.

The League of Arab States returned responsibility for Syria to the United Nations. At the same time, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, followed by the Chinese vice foreign minister visited president Asad to sound out alternatives. After discussions, the UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon named the former secretary-general Koffi Annan as the joint UN-League of Arab States mediator. Koffi Annan is a skilled mediator, but he has few “cards in his hand”.

The situation is increasingly complex with regional and international rivalries and interests. Turkey is worried by the repercussions of instability in Syria for its own stability, especially in the Kurdish areas and a possible flow of refugees to Turkey. Iran has interests and is largely supporting the al-Asad government. There are implications for stability in Iraq, and there is currently an increased flow of arms from Sunni groups in Iraq to the opposition in Syria. Lebanon, which is unstable under the best of conditions, has already seen sparks of Sunni-Alawite tensions there. Saudi Arabia is a regional power and wants to be part of any evolution of the situation. Israel watches closely. Non-Middle East states also have interests: Russia, the USA, France – thus the European Union – and China. All watch and push their interests to the extent possible.

Since NGOs have limited power to influence the decisions of national governments, are there measures which we can take independently? The one NGO with its “foot in the door” is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has an internationally-recognized mandate for the protection of civilians in times of conflict, exchange of prisoners and provision of medical services. ICRC delegates in conflict zones have a good deal of possibility to work for cease-fires and other humanitarian measures. The ICRC can potentially open the way for other humanitarian NGOs to work on the care of refugees, women and children. The ICRC and other humanitarian aid organizations do not usually work on the broader areas of conflict transformation with its political implications, though everyone in the humanitarian field is aware of political and strategic issues.

No conflict transformation organization has a mandate recognized by governments in treaties as has the ICRC. However, most have consultative status with the United Nations. There are conflict transformation organizations which have worked with national government, but none are bound by treaties as is the ICRC. Nevertheless, there may be roles which NGOs can play in the Syrian context.

One is to facilitate a return of the opposition movements to a nonviolent position and ethic with a withdrawal to safe zones of the Free Syrian Army, who are mostly deserters from the regular Syrian Army and security forces. In recent protests in Damascus, some demonstrators carried palm fronds to indicate their peaceful intent. Is it too late to return to a "Palm Revolution"? Can movements move from nonviolence to violence and then return to a nonviolent ethic be credible?

There may be ways in which NGOs can work with the efforts of Koffi Annan. He is well aware of NGOs and humanitarian organizations. There may be ways to cooperate with his mediation efforts. There may also be ways in which NGOs can work independently on conflict transformation efforts. Until now the Syrian government has shown no signs of openness to such NGO activities. However, the situation is evolving rapidly, largely in a negative direction. Thus discussion and contingency planning among NGOs can be useful to see if there are ways that we can help to break the downward spiral.

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