

The on-going conflict in Syria presents a great challenge to proponents of human rights. A consensual strategy must be found that saves lives and prevents an escalation of violence

*Many world leaders agree that something has to be done to stop the bloodshed in Syria, but the country sits on a faultline of instability which could be made worse by intervening parties. **Katerina Delacoura** argues that the UK and other key powers must decide the path that best reduces the loss of lives and minimises the risk of a protracted, violent fall-out.*



The world is watching as Bashar al Assad's forces close in on the city of Homs, positioning themselves for the final kill. The death toll in Syria has yet again crept up and has now reached 7,500. However, British foreign secretary William Hague has stated that there will be no military intervention in Syria, as did the 'friends of Syria' meeting in Tunis last week. It would lack legal sanction following the Russian and Chinese veto of the UN Security Council resolution calling on Assad to step down and for sanctions to be put in place. More importantly, there exists no combination of either Western or Middle Eastern powers capable of implementing such an operation.

The calls for 'doing something' to stop the carnage in Syria are inevitably becoming louder. The prospect of yet more deaths as the world is standing on the side-lines is, for many, difficult to countenance. Yet, it is false to claim – as did Basma Kodmani of the Syrian National Council – that the choice is between 'military intervention or protracted civil war'.

Trying to think about the various options on Syria from a human rights perspective confronts us with hard choices. Intervention is called for in order to save lives and stop the assault of the Syrian government on its own citizens, yet it will probably increase the body count. The Syrian regime is engaged in a fight to the finish and resistance will not deter them from more killing. The intervening side, and its domestic rebel allies, will also kill. Outsiders will inevitably become involved when Syria's religious, ethnic, class and ideological divisions, all of which have been used as instruments of control over decades by an authoritarian regime, erupt into murderous, internecine conflict. Let us remember that the uprising and relatively short NATO intervention in Libya caused thousands and possibly tens of thousands of deaths (the Libyan government is still unable to verify the figures).

Various principles of human rights, however, must be balanced with one another. The right to life is placed alongside civil and political rights; individual rights alongside collective rights, which are inclusive of minority rights. The call of the Arab uprisings over the past year has been a call for dignity. Like other Arab citizens have shown, Syrians are prepared to sacrifice their lives for it. Outside military intervention may lead to more deaths but it will also assist Syrians in winning freedom and dignity from a repressive regime: the lives of some will be lost for the future of many.

The moral dilemma over Syria which arises from the conflicting demands of human rights principles, becomes a veritable conundrum when we place it – as we must – in the context of power politics, be they domestic, regional or international. The British government and its allies, i.e. the United States, France and the European Union, are no friends of the Syrian regime and would be happy to see it end. The same applies for the overwhelming majority of Middle Eastern states, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

However, in contrast to Muammar Qadhafi, Bashar al Assad does have powerful friends: Iran (and

Hizbullah although Hamas is distancing itself from Damascus) in the Middle East, Russia (and China by dint of its opposition to interventionism) further afield. In a region already threatened by brinkmanship between Israel and Iran, a Western or Middle Eastern intervention in Syria may precipitate a wider conflagration, with disastrous consequences. Alternatively, the loss of its Syrian ally may push a besieged and isolated Iranian regime irrevocably towards the nuclear option.

Faced with these realities, and the lack of stomach – or capability – for yet another intervention following the Libyan one, the British government and its allies are pursuing alternative measures. The European Union has already imposed economic sanctions on Syria, hoping to hurt Assad's middle class and crony capitalist allies enough so as to force them to abandon him. There is some enthusiasm, particularly by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, of arming the rebels.

However, one year on from the start of the rebellion, the Syrian opposition – comprising the Syrian National Council, the Free Syria Army and the National Coordination Committee – remains fractious and divided along ideological, ethnic and sectarian grounds. It is not yet able to form a proper alternative centre of power to the incumbent regime or present a credible plan for the future of Syria. Human Rights Watch is already reporting violations and abuses by opposition groups. This does not bode well for what may follow Assad's overthrow.

The future of Syria is bleak. If the regime suppresses the revolt, more casualties will follow as it metes out punishment. However, the regime may not be able to regain control of the country. This could lead to stalemate and more fighting. The arming of the rebel opposition by outsiders will herald long-term civil conflict. If the rebels finally prevail, a bloodbath may follow as they extract revenge on the regime's allies – Alawites, some Christians and segments of the middle class.

What can outsiders do to prevent such developments or, more realistically, reduce its most disastrous implications? Tunisia's president, the venerable human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, has suggested giving Assad's regime an exit strategy. This may work if the regime becomes convinced it cannot prevail. The good offices of Turkey, whose government relishes such a role, could be solicited. Turkey had been friendly towards the regime and has now turned against it though it may not have burnt all its bridges.

The United Nations, the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, in combination with the Arab League, could be allowed to offer humanitarian assistance and the former to send a peace-keeping force. Given the delicate domestic situation in Syria and its regional role in the wider balance of power most notably, Iran and Israel (but, also, its proximity to hapless Lebanon which may be sucked into a conflict), outsiders must converge to find a consensual arrangement, with the inevitable compromises this will entail. The British government can play its part in a solution where common sense prevails and lives are saved.

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