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**From:** Anne-Marie Slaughter [redacted]  
**Sent:** Sunday, June 12, 2011 10:20 AM  
**To:** H  
**Cc:** Abedin, Huma; Sullivan, Jacob J; Mills, Cheryl D  
**Subject:** Best piece I have seen recently on Syria (from Foreign Policy blog)

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This suggests US should be making much more of the ways in which Syrian regime is *simulating* sectarian violence. Can't we call for a meeting of the UNSC where we do not call for action but simply present information along the lines of what is recounted below so as to "bring it to the attention of the Council" in a way that then has greater credibility globally? Making the point repeatedly that the regime *wants* this to look like/turn into sectarian violence? At the very least that can be broadcast back into Syria in various ways that will encourage protesters. There is an information war going on; we can do much more to elevate and legitimate the truth.

## The Fall of the House of Assad

It's too late for the Syrian regime to save itself.

BY ROBIN YASSIN-KASSAB | JUNE 10, 2011

"*Selmiyyeh, selmiyyeh*" -- "peaceful, peaceful" -- was one of the Tunisian revolution's most contagious slogans. It was chanted in Egypt, where in some remarkable cases protesters defused state violence simply by telling policemen to calm down and not be scared. In both countries, largely nonviolent demonstrations and strikes succeeded in splitting the military high command from the ruling family and its cronies, and civil war was avoided. In both countries, state institutions proved themselves stronger than the regimes that had hijacked them. Although protesters unashamedly fought back (with rocks, not guns) when attacked, the success of their largely peaceful mass movements seemed an Arab vindication of Gandhian nonviolent resistance strategies. But then came the much more difficult uprisings in Bahrain, Libya, and Syria.

Even after at least 1,300 deaths and more than 10,000 detentions, according to human rights groups, "*selmiyyeh*" still resounds on Syrian streets. It's obvious why protest organizers want to keep it that way. Controlling the big guns and fielding the best-trained fighters, the regime would emerge victorious from any pitched battle. Oppositional violence, moreover, would alienate those constituencies the uprising is working so hard to win over: the upper-middle class, religious minorities, the stability-firsters. It would push the uprising off the moral high ground and thereby relieve international pressure against the regime. It would also serve regime propaganda, which against all evidence portrays the unarmed protesters as highly organized groups of armed infiltrators and Salafi terrorists.

The regime is exaggerating the numbers, but soldiers are undoubtedly being killed. Firm evidence is lost in the fog, but there are reliable and consistent **reports**, backed by YouTube videos, of mutinous soldiers being shot by

security forces. Defecting soldiers have **reported mukhabarat** lined up behind them as they fire on civilians, watching for any soldier's disobedience. A tank battle and aerial bombardment were **reported** after a small-scale mutiny in the Homs region. Tensions within the military are expanding.

And a small minority of protesters does now seem to be taking up arms. Syrians -- regime supporters and the apolitical as much as anyone else -- have been furiously **buying smuggled weapons** since the crisis began. Last week for the first time, anti-regime activists **reported** that people in Rastan and Talbiseh were meeting tanks with rocket-propelled grenades. Some of the conflicting reports from Jisr al-Shaghour, the besieged town near the northwestern border with Turkey, describe a gun battle between townsmen and the army. And a *mukhabarat* man was **lynched** by a grieving crowd in Hama.

The turn toward violence is inadvisable but perhaps inevitable. When residential areas are subjected to military attack, when children are tortured to death, when young men are randomly rounded up and beaten, electrocuted, and humiliated, some Syrians will seek to defend themselves. Violence has its own momentum, and Syria appears to be slipping toward war.

There are two potential civil-war scenarios. The first begins with Turkish intervention. Since Syrian independence in 1946, tensions have bubbled over into Turkey's Hatay province, known to Syrians as Wilayat Iskenderoon, the Arab region unjustly gifted to Kemal Ataturk by the French. War almost broke out in 1998 over Syria's hosting of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan, who now sits in a Turkish prison. Yet since the ascension of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and Bashar al-Assad's inheritance of the Syrian presidency, relations have dramatically improved. Turkey invested enormous financial and political capital in Syria, establishing a Levantine free trade zone and distancing itself from Israel.

Erdogan extracted promises of reform from Bashar at the onset of the protests and then watched with increasingly visible consternation as the promises were broken. He warned Syria **repeatedly** against massacres and their consequences (on June 9, he described the crackdown as "**savagery**"). Syria's response is reminiscent of Israel's after last year's Mavi Marmara killings: **slandering** its second-most important ally with petulant self-destructiveness.

Turkish military intervention remains unlikely, but if the estimated **4,000 refugees** who have crossed the border thus far swell to a greater flood, particularly if Kurds begin crossing in large numbers, Turkey may decide to create a safe haven in north or northeastern Syria. This territory could become Syria's Benghazi, potentially a home for a more local and credible opposition than the exile-dominated one that recently met in Antalya, Turkey, and a

destination to which soldiers and their families could defect. A council of defected officers might then organize attacks on the regime from the safe haven, adding military to economic and diplomatic pressure.

The second scenario is sectarian war, as seen in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon. Although most people choose their friends from all communities, sectarianism remains a real problem in Syria. The ruling family was born into the historically oppressed Alawi community. The Ottomans regarded Alawis as heretics rather than as "people of the book," and Alawis -- unlike Christians, Jews, and mainstream Shiite Muslims -- were therefore deprived of all legal rights. Before the rise of the Baath and the social revolution it presided over, Alawi girls served as housemaids in Sunni cities. Some Alawis fear those times are returning and will fight to prevent change. The social stagnation of dictatorship has made it difficult to discuss sectarian prejudice in public, which has sometimes kept hatreds bottled up. Some in the Sunni majority perceive the Assads as representatives of their sect and resent the entire community by extension.

None of this makes sectarian conflict inevitable. Class and regional cleavages are perhaps more salient than sect in Syria today. Sunni business families have been co-opted into the power structure while disfavored Alawis have suffered as much as anyone else. The protesters, aware of the dangers, have consistently chanted slogans of national unity. And in Lebanon and Iraq the catalysts for civil war were external interventions, not internal upheaval.

The catalyst in Syria may be the regime itself. Simulating sectarian war is one of the regime's preferred tactics. In March, Syrian friends have told me, its *shabiha* militia tried to spark social breakdown in Latakia by pretending to be a Sunni mob while it shot up Alawi areas and an Alawi mob as it terrorized Sunni neighborhoods. Syrians say the regime is arming Alawi villages and wishfully thinking of a repeat of the 1980s, when it faced a genuinely violent sectarian challenge in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it defeated at the Hama massacre in 1982.

The danger of the simulacrum is that it could become reality. If the regime doesn't disintegrate quickly, the state will disintegrate gradually, and then the initiative could be seized by the kind of tough men who command local loyalty by providing the basics and avenging the dead. If violence continues at this pitch for much longer, it's easy to imagine local and sectarian militias forming, with the Sunnis receiving funding from the Persian Gulf.

Such a scenario would be a disaster for Syrians of all backgrounds. The ripple effects would be felt in Lebanon (which would likely be sucked into the fray), Palestine, Iraq, Turkey, and beyond. It could also give a second life to the Wahhabi-nihilist groups currently relegated to irrelevance by the new democratic mood in the region.

Let's hope the boil bursts before either of these wars occurs. The economy may collapse catastrophically, at which point almost every Syrian would have to choose between revolution and starvation. Under continued pressure, the regime may destroy itself through internecine conflict, or it may surrender when mass desertions make the military

option unfeasible. The manner of bringing the boil to eruption remains obscure. What seems certain is that the regime will not be able to bring Syria back under its heel.