Ten months ago the peaceful uprising began; three hundred and fifty days, more or less, during which 6,000 people have been killed at a rate of twenty per day and over 100,000 citizens have been arrested or detained. Ten months, while the regime continues to kill citizens its repressive tactics have reached a pitch of savagery unparalleled in the recent history of the Arab world and have led the country down a dark narrow tunnel, destined for the abyss.

The situation in Syria today has a number of characteristics that need to be taken into consideration when studying the dynamics of the uprising, both now and in the future. These include:

1. The Grassroots Nature of the Popular Movement

With every day that passes the uprising establishes itself more deeply and extends itself more widely in Syria. In hotspots such as Homs, Hama, Deraa and the Damascus hinterland it has won over the majority of inhabitants. In places where a few months ago only a handful of demonstrators assembled in short-lived protests, tens of thousands are now participating in rallies and sit-ins which last many hours. What is certain is that fear of repression – which on many occasions has reached the point of outright murder – is the only factor that has prevented million-strong rallies being held in major cities.

Not only does the uprising have strong roots in traditional centers of resistance, but we have also witnessed the spread of its geographical footprint.

It is worth mentioning that the established nature of the popular movement is not a claim based purely on the physical size and frequency of the demonstrations, but has a spiritual and ethical dimension manifested in the heroic courage displayed by ordinary citizens, who continue to take to the streets despite the very real threat to their safety. It can also be seen in the revolutionary spirit that has crept into many intangible aspects of daily life: songs, music, movies, dance and satirical jokes. The Syrian revolution has imbued the arts with a genuine revolutionary legacy never before seen in Arab societies, with the exception of that created by the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

2. The Regime’s Cohesion

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian army has not stood on the sidelines. Almost without exception, the armed forces have remained obedient to the regime, as have the security forces and the secret police, and any attempt to split from the regime and state authorities has been met with a heavy-handed response. As a result we are yet to see anything comparable with the
situation in Libya, where several important regime elements declared that they had broken with the regime, hinting at the fragility behind the outward show of solidity that it promoted in the media.

Due to its careful management of the country’s ethnic and sectarian make-up, the regime has created a despotic administration based not on the principle of all citizens being equal before the law, but rather, on grading Syrians according to their loyalty.

We should point out that for socio-historical reasons the army’s loyalty was never in doubt. This loyalty can only be understood in the context of the regime’s security policy, as practiced against both society and the state apparatus itself. Witness statements by army deserters confirm that the overwhelming majority of those killed from army ranks were soldiers and officers executed in the field either for refusing to open fire on civilians or for attempting to flee clashes with demonstrators. It is also pertinent to mention the official decrees issued in late 2011 that banned all senior government employees, including all former and present ambassadors, ministers and members of parliament, from leaving Syria without first obtaining special permission from the security services.

Due to its careful management of the country’s ethnic and sectarian make-up, the regime has created a despotic administration based not on the principle of all citizens being equal before the law, but rather, on grading Syrians according to their loyalty. This community to protect itself from attack. These communities are an organic extension of the regime and their survival is inextricably bound up with that of the state. By protecting the regime from society at large they believe they are protecting themselves.

Furthermore, these pro-regime pockets within contemporary Syrian society are of two kinds: the first is cultural, composed of religious minorities, such as Alawites, Christians and Druze, or at any rate, the leadership of these communities; the second is economic such as the nouveau riche, who depend on mutually beneficial relationships with senior regime figures.

The regime’s solidity therefore, does not derive from a structural strength or from the durability of its internal and external relationships, but from the brute force with which it manages these relationships (i.e. relationships with state employees, citizens and conscripts). Its brutality transforms citizens into tragic figures, motivated by their fear to preserve and protect the very monster that so terrifies them.

3. The Incompetence of the Traditional Political Opposition

Since taking power the Baath party has worked hard to weaken political life in Syria. Over three decades in charge of the country, Hafez Assad succeeded in emptying public life of meaningful participation and established the following rule: politics is for Baathists and those who slavishly adhere to their prescriptions. For everyone else, there is prison, exile or the grave. Despite the creation of a narrow margin for political activity under Bashar Assad, Syrian political life still lacks the basic conditions it needs to progress beyond its moribund state.

Initial protests included a modest clutch of active political figures, but the uprising very quickly moved beyond the control of recognized political organizations, that were left striving to catch up with events. There were attempts to unite disparate opposition forces into a single front, but these efforts, most of which took place outside the country, were characterized by dissent and disagreement, which quickly
lost them credibility among Syrian citizens. These constant disagreements, and the fact that personal ambition was often prioritized over national interest, severely weakened the opposition, not to mention the almost total lack of consensus over issues connected with the future of the uprising, such as sectarianism, foreign intervention and the role of the Syrian Free Army.

There was a split between the “body” of the uprising, represented by the revolutionaries on the street, and its “head”, represented by opposition politicians who trekked from meeting to meeting and from country to country in search of an alliance.

Meanwhile, the uprising was spontaneously generating a new opposition from the ranks of the coordinating committees. These committees took responsibility for organizing protests, providing medical care for the wounded and supplying the media and international organizations with evidence of the brutality of the regime and its security services. At the same time, these committees were unable to make the transition to a united political organization capable of leading and representing the uprising.

There was a split between the “body” of the uprising, represented by the revolutionaries on the street, and its “head”, represented by opposition politicians who trekked from meeting to meeting and from country to country in search of an alliance. However, whenever a step was taken to form an alliance, a side-declaration was issued that would reverse any progress.

4. The Militarization of the Uprising
The uprising began as a peaceful movement and remains so to this day, in its ten months. But despite its ideological opposition to the use of violence and although it is defending its peaceful nature, it has not been immune to facts on the ground that push it toward militarization.

The regime’s insistence that the security forces and the army use excessive force against protestors has caused many soldiers to disobey orders. They have refused to fire on civilians, preferring to defy their superiors, and though a great number of them have been killed by the security forces as a result of mutinous sentiments which are becoming more widespread than before. At the beginning of the uprising, only a few individual soldiers and officers deserted. Today, the deserters number in their thousands, if not tens of thousands. At first, these deserters confined themselves to protecting the peaceful demonstrators with light weapons they had brought with them when they deserted. Today, they are organized into a shadow force called the Syrian Free Army and have begun carrying out operations against military and security targets, sometimes in response to an assault by the regime or to forestall an impending attack.

The regime’s use of force has also prompted many citizens, either those targeted by the regime or the families of victims, to take up arms against the security forces, motivated both by a desire for revenge and the necessity of legitimate self-defense.

We should note that from the very first day the regime has worked to deflect the uprising from its non-violent principles and encourage its militarization. By drawing it into armed conflict the regime was sure of its victory as it is stronger militarily, better equipped and supplied and more organized. Furthermore, it would legitimize its use of violence, gaining international support for its actions by presenting them as part of the international war on terrorism. To achieve these goals the regime immediately began arming communities in loyalist areas and it is worth mentioning here the rumors of weapons smuggled from neighboring countries with the knowledge, if not the active consent of military and government officials.

5. Security Chaos
Certain violent attacks on the fringes of the uprising, which, despite the state media’s attempts to exploit them and smear the
reputation of the popular movement, are either indicative of a general lawlessness or, as many claim, staged and planned by the security forces themselves. The latter explanation is popular due to a widespread belief in the almost mythical powers of state security without whose consent or participation, such operations would be impossible.

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These attacks are either terrorist or sectarian. Terrorist attacks include the bombings of public installations such as gas and petrol pipelines, the rail network, bridges and government buildings (e.g. the secret service headquarters in Damascus). Sectarian refers to the tit-for-tat abduction, extortion, rape and murder between different ethnic and religious communities, which has risen to truly terrifying levels, particularly in regions with many such communities living side by side such as Homs and the countryside around Hama and Latakia.

Possible Scenarios and Solutions
Taking these five points into consideration we can now address the possibility of finding a solution to the crisis in Syria. A solution must derive from three 'arenas', which in order of size are the Syrian arena, the Arab arena and finally the international arena, all of which, including the regime itself, agree on the central issue: that the country cannot return to its pre-uprising state. In other words, change is inevitable.

In the Syrian arena, there are three possible, maybe only theoretical, scenarios:

- The first scenario is that the regime’s security policy proves successful and it manages to quash the uprising before implementing a package of reforms – and in some cases new laws – that enable it to regain control of the country. It has to be said that, though hypothetically possible, this seems unlikely to transpire. The regime is utterly bankrupt. It has lost every shred of its legitimacy and is only able to maintain its unity thanks to an oppressive use of its security and military forces.

- The second scenario is that the uprising manages to topple the regime. However, a rational appraisal of the current balance of power in the country does not support such a conclusion and it only seems likely in the event of outside intervention or some seismic internal change, for instance the whole-scale abandonment of the regime by the armed forces or a palace coup of some kind. Neither of these scenarios is certain at present. Alternatively, we may see an intervention by an Arab or international military force or an escalation of outside pressure that makes the regime’s position untenable.

- The third scenario is a settlement reached by negotiation between representatives of the popular movement and the regime. The regime however persists with its repressive tactics and seems unwilling to seriously consider the possibility of negotiating with anybody except its own puppet ‘opposition’. The revolutionaries on the ground, meanwhile, utterly reject the possibility of entering into dialogue with the regime and the official political opposition remains divided on the issue. For all these reasons, such an outcome seems unlikely.

To sum up, it is clear that the only possible solution in terms of the Syrian arena will have to involve the intervention of actors from outside, i.e.: a transferral of responsibility to the Arab and international arenas, which in practical terms means the intervention in some form of Arab and Western countries.
At first glance, it would seem that the Arab League is the only player in the Arab arena capable of providing a solution to the Syrian crisis. Yet its members have been unable to reach a consensus on Syria and the League itself is too weak to provide a way out of a situation as intractable as the current one, taking place in a country where the roots of the crisis are so entangled that it is hard to find a solution. Nevertheless, the League has taken a step, practically without precedent in its own history, of imposing economic sanctions on Syria and putting forward an initiative to end the crisis. Reluctantly, the regime allowed Arab League observers to enter the country to ensure it was abiding by the League’s conditions.

Yet even in the presence of these observers, indeed under their very noses, the regime continued with its security strategy and deepened its media war against those that failed to stand by it, until almost every Arab state was listed in the universal conspiracy against Syria.

The League has done everything in its power to help Syria avoid yet another international intervention in the Arab world. However, the regime’s sheer bloody-mindedness has effectively negated their best efforts and increasingly eyes are turning to the third and most potent of the three arenas to provide a solution to the problem. In the third, the international arena, Western countries are alike when it comes to their unsure attitudes to direct intervention. Turkey is divided between its nationalist pan-Islamic ambitions on the one hand, its fear of the Kurds and the Alevi at home, and of Russia and Iran abroad. Then there is Europe mired in economic crisis and terrified of disintegration and a United States weakened by the failure of its military interventions in the region. None of them want the situation to develop without having a hand in the matter, yet nor do they want the crisis to continue, in view of its huge potential for causing instability in the Middle East. They also do not want a return to stability, whatever form it might take, if they are to have no say in the new status quo. At the same time, they would much prefer it if this stability could be brought about without requiring any sacrifice on their part. For this reason they have been content to leave the ball in the court of those international bodies that have proved incapable of reaching a consensus on the non-military intervention being called for by the Syrian demonstrators, the Free Syrian Army, and certain sections of the formal Syrian opposition: i.e. international protection, no-fly zones, safe corridors, etc. They are even less certain about military intervention, despite the fuss made by the Syrian state media about an international plot to invade the country.

It is a whirlpool dragging the country deeper into violence. At present the country is engaged in a minor form of civil war, that we can call a confined civil war. If the whirlpool is to be calmed, the regime still has the power to solve the crisis by stopping the slaughter, withdrawing its troops, releasing prisoners and inviting the opposition (as represented by those part of the uprising) to engage in a negotiated transfer of power. Without this the current polarization of the country will continue, the confined civil war will spread and international intervention – perhaps under cover of an Arab initiative – will be the inevitable result with the consequent destruction of the country. But will the regime see fit to act? Unfortunately not, it seems. It will stay its course, pulling down the temple on its own head and on Syria itself.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.