

3.1. The civil war in Syria and the impotence of international politics

Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen

Entering the third year of the conflict, a lot of evidence points to the fact that the civil war in Syria will neither be settled politically nor decided militarily in the near future. Regime and rebels are locked in a battle for survival that does not permit any compromise. External supporters of both sides consider the conflict to be a zero-sum game with far-reaching, for some even existential, consequences for their own strategic position. With their diplomatic, financial and in part military support these external supporters are stoking up the conflict and strengthening the hardliners on both sides. This article analyzes the present and (foreseeable) future implications of the continuing civil war for Syria and the region. It also looks into the main factors that are responsible for the dynamics of the conflict's escalation and attempts to find entry points on the local, regional and international level which could reverse or at least halt these dynamics. Not least, it asks for sensible priorities of German foreign policy, a policy that ought to be geared towards preventing further escalation of violence, improving living conditions on the ground and creating advantageous starting conditions for the transition to a stable and inclusive post-Assad order.

Military situation and domestic balance of power

In Spring 2013, the military confrontation between the regime and rebels is continuing unabatedly. The regime has withdrawn its forces from large parts of the country. Various rebel groups control villages and smaller towns as well as rural areas in the southwest and southeast of the country and along the Lebanese and Turkish border. Parts of the Kurdish areas in the north and northeast are under the effective control of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), a PKK offspring.¹

Yet, the rebels have so far not succeeded in completely and lastingly controlling larger, contiguous areas or one of the major cities. Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Deir al-Zor are still partially controlled by the regime. What

¹ A regularly updated map on the armed conflict and the control of cities and border posts is offered by the website Political Geography Now: Syria Uprising Map, <http://www.polgeonow.com/search/label/syria>.

is more, the rebels are unable to protect the civilian population in the ‘liberated’ areas against attacks by the regular army. Since the rebels started offensives in Damascus and Aleppo in Summer 2012, the Assad regime has retaliated with large-scale devastation by bombing rebel-held areas with artillery, missiles and fighter jets. It has also attempted to recapture ‘liberated’ parts of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, if with varying success. In May 2013, the regime has regained control over strategic locations on the routes between Damascus and Beirut and Damascus and the Alawite inhabited coastal mountains.

The fighting has entailed massive effects on the civilian population. In mid-February 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, estimated that the number of deaths since the beginning of the uprising had risen to nearly 70,000.² Tens of thousands of arrested and missing persons add to the score. At the end of April 2013, the United Nations registered or listed for registration more than 1.4 million refugees in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.³ With this, the number of registered refugees has nearly tripled since the beginning of the year, with no slowdown in sight: in April alone, some 250,000 refugees were registered, double the number of January 2013. In addition, by mid-April, the number of internally displaced people was estimated at more than four million.⁴ Thus, more than one-quarter of the population of Syria has been displaced fleeing from the violence.

In the areas affected by fighting, public services have all but broken down. This affects medical care and schools but also public transport and garbage collection. The regime has also mostly stopped paying wages. At the same time, access to these areas is highly restricted; this also applies to humanitarian organizations. UN relief organizations and the International Red Cross, for example, can only work in those areas in which the government allows it to. Food, fuel and medicine are rare and expensive. In part, local coordination committees or revolutionary councils, charities and informal networks have been taking over public functions. Thus, a significant degree of self-organization is taking place at the local level, if with varying efficiency. Civilian and military

2 OHCHR: Statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Security Council, on February 12, 2013. New York 2013, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12990&LangID=E>.

3 UNHCR: Syria Regional Refugee Response. Information Sharing Portal, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

4 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA): Syrian Arab Republic: People in Need and IDPs by Governorate – as of 16 April 2013, <http://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-people-need-and-idps-governorate-16-april-2013>.

forces cooperate to maintain public order, to provide the people with food and medicine and to organize protest.⁵

What is missing on the side of the rebels in many areas, however, are clearly identifiable, widely accepted and accountable leaders. While the rebels have organized in local military councils, regional brigades, and a Higher Military Council, to date one cannot speak of a central command structure. More radical, Islamist brigades (such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* or *Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham*), amongst others, are not prepared to accept the authority of the Council and cooperate only on a case-by-case basis.⁶

Conflict dynamics

In Syria, both sides, regime and opposition, are fighting for their physical survival and are set on military victory. Compromise is therefore out of the question. Initiatives on starting a 'dialogue' – as the public address by President Bashar al-Assad in early January 2013 at the Damascus Opera House or the opposition leader's offer of talks during the Munich Security Conference one month later – are always accompanied by conditions and rhetoric which are not acceptable to the other side and are primarily intended to present the opponent as being responsible for the continuation of the violence.

The Syrian regime describes itself as the target of a concerted strategy followed by Israel, Western and pro-Western Arab states. The aim of this strategy, according to the regime, is to assert the interests of the West and Israel in the region with the help of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and to push back all those actors who resist such a re-organization of regional policy – i.e., the so-called axis of resistance, comprising Syria, Iran, *Hezbollah* and *Hamas*. To this end, the regime argues, the pro-Western states employ Islamist extremists and terrorists.

It seems that for the majority of the actors on the decision-making levels of the Syrian state and security apparatus, this ideological mindset still rationalizes and legitimizes their actions. In addition, minority groups (notably Alawites and Christians) increasingly fear collective acts of revenge and an Islamist order in case of regime change. By describing the rebels as 'extremists' and 'al-Qaeda terrorists', equipped and controlled by the United States and

5 See Doreen Khoury: *Losing the Syrian Grassroots. Local Governance Structures Urgently Need Support*, SWP Comments 9, Berlin 2013.

6 Hania Mourta / Anne Barnard: *Jihadists and Secular Activists Clash in Syria*, in: *New York Times*, January 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-war-developments.html?_r=0.

its Arab clients, in media loyal to the regime and in official statements, such minority fears are integrated into the regime's 'anti-imperialist' discourse. The leeway for compromise is correspondingly little, and the determination to fight out the conflict by all means regardless of costs is very high.

The escalation of violence has also contributed to the radicalization of the rebels. The share of fighters with a salafist or jihadist outlook has risen correspondingly. Additionally, more and more foreign jihadists flock into Syria.⁷ Even if the share of such fighters remains relatively small, the trend is cause for concern. It is accompanied by an increasing confessionalization of the conflict which is both stoked by the regime and the external sponsors of the rebels. Increasingly, the perception of a Sunni uprising (supported by the Sunni Gulf Kingdoms and Turkey) against an Alawite regime and its Shiite allies (Iran, *Hezbollah*, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government) is consolidated and thus provides those parts of the population, who are loyal to the regime or have not taken sides, with reasons to believe that their very existence is at stake and that there will be chaos and genocide if the regime falls.

The logic of a proxy war

Consequently, the domestic actors are caught in a vicious cycle of violence from which they could only free themselves with the help of external mediation or intervention. Instead, due to their respective strategic interests, external actors continue to stoke up the conflict in Syria.⁸ Iran interprets the events there (as it does the conflict over its nuclear program) as part of a comprehensive Western/ US-American/ Israeli strategy fighting the Islamic republic. Regime change in Damascus would, according to Iran, only be a precursor to regime change in Teheran. Iranian counterparts leave no doubt that Teheran will support its Syrian ally with all available means. Deliveries of energy, military supplies and consultants, and credit lines for imports are the practical implementation of this stance. Despite some criticism, Russia and China, too, continue to bolster the Assad regime economically (and Russia militarily) and

7 See Aaron Lund: Syrian Jihadism, UI Brief Nr.13, Stockholm 2012, <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/77409.pdf>; Elizabeth O'Bagy: Jihad in Syria, Middle East Security Report Nr.6, Washington 2012, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>; International Crisis Group: Tentative Jihad. Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, Middle East Report Nr.131, Brüssel 2012, www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/MiddleEastNorthAfrica/IraqSyriaLebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf.

8 See in more detail Muriel Asseburg / Heiko Wimmen: Syrien im Bürgerkrieg. Externe Akteure und Interessen als Treiber des Konflikts, SWP-Aktuell 68, Berlin 2012.

block its condemnation as well as global sanctions by their veto in the Security Council.

The external supporters of the Syrian opposition – first and foremost France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – have a similar far-reaching agenda like Iran, however, with opposite intentions. From the perspective of the Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the crisis in Syria offers an opportunity to roll back the influence of Teheran in the region, which has been on the rise since the 2003 Iraq war, and to strengthen their own position. Beyond this, some US-American (and Israeli) strategists hope that a defeat in the Levant would weaken Teheran sufficiently to force it to back down on other contentious issues, such as its nuclear program. It is also expected that the Lebanese *Hezbollah* would be weakened by a shift in power in Syria as the latter is the most important transit country for arms deliveries to the *Hezbollah* militias. At the same time, Damascus has considerable influence on other actors in Lebanon, which contributes substantially to *Hezbollah*'s dominant position in the country's power structure. Should the Assad regime fall, so the line of thinking, the risks of an attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities – in particular possible retaliation attacks of *Hezbollah* on Israel – would decrease. Regime change in Syria would thus make the military threat towards Iran more credible. It is mostly opposition forces with a variety of Islamist orientations who have benefited from financial and material support of the regional actors Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, while those with a more secular orientation have seen little support. This has clearly strengthened the more radical elements in Syria's opposition.

No way out of the impasse

External actors thus associate far-reaching, at times even existential, consequences for their own strategic position or their long-term political goals with the conflict in Syria. They are accordingly likely to continue their efforts in preventing any outcome of the civil war that, in their eyes, is disadvantageous. In the foreseeable future, the two camps in Syria can thus count on the influx of money and weaponry. Significant military successes of one party will nearly inevitably lead to a more intensive support for the other. As a consequence, it is unlikely that the civil war will soon be decided militarily. On the contrary, it is to be feared that the intensity and scope of the fighting as well as the number of victims and refugees will grow further, at least in the short term.

Chances for a political solution – as increasingly demanded by various actors (albeit with little consistency) – that is a compromise negotiated between

representatives of the regime and the opposition on ending the bloodshed and on a political transition⁹, are also extremely low. Despite showing clear signs that they have lost contact with reality, regime elites must be aware that any political process allowing the Syrian population to democratically choose its government will inevitably lead to their fall from power. The very justified fears of a constantly growing number of security apparatus' staff, that they will be personally made responsible for the death or torture of political opponents, and the interest of a part of the economic elite to secure the privileges they attained in the shadow of the regime, are yet other stumbling blocks to such a solution.

Accordingly, a large majority of the actors within the regime will only agree to a 'political' solution to the conflict when they have reason to believe that they can preserve their position of power in the process, which would allow them to secure maximum immunity, the protection of their own economic interests, and a long-term determination of the foreign policy orientation of Syria. Such an arrangement could also be supported by Iran, where parts of the political elite are not comfortable with the violence in Syria and the accompanying confessionalization of regional relations. Thus, one could imagine that Teheran would encourage Damascus to agree to such a negotiated solution to secure its own position in Syria at justifiable costs. Part of such a package could be a declaration of President Assad not to stand for office in the 2014 presidential elections. Western initiatives and trust-building measures with respect to the Iranian nuclear program would certainly benefit such an attitude. If Russia were to act as a 'mentor', it would increase the credibility of such an approach. In view of the close Syrian-Iranian alliance it is justified to assume that Damascus would at least seriously consider an initiative that is approved by Teheran.

Still, prospects for such a compromise, initiated by external actors, appear remote. A power-sharing system which would uphold the political privileges of the current regime in the long term and which, at the same time, would allow a degree of participation that would satisfy the aspirations of the Syrian population is inconceivable. In view of the violence inflicted, it is just as inconceivable that any Syrian opposition force could participate in a process that grants the main perpetrators immunity from prosecution without completely losing their credibility. After all, all initiatives of the regime and its regional

9 The International Community had generally agreed on such an approach, admittedly having excluded Iran and Saudi Arabia, in Geneva in Summer 2012. See UNOG. Final communiqué of the Action Group for Syria, Geneva, Saturday, June 30, 2012, http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/18F70DBC923963B1C1257A2D0060696B?OpenDocument.

allies to date have been geared towards a renewal of the legitimacy of Assad's rule and the maintenance of its monopoly of power through a mere symbolic participation of hand-picked 'members of the opposition' in dialogue.

Scenarios and their implications

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis, including the mission of Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations' and Arab League's joint envoy, have focused on achieving a transition negotiated between the regime and the opposition along the lines of the Yemeni model. In May 2013, the United States and Russia agreed to convene a Geneva II Conference by mid-June, to bring together regime and opposition representatives. However, concrete results have been elusive to date, and are unlikely to materialize in the near future as both sides to the conflict act according to the logic of a zero-sum game, in which there are only winners and losers, and are thus not prepared to enter into serious negotiations. Only an unbending and concerted intervention of all regional and international actors that are involved in the conflict could induce the conflict parties to relinquish their maximum demands and to negotiate a compromise. In the foreseeable future, however, such broad cooperation is not expected to materialize, not least in view of the conflict about Iran's regional role and nuclear program.

With no diplomatic solution in sight at the time of writing, three scenarios for the short- to medium-term development seem to be plausible:¹⁰

- *Continuation of the fighting*: The most likely scenario seems to be that of a continuation of the fighting and a consolidation of the country's fragmentation. External supporters will continue to support their respective clients with military means and other resources to keep the fight going. The regime still possesses a great amount of military equipment. Western supporters of the uprising are increasingly concerned about the strengthening of Jihadists and thus hesitate, and limit their armed support, while potential arms transit states – Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, but also Turkey – fear consequences for their own stability. All this makes a quick military solution unlikely. A direct military intervention by the international community, which could change the course of the war significantly, remains equally remote.

In this scenario, the regime would control the center of the capital, a corridor to the coast (via Homs), including the cities of Latakia and Tartous,

¹⁰ See Muriel Asseburg: Ziviler Protest, Aufstand, Bürgerkrieg und Zukunftsaussichten, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 63 (2013): 8, pp. 11–17.

and the mountainous region along the coast settled by Alawites, whereas the PYD would control the Kurdish regions in the north, and the rebels would control the rest of the country. Yet, it is likely that fighting will continue amongst these three forces as well as in the respective areas, not least between competing rebel groups, and emerging warlords. The trend of radicalization and confessionalization is likely to continue: population groups will flee or be expelled from areas in which they are suspected of being followers of the respective other side due to their confession or ethnicity. Independent of such attributions, people will flee from areas where there is fighting.

- *Fall of the regime and wide-ranging ethnic-confessional civil war:* Should the rebels succeed, against all expectations, to topple the regime by military means, there is as a risk that massive violence erupts – in the form of vengeance killings and attacks against specific population groups that are being collectively made responsible for the atrocities committed by the regime. In addition, fighting between the various rebel groups, remnants of the regime’s security forces, and militias could escalate along sectarian lines and lead to the expulsion of those parts of the population that are considered to be the respective ‘enemy’, thus ultimately leading to ‘ethnic cleansing’.
- *Fall of the regime and political transition:* While there are important groups in Syrian society that strive for a democratic, pluralist and inclusive post-Assad order in a unified Syria,¹¹ the chances of these forces to establish a democratically structured political process after the Assad regime falls, and prevail against actors of violence, are decreasing as the conflict continues. Much will depend on more effective cooperation of the international community than before to prevent the country as well as local structures of self-governance from breaking apart in the course of prolonged violence. It will also depend on whether the international community will help the Syrians in coping with the immense challenges the country is fac-

11 See for instance the declaration of principles which was issued in early July 2012 by representatives of the Syrian opposition in Cairo, online: www.facebook.com/notes/us-embassy-damascus/the-final-statement-for-the-syria-opposition-conference/10150925537506938 and the document which was elaborated in the framework of “The Day After”-Project in Berlin and which is supported by the major alliances of the opposition. See: The Day After Group: The Day After Project. Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria, Berlin 2012, <http://www.usip.org/the-day-after-project>. For a summary, see: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/ United States Institute of Peace: The Day After. Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria, SWP Comments 28, Berlin 2012, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C28_TDA.pdf.

ing in the restructuring of the security sector, in terms of transitional justice, and with economic reconstruction.

Regional effects

If the fighting continues or escalates further, the neighboring countries will also bear the brunt. Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and, to a growing degree, Egypt, are faced with an ever rising number of Syrian refugees whose accommodation and provision with food, shelter and health care turns out to be an enormous challenge for the recipient countries. The presence of the refugees also increases tensions with the local population. In Turkey, for instance, the presence of mostly Sunni refugees and rebels in the border area to Syria causes problems with the local Arab-Alawite population, which partly sympathize with the Assad regime, and feel threatened by the rebels and placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the refugees. In all neighboring countries, conflicts over the distribution of resources are likely to increase as the number of refugees keeps rising and the burden is not cushioned effectively by the international community.

Fighting has already spilled over to Syria's notoriously unstable neighbors Lebanon and Iraq, where extant ethnic-confessional conflict has been exacerbated. Occasional fighting is breaking out between local Alawite and Sunni-Islamist parties in the North Lebanese harbor city of Tripoli. Rising anti-government protests of an increasingly confessional nature in the Sunni-dominated parts of Iraq as well as a new wave of terrorist attacks mostly against Shiite targets are often considered to be indirect effects of the events in Syria. In addition, the governments and opposition of both countries have been supporting corresponding forces in the Syrian conflict – by rhetoric, financially and, at least partially, by sending combatants. While the Lebanese *Hezbollah* and the government of Iraq side with the Syrian regime, Sunni politicians in Lebanon as well as Sunni clans and Sunni-Jihadist groups in Iraq side with the rebels. This could well lead to a massive destabilization of both countries and may even draw them into the civil war in Syria.

While Israel had first shown restraint with regard to the power struggle in Syria, it intervened in the conflict in January 2013 and again in early May 2013 by bombing arms transports and depots near Damascus, supposedly to interdict transfer of advanced arms to the Lebanese *Hezbollah*. This conflict dimension carries the danger of a serious regional escalation, particularly in conjunction with the conflict over the Iranian nuclear program.

Turkey, as host of the oppositional Syrian National Council and operational basis for the Free Syrian Army, had become a party to the conflict early on, and considers itself directly threatened by the developments in Syria. As a result, Turkey's parliament authorized operations in neighboring countries in early October 2012. In January 2013, NATO (Germany, the United States and the Netherlands) stationed Patriot defense systems at the border with Syria. In their current mission, these systems are solely intended to defend Turkey against direct attacks from Syrian aircraft or missiles. Primarily, this shows symbolic support for NATO partner Turkey and the Turkish government which, due to its Syria policy, is pressed hard in its domestic arena. The Patriots neither have a direct effect on the conflict dynamics in Syria nor do they (or are they intended to) protect the Syrian civilian population. As has been highlighted by bomb attacks in the border town of Reyhanli in early May 2013, Turkey continues to be directly affected by fighting and instability along its border with Syria, with an inherent and serious potential for escalation.

Above all, however, Turkey fears that yet another autonomous Kurdish region (besides the one in northern Iraq) could form directly behind the border, which could give new impulses to separatist tendencies in Turkey's own Kurdish population or could provide a refuge for the PKK.¹² Indeed, since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, attacks by the PKK increased markedly and the structures of a factual autonomy under the control of the PYD, which is closely associated with the PKK, have consolidated. Yet, thus far there is no proof for a connection between both developments, or for PKK attacks originating from Syria in particular. While the ceasefire announced by Abdullah Öcalan in March 2013 and the planned withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey to northern Iraq (and their disarmament at a later stage) would probably alleviate Turkish concerns, that process in turns remains fraught with uncertainty, as hardliners on both sides may attempt to sabotage it.

Approaches for a sensible international engagement and priorities for German politics

At present, there is neither a legal foundation for supporting the Syrian rebels with heavy weapons, nor for a direct military intervention. And, due to opposing interests among the P5, it remains highly improbable that the UN Security Council will adopt such a resolution. The degree of violence, constantly rising

12 See Heiko Wimmen / Müzehher Selcük: The Rise of Syria's Kurds, in: Sada, February 5, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/05/rise-of-syria-s-kurds/fa7v>.

numbers of victims, and recent allegations of the use of chemical weapons, add weight to those positions which consider external intervention to be legitimate under the principle of the international responsibility to protect (R2P), even without a Security Council mandate. Without doubt, a substantial equipment of the rebels with heavy weapons could tip the balance of power in their favor. Even so, however, it is highly questionable whether the conflict could be terminated without major loss of life. It is just as likely that with the increase in military capabilities on the rebels' side, the intensity of the violence and the number of victims will increase further while the war of attrition continues. Furthermore, the idea that it would be possible to limit arms deliveries to those actors whose ideology is acceptable to us (rather than to actors with a Jihadist orientation), who during and after the fighting acknowledge the authority of civilian political structures, and who keep to humanitarian law and human rights standards, is unrealistic.

Without additional deployment of ground troops, no-fly zones will hardly offer sufficient protection for the population. Disabling and securing Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons would likewise require a considerable deployment of ground forces. Even limited military actions (buffer zones, air strikes) carry a great risk of escalation – up to a direct confrontation with the regional allies of the Syrian regime (first and foremost *Hezbollah* and Iran) – and would, as a direct result, drastically deteriorate international relations in particular with Russia and China. They would also mean yet another setback in the efforts to uphold legal principles and mechanisms in the management of international relations and conflict management. What is more, even if the regime were to be brought down militarily, it remains unclear how the country could be stabilized afterwards and how further violence – in particular vengeance and infighting – and a spread of such violence to the fragile neighboring countries, could be prevented.

Consequently, in the case of a military intervention, one of the fundamental requirements of the R2P principle, i.e., that the civilian population would indeed be effectively protected, would not be fulfilled. Intervention also carries risks the consequences of which can hardly be calculated and is thus a course of action that would be irresponsible in the present situation. At the same time, the international community is running the risk of, once again, sanctioning systematic war crimes and the violation of elementary human norms by doing nothing against the atrocities committed, while some international actors contribute actively to this escalation and thus to an acute danger of state collapse, disintegration and genocide.

In this dilemma, the international community should first and foremost aim at reversing, or at least mitigating, the described escalation dynamics. This definitely cannot succeed without the engagement of all regional and international actors. International policies towards Syria should, additionally, be geared towards alleviating the humanitarian effects of the war on the ground and towards creating better starting conditions for the transition to a stable and inclusive post-Assad order.

Including all external actors: As long as it remains in the interest of Iran to strengthen the hardliners within the Syrian regime, approaches towards a negotiated solution will fail. Iranian cooperation, however, has not been sought by the West. It is also unlikely to occur as long as signs point towards escalation in the conflict over Iran's nuclear program and as international sanctions against Iran are being tightened. This is why Germany should encourage the inclusion of Iran in frameworks to solve the Syrian crisis and why it should, in the framework of the EU-3 (i.e. together with France and Great Britain), encourage the United States and Iran to achieve a rapprochement in the nuclear question, for instance by direct bilateral negotiations. At the same time, Germany should pressure Iran and Israel to refrain from escalation rhetoric, war preparations and direct involvement in Syria. Besides this, one should look for constructive approaches which could induce Russia to change its position. One approach could be to include Moscow in decisions about NATO's anti-missile shield.

Containing the conflict and reducing violence: Any support for the rebels should be checked carefully as to whether it will contribute to further escalation of the conflict. Also, Turkey should be warned against taking the presence of forces close to the PKK in the Kurdish regions as a motive to intervene there militarily or stoke tensions between rebels and the PYD.

A comprehensive ceasefire remains unlikely as long as (all) parties do not agree to a political process. Therefore, negotiation efforts that support partial ceasefires or initiatives for the reduction of violence on the local level should have priority. Germany and its allies should lobby towards expanding the mission of negotiator Brahimi in this sense.

Immunizing the neighboring countries: Already today, the civil war in Syria is having a highly destabilizing effect on Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. Germany should promote the cessation of all actions by the supporters of the opposition, and of the regime that exacerbate this trend even further. Such actions would be, for instance, to pressurize neighboring countries to take a side in the civil war, to use their territory as a rear base for operations or the transit of

weapons, or to misuse Syrian refugees in these countries as a pool for new recruits for the rebels.

Making the political opposition more representative: Efforts to overcome the differences amongst the Syrian opposition ought to be supported. The establishment of the Syrian National Coalition mid-November 2012 in Doha, for instance, was a step in the right direction. For the Coalition and a transitional government, however, the exact balance of political, confessional and ethnic forces is less important than that it communicates and cooperates effectively with the nascent structures of local self-administration that have been created in areas 'liberated' from or abandoned by the government. It is also important that a transitional government constructively approaches those opposition groups and personalities that so far have refused to become part of the National Coalition, based on the principles worked out by a large array of opposition forces in July 2012 in Cairo (cf. footer 11). At the same time, the government ought to make sure that those citizens of Syria who, presently, for whatever reason, are not siding with the rebellion, can envisage a future for themselves in Syria.

Structuring the military opposition: Clear responsibilities, hierarchies and command structures within the rebel forces are essential to counter fragmentation and domination by warlords and to prevent infighting. Also, those states that provide military support to the rebels should exert their influence to make the rebels submit to civilian control and to adhere to humanitarian law. As some of these states are close political and military partners of Germany, the German government ought to actively encourage them accordingly. It is particularly important to assure that non-state networks supporting the rebels – especially from the Gulf States – are committed to the goals of such a common strategy.

Supporting local structures: After the end of the civil war, it will be important to reduce the influence of military actors and to reconcile the deep schisms between society's various groups. One important precondition for this is that emerging structures of local governance are strengthened as prospects of peaceful coexistence will improve markedly if inclusive political structures are established. Germany and its partners should support such local structures much more effectively than to date to ease the life of the population and to create a basis for the time after Assad. In this context, one should bear in mind that the reliability and performance of local administrative councils and their cooperation with the rebels vary from location to location, just as their capacity to take over state and humanitarian functions does. In their support, one should see to it that the fragmentation is not worsened by transferring donor

competition to local structures. In this sense, a close coordination is advisable, for instance in the framework of the Friends of Syria group.

Humanitarian aid: It is absolutely vital to deliver sufficient humanitarian aid – food, emergency housing, fuel, and medical supplies – to the local population and the internally displaced people, particularly in the regions controlled by the rebels and the PYD. This also offers an entry point into strengthening the legitimacy and authority of the budding local structures of civilian autonomy.

Beyond this, support for the host countries of Syrian refugees, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and increasingly Egypt, should be considerably enlarged as should support for the UN refugee agency UNHCR, whose work is already markedly underfinanced. Otherwise, a humanitarian catastrophe accompanied by an escalation of distribution conflicts in the host countries is about to happen.