

Achievements and Challenges of the Nonviolent Movement in Syria¹

María Belén Garrido

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador

Cécile Mouly

Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales

Abstract. This paper uses insights from the literature on nonviolent movements against dictatorships to analyse the main achievements and challenges of the nonviolent movement in Syria since the beginning of mass protests in 2011. It begins with reviewing the nonviolent strategies used by the movement to protest against the regime and evaluating their impact. It then assesses the challenges encountered by the movement, including its internal fragmentation, its insufficient strategic planning, the growing use of violent opposition tactics, the army's continuing allegiance to the regime, and outside interference. Finally, it concludes that the Syrian nonviolent movement overcame some of these, demonstrating its resilience and the possibility for it to play a role in reducing polarization among society and paving the way for a more inclusive transition.

Key-words: Syria; nonviolence; resistance; opposition movement.

Logros y Desafíos del Movimiento No Violento en Siria

Resumen. Este artículo se basa en estudios académicos sobre movimientos no violentos contra dictaduras para analizar los principales logros y desafíos del movimiento no violento en Siria desde el comienzo de las protestas generalizadas en el 2011. Primeramente se analiza las estrategias no violentas usadas por el movimiento popular para protestar contra el régimen y se evalúa su impacto. Después se examina los desafíos del movimiento, incluyendo su fragmentación interna, su insuficiente planificación estratégica, el creciente uso de tácticas violentas de oposición, la persistente lealtad del ejército al régimen y la injerencia externa. Finalmente, se concluye que el movimiento no violento en Siria logró superar algunos de estos obstáculos, demostrando su resistencia y la posibilidad de que tenga un rol en reducir la polarización en la sociedad y allanar el camino para una transición más incluyente.

Palabras-clave: Siria; no violencia; resistencia; movimiento de oposición.

1 Introduction

This article analyses the recent uprising in Syria from the perspective of nonviolence put forward by authors, such as Gene Sharp, Michael Nagler and Stephen Zunes, who have studied the role of nonviolent strategies in regime changes from dictatorship to democracy. Relatively little research has been conducted thus far on why nonviolent movements are able or not to overthrow an authoritarian regime, and mainstream analysts tend to perceive that such an outcome is more likely to be achieved through violent methods. This article seeks to fill this lacuna in relation to the nonviolent movement that initiated mass protests in 2011 in Syria.

It begins with a description of the nonviolent strategies used by the Syrian population against the government, discussing the variety of actions employed and their meaning. Then, it appraises the main strengths and achievements of the nonviolent movement, highlighting its contributions to raising awareness among common people and eroding the legitimacy of the Syrian regime. Finally it explores the main challenges encountered by the nonviolent movement up to October 2012, distinguishing between internal factors proper to the opposition movement, factors related to the response of the government in the face of growing contestation, and factors related to outside actors. It concludes by arguing that the Syrian nonviolent movement overcame some of these challenges, demonstrating its resilience and the possibility for it to play a significant role in reducing polarization among society and paving the way for a more inclusive transition.

¹This article is based on a paper presented at the "Riot, Revolt, Revolution", conference organized by the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics of the University of Brighton, United Kingdom, from 5 to 7 September 2012.

2 Nonviolent Actions Used by the Syrian Population

According to Michael Nagler, nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, is the absence of the desire or intention to harm. Nonviolence starts with an internal fight in each person to keep fear and hate away from oneself. Gandhi used the word *Satyagraha*, which means “clinging to truth”. It does not mean the weapon of the weak, but that of the strong because those who use *Satyagraha* renounce to use physical force voluntarily and by principle (Nagler, 2004). Nonviolence acts mainly through deep persuasion, moving people’s hearts. It is different from forcing someone to do something through sanctions or punishments. As Gene Sharp explains, violent fight uses physical weapons to threaten, hurt, kill or destroy, while nonviolent struggle uses political, economic, social and psychological weapons that can be applied by anyone (Sharp, 2010).

Nonviolent actions, understood by Zunes (1999, p. 138) as “conflict behaviour consisting of unconventional acts implemented for purposive change without intentional damage to persons or property”, already took place against the Syrian government long before the rebellion started in Syria in early 2011. For example, in Daraya town, since 1998 young Muslims had studied and used nonviolence as a way to foster social change, for instance by wearing vests that said: “until you change what is inside you”. This kind of actions started to make people think that their destiny was in their hands. Another action undertaken by these youths in 2002 was to sweep the streets of Daraya; many went to prison for this (Kahf, 2011). In 2000, 25 Syrian Kurds initiated a nonviolent movement in Jazeera area, and similar groups were organized in Homs and Daraa (Kahf, 2011).

On 26 January 2011 in Al-Hasakah a man called Hasan Ali Akleh poured gasoline on himself and set himself ablaze, as a way of protesting against the oppression of the Syrian government (Sarihan, 2012). This was undoubtedly a political act, in the same fashion as Tibetans’ immolations over the past few years to protest against the oppression of the Chinese government (RFA, 2012). Immolation is a desperate action that expresses the suffering of people whose rights are violated. Hasan Ali Akleh was able to show until which point the oppression of the Syrian regime against the population had gone. As Nagler said, “the nonviolent actor is deliberately seeking to manifest the pain that others are trying not to see” (Nagler, 2004, p. 66).

One significant event was the writing of anti-regime slogans by 15 children on the walls of their school in Daraa in March 2011. They were brutally tortured (Yazbek, 2012). This punishment enabled, as Nagler says, “to awaken sleeping consciousness, by making people see the pain they are causing – making them feel empathetically” (Nagler, 2004, p. 43-93). The demands of their parents indeed generated empathy in Syrian people, who began to develop a critical consciousness. According to Nepstad, such a step is necessary in order for the population to willingly withdraw its cooperation and consent (Nepstad, 2008). Protests against this act started after Friday prayers. Since there was almost no place to gather in Syria in order to discuss political issues, the mosque became one of the few places where people were able to talk about the oppression and organize demonstrations. In this way the role of religion became very important, in the same fashion as the East German Protest Church provided people the space to discuss freely during the Cold War (Nepstad, 2008).

Another nonviolent action took place on 25 March 2011 in Daraya. A group of activists gave flowers to soldiers who were sent to stop a nonviolent demonstration against the regime, and others offered them bottles of water with notes that said: “we are your brothers. Don’t kill us. The nation is big enough for all of us” (Kahf, 2011, p. 3). Their aim was to show to the government forces that demonstrators saw them as human beings and not as enemies. Other nonviolent activists painted fountains in red in Damascus and Aleppo to remind Syrians that many citizens were dying due to government repression. This and other nonviolent actions enabled many soldiers to see protesters as human beings instead of enemies. At the same time demonstrators, who saw change in the soldiers, were reinforced in the rightness of their actions, and anger decreased on both sides.

Quickly nonviolent actions became coordinated locally and at the national level, through the spontaneous formation of local coordinating committees, including many youths joined by different sectors of society. Cell phones and the Internet played a significant role in helping to share information among activists. For example, on 15 March 2011, at the beginning of the uprising, the “Syrian Revolution 2011” Facebook group called for protests, resulting in massive demonstrations against the regime according to Alvarez-Ossorio (2012, p. 25). In the same vein, the online “Freedom Days Calendar” helped activists plan and disseminate nonviolent actions, such as wearing white T-shirts as a way of protest, through social networks (Williams, 2012, p.1). Likewise, the videos of the finger puppet show of *Masasit Mati* posted on YouTube sought to raise awareness about the repressive nature of the government and the need to topple it, albeit through peaceful means². A nonviolent Syrian activist called Ghiyath said once on Facebook: “we chose nonviolence, not from cowardice or weakness, but out of moral conviction; we don’t want to reach victory by having destroyed the country. We want to arrive morally, so we will stick to this path until God works His will [sic.]” (Kahf, 2011).

Nonviolence expressed itself in different ways in Syria, including public manifestations, the use of special clothing, civil disobedience acts, vigils, silent demonstrations or sit-ins in emblematic places, as well as more creative initiatives. For instance, fountains and waterwheels were painted in red to symbolize the victims of repression. Protest messages of solidarity and resistance were written onto “ping pong balls that can roll down surrounding hills into the main city”, and the face of Bashar al-Assad was plastered onto “packs of cigarettes with a warning that ‘the Syrian regime is a main source of cancer and heart and lung disease’” (Bloch, 2012; Al-Zubaidi, 2012). Further, the repertoire of actions used by the nonviolent movement spanned across levels of contention, from civil to more aggressive actions (Lofland, 1993). Table 1 uses the typology developed by John Lofland (1993) and employed by other authors, such as Mauricio García Durán (2006, p. 123), taking the latter’s work as a model, to provide an overview of the actions of the Syrian nonviolent movement according to their level of contention.

Table 1: Actions by the Syrian nonviolent movement according to their level of contention.

Level of contention	Type of collective action
High	Confrontation with security forces
	Strikes, occupation of buildings or spaces
Middle	Peaceful demonstrations, sit-ins
	Use of special clothing
	Painting of fountains and waterwheels in red; graffiti
Low	Vigils
	Street theatre, puppet shows, singing and dancing at public gatherings
	Education campaigns

One of the most important symbols used by the opposition was the old Syrian flag of green, white and black colours. This flag was used before Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad’s father, took power in 1971 and was displayed in all public protests from the beginning of the uprising. Likewise, in a number of demonstrations women and children painted their faces “with blood-red tears to symbolise people’s suffering” (Shuvra, 2012).

As briefly described, the nonviolent movement in Syria had a long history that predated the 2011 uprising. This experience was undoubtedly pivotal. The death of Hasan Ali Akleh was a catalyst that soon rallied support for the movement from broad sectors of society. Nonviolent

² See the Masasit Masi puppet finger show website at: <http://www.masasitmati.org>. Accessed on: 08/10/2012.

actions spanned across different levels of contention and showed extraordinary creativity, using arts and symbols to express the suffering of the population and its desire for change.

3 Main Achievements of the Nonviolent Movement

Carrying out these types of actions after many years of repression empowered people and raised their consciousness about their rights and the possibility of expressing their ideas. For instance, a woman who used to work in the government said: “I am alive. After the revolution, I realised what all those years of idleness and boredom had done to me. My knowledge, my instincts, my thought processes, everything was wrong” (International Crisis Group, 2012). Many protesters also came to realize that what initially began as a series of actions to call for reforms gradually turned into a revolution with the potential of overthrowing the current regime (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012). Yet, the uprising was not just about the legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad, but of the political system overall, which suffered from a deed representation crisis, with a single political party monopolizing power for nearly 50 years. Additionally, socioeconomic inequalities, compounded by the regime’s corruption, and the differential treatment of Sunnis and Alawites generated grievances among many ordinary citizens, on which the movement could quickly capitalize. According to International Crisis Group (2011), Bashar al-Assad, who initially enjoyed significant popular backing, started to lose some of it when the nonviolent movement got more and more adept, especially from the middle class and the private sector.

Moreover, the excessive use of force by the government against unarmed civilians backfired, causing defections in the army and condemnations against massacres carried out by military forces (International Crisis Group, 2012). An increasing number of soldiers refused to shoot at demonstrators, although this meant their immediate execution or obliged defection for fear of retaliation. By September 2012, 27 high-ranking security and military officials had defected, including Manaf Tlass, a commander in the Republican Guard and friend of the Assad family (Al Jazeera, 2012). The defection of Syria’s prime minister, Riyad Farid Hijab, in early August 2012 came as another blow to the regime. Including him, three top-level cabinet members, four members of parliament and 12 diplomats had defected by September 2012 (Al Jazeera, 2012). As Machiavelli said, the prince “who has the people as his enemies generally never makes himself safe” (Machiavelli, 1989, p. 236). The contrast between the violent repression by the regime and the peaceful nonviolent protests staged by common people weakened the government and was behind the decision of many soldiers and government officials to leave.

Nonviolent actions eroded the internal and external legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad and challenged the *status quo*, pushing the Syrian president to make symbolic gestures in the beginning, including the opening of a national dialogue (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012). The fact that not only men but also women, children and the elderly took part in these actions revealed the broad support that they commanded and prompted many in the international community to progressively decry the regime. Although many of al-Assad’s gestures only resulted in minimal changes and some were half-hearted, concessions showed the fragility and sensibility of the regime to nonviolent protests. Sharp explained that when dictators’ legitimacy is questioned or endangered, they try to show benevolence and flexibility by endorsing some reforms (Sharp, 2010). This demonstrates dictators’ insecurity about their continuance in power and how important it is for them to maintain their legitimacy. For example, as Bashar al-Assad saw the effect that nonviolent actions were producing on the population, he declared that the state of emergency, in force since 1973, would be lifted, political prisoners would be liberated, a multiparty system would be established and reforms in the media law would be passed (El Mundo, 2011). Furthermore, and with the aim to keep the bureaucracy support, he announced a salary increase for civil servants (Now Lebanon, 2011). Even though some promises were kept, the regime often manipulated reforms. For instance, a new media law that granted basic citizen rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to be informed,

was issued in August 2011, but it included certain restrictions, such as the prohibition of publishing information about the Syrian army, unless coming from them. Likewise, when in February 2012 the president decreed that Internet communications should be organized and cybernetic crime fought against, measures were effectively taken to curb freedom of expression through Internet.

The referendum about the new constitution that took place in February 2012 aimed to persuade the international community that some progress towards democracy was taking place in Syria. However, it did not succeed in doing so, since the opposition's participation was limited, first because many citizens had fled Syria or were in cities that were being bombed at, such as Homs, Hama, Idlib or Daraa. On the other hand, the vote was not secret and was not deemed free and fair (Mottaleb El Husseini, 2012). In fact, the promises made seemed to be more an intent to calm down demonstrators or gain time rather than reflect a true commitment to change because in practice the government kept restricting freedoms (International Crisis Group, 2012). Sharp actually warns about the risks of trusting such seemingly goodwill gestures. Although they can be a step forward in the direction of democratic change, they can also be a strategy to weaken the opposition movement without relinquishing power (Sharp, 2010).

In sum, the nonviolent movement succeeded in empowering broad sectors of society, who had longstanding grievances against the regime, enabling them to express their concerns and gradually eroding the legitimacy of the regime internally and externally. The response of the regime to the growing challenge raised by the movement was twofold: on one hand, it initially displayed limited willingness to compromise by adopting mild reforms, while, on the other hand, its security apparatus crushed peaceful protests with exaggerate use of force. This double-edged strategy failed to convince the movement of the sincerity of the regime and strengthened its determination to bring about change.

4 Challenges to the Nonviolent Movement of Syria

Like the Prague Spring or the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Arab Spring was driven by nonviolent popular movements fighting against autocratic regimes. Yet, what makes some of these movements successful and others not? In the case of Syria three types of factors had an impact on the effectiveness of the nonviolent movement: 1) factors related to the opposition movement, including its cohesion and strategies; 2) factors related to the regime and its response to challenges raised by opposition forces; 3) external factors, including the support of third parties to the opposition or the regime. These will be examined in turn.

4.1 Factors Related to the Opposition Movement

The fragmentation of the opposition weakened the Syrian nonviolent movement. On one hand, the initial security strategy adopted by the regime was successful in geographically isolating nonviolent protests from one another by restricting the movement and communications of demonstrators (International Crisis Group, 2012). This trend, though, was reverted as a result of the shift to a military strategy by end January 2012, with "expanding solidarity networks that cut across formerly segregated compartments" (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 10). On the other hand, the heterogeneity within Syrian society hindered "collective action on a broad scale" and stood at odds with the relative coherence that characterized the regime (Haddad, 2012, p. 85). This disparity impinged on the formation of an inclusive, united opposition. The main opposition group, the National Syrian Council, officially created on 2 October 2011, seven months after the beginning of large demonstrations, was indeed criticized for failing to adequately represent minorities, such as Kurds or Christians (EFE, 2011). This perceived lack of representativeness explained that other organizations, such as the Movement for Social Change, led by prominent human rights activist Ommar Qurabi, emerged in parallel. The absence of a group of leaders that could keep the

opposition together undermined the legitimacy of the National Syrian Council as an alternative to the government in power. However, the commitment of the main opposition groups during the meeting held from 26 to 27 March 2012 in Turkey to build a more inclusive opposition platform and their common proposal of a vision for the future of Syria were steps forward.

Such a fragmentation also had a negative effect on planning, which is key for nonviolent movements to accomplish their goals, as Sharp pointed out (Sharp, 2010). When the opposition fails to correctly assess a dictator's actions, it can make huge mistakes, risking the lives of many people, without necessarily putting more pressure on the government. A nonviolent movement requires a constant analysis of the situation and possible actions in order to know whether the population will be willing to continue the nonviolent struggle. As Nepstad (2008) says, nonviolent movements need to anticipate strategic moves and countermoves. Further, in the strategic planning of nonviolence it is recommended to start with low-risk actions, with the aim of gradually building confidence in people's power. This did not happen in Syria. Almost from the beginning large public demonstrations were held, resulting in many civilians losing their lives. From March to May 2011 alone, 1100 demonstrators died (AFP, 2011). This amount nevertheless is small if compared with the death toll that could result from the use of a violent strategy.

According to Sharp, a well-planned nonviolent strategy needs to focus on decreasing the military's power: "defiance strategists should remember that it will be exceptionally difficult, or impossible, to disintegrate the dictatorship if the police, bureaucrats, and military forces remain fully supportive of the dictatorship and obedient in carrying out its [sic.] commands" (Sharp, 2010, p. 64). In the same vein Nepstad argues that military defections are key to the success of nonviolent movements (Nepstad, 2011). Although some actions of the nonviolent movement had this purpose, such as giving water bottles and flowers to soldiers, and successfully convinced some in the military to defect, others were not developed with this strategic aim in mind.

In addition, planning is important to avoid the emergence of a new dictatorship after the fall of the current one. The main objective of the nonviolent movement is to establish a democratic system. However, the essence of the regime that replaces a dictatorship depends on how the latter is overthrown. On 26 and 27 March 2012, more than a year after the immolation of Hasan Ali Akleh, the opposition finally announced a transition plan, in which it committed to establishing a democratic regime that respect human rights, including minority rights. One should nonetheless stress that poor planning does not mean poor coordination. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, nonviolent actions against the regime were coordinated at the local level and between different cities through local coordination committees.

Although weak cohesion and shortcomings in strategic planning hindered the success of the Syrian nonviolent opposition, one of the most significant threats came from the increasingly violent strategies chosen by some in the opposition. Indeed, according to nonviolence scholars, violence undermines the prospects of nonviolent actions and can lead to their failure. It overshadows nonviolent resistance and reduces its effectiveness. Scholars are unequivocal: a nonviolent strategy is only effective if it remains nonviolent. Otherwise, it loses its essence. This is what happened to some extent in Syria, where the nonviolent movement, initially very strong, became less visible, as violent hostilities increased.

The massacres committed by the Syrian army against the population made some in the opposition doubt that they could successfully strive for their rights through nonviolent actions. Additionally, members of the nonviolent movement were unable to persuade army deserters to follow them. Deserters could have been of great help to the movement, owing to their planning and organizing skills, acquired through military training. However, soldiers were also trained in the use of violent means of struggle and brainwashed to fight against "the enemy". This undoubtedly constituted a major challenge for the nonviolent movement to rally them to their cause.

With the emergence of the Free Syrian Army, mostly made up of army deserters, at the end of July 2011, the strife against the Syrian government changed dynamics and became more violent

every day, reaching the threshold of “non-international armed conflict” according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. While at the beginning of the uprising newspaper articles focused on nonviolent protest strategies, they gradually turned their attention to military confrontations and the tragic humanitarian situation in the areas affected by armed conflict. Having said that, violence did not totally undermine nonviolent activism. Some activists, in particular, refused to support armed opposition groups. As International Crisis Group observed, in the midst of adversity some civil society groups became more active and played a significant role in keeping “in check some of the worst forms of violence to which any armed opposition operating in a poisonous environment might have resorted” (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. i).

According to Sharp, “by placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority” (Sharp, 2010, p. 4). This is the case in Syria, where neither the Free Syrian Army nor other armed opposition groups are militarily as powerful as the armed forces. If it were not for the outside support received, the Free Syrian Army would probably have been quickly defeated. The government not only has military advantage in a situation of armed conflict, but can also take advantage of such a situation to strengthen its rhetoric – a point that will be further discussed below. As Stephen Zunes argues,

Recent history has shown that armed struggles are far less likely to be successful than nonviolent struggles, even against dictatorships, since it lessens the likelihood of defections by security forces and government officials, reduces the numbers of active participants in the movement, alienates potential supporters, and gives the regime the excuse to crack down even harder by portraying the opposition as ‘terrorists’ (Zunes, 2012a, p. 1).

Likewise, the local coordinating committees stated in August 2011:

While we understand the motivation to take up arms or call for military intervention, we specifically reject this position as we find it unacceptable politically, nationally, and ethically. Militarizing the revolution would minimize popular support and participation in the revolution. [...] Militarization would put the revolution in an arena where the regime has a distinct advantage and would erode the moral superiority that has characterized the revolution since its beginning (LCC, 2011 quoted in Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012, p. 27).

As this statement illustrates, while some in the opposition were quick to take up arms in the face of growing repression, others warned against a strategy that could get out of hands and advocated for the need to maintain “moral superiority”.

Furthermore, it is not because one is “on the right side” that violence can be used in a legitimate way and without collateral damages. Violence always backfires. The Free Syrian Army conducted several military operations, killing police members and people loyal to the government, and was accused of obtaining forced confessions from prisoners – acts that cannot be compared to the extent of abuses perpetrated by the regime, but nevertheless had a negative effect on its image (International Crisis Group, 2011). In particular, abuses against Alawites (religious group to which Bashar al-Assad belongs) raised fears among this group of possible retaliation against them and made some consider the current regime as the best defender of their rights. No matter how solid the arguments of the nonviolent opposition to assuage Alawites’ fears, it failed to convince many of them that the struggle was not against any religious group (Yazbek, 2012). At the same time, the government pushed Alawites to join it in its fight against the opposition or face consequences. In the same vein, certain segments of the population, including among minorities and the private sector, came to consider the regime as a lesser evil and the only guarantor of stability in the face of a growing militarization of the armed conflict and the involvement of militant groups in the strife against the regime.

Most importantly perhaps is that, as Nagler (2004) asserts, a violent revolution almost always brings about a violent regime. The only safe way to establish solid bases for a future democratic

regime is when the majority of the population withdraws its consent to a regime that has lost all legitimacy and is forced to resign. The local coordinating committees, which from the beginning rejected sectarianism, violence and foreign intervention, echoed these fears and warned in August 2011, when the Free Syrian Army started to operate, that:

The method by which the regime is overthrown is an indication of what Syria will be like in the post-regime era. If we maintain our peaceful demonstrations, which include our cities, towns, and villages, and our men, women and children, the possibility of democracy in our country is much greater. If an armed confrontation or international military intervention becomes a reality, it will be virtually impossible to establish a legitimate foundation for a proud future Syria (LCC, 2011, quoted in Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012, p. 31-32).

Various analysts thus consider likely that the transition will not be a smooth one. At best, it will be messy, but gradually moves towards democracy. At worst, it could lead to another autocracy, possibly a radical Islamist one (Abbasi, 2012; Sarihan, 2012).

In sum, the nonviolent movement suffered from three important weaknesses linked to the opposition in general. Firstly, the heterogeneity of Syrian society was reflected in the weak cohesion of opposition forces and limited representativeness of the National Syrian Council. Secondly, the nonviolent movement did not always plan its actions strategically, often responding spontaneously to moves by the government. Thirdly, the growing resort to violence by certain opposition sectors and the belief by many that this was the only alternative dealt a severe blow to the movement. In the face of this situation, though, the local coordinating committees and key leaders maintained a principled stance. This was instrumental and contributed to somewhat moderate excesses that could otherwise have been committed by the armed opposition.

4.2 Factors Related to the Regime and its Response to Challenges Raised by Opposition Forces

The regime employed several strategies to remain in power. First and of great importance was the maintenance of the loyalty of security forces. There were desertions, but trustworthy allies remained in the top leadership of the army and key security services (Haddad, 2012). Those in these positions were usually relatives and/or Alawites. In addition, soldiers were usually deployed in places remote from their hometowns, thereby ensuring that they did not have anything in common with protesters and would therefore more easily believe that they were fighting against terrorists, rather than peaceful protesters. Likewise, a number of military operations were carried out from afar, such as bombing from airplanes, without going on the ground, limiting the military's contact with those targeted and reducing casualties among armed forces (International Crisis Group, 2012). As Nepstad argued, "the military's decision to remain loyal to the regime or to side with civil resisters" is fundamental and is likely to affect the outcome of the Syrian rebellion (Nepstad, 2011, p. 485).

Another strategy adopted by the regime was the use of militia proxies called *shabihas*³. Authors, like Zunes, call them "pro-government vigilante forces"; the latter "often operate with the direct support of the police and the military [...] to assassinate or otherwise silence leaders [...] and participants in nonviolent movements and to terrorize the population into submission" (Zunes, 2000a, p. 185). Such a strategy enabled the regime to evade responsibility for some of the worst human rights abuses against peaceful protesters and exacerbated the conflict (International Crisis Group, 2012). The number of street protests effectively came down in early 2012 and a number of activists fled the country as a result of the regime's crackdown and some sense of demoralization; yet by May "demonstrations had picked up across the country", signalling a renewal of the nonviolent movement (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 18). Hence, while initially successful,

³ For more detail on the functions, motivations, funding, ideology and evolution of the *shabihas*, see Yassin Al-Haj (2012).

the regime's strategy in some way backfired, as "horrifying violence also prompted new forms of peaceful dissent" (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 19).

A third strategy used by the regime was the manipulation of information to depict the situation in advantageous ways, in particular through the monopolization of national media coverage (Zunes, 2012b; Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012). For instance, from the beginning Bashar al-Assad denied the nonviolent character of the protest movement and portrayed all demonstrations as initiatives by "terrorist groups" to topple his government. He also warned of the involvement of outsiders and the possibility of a sectarian war between Sunnis and Alawites (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012; Haddad, 2012). The violent actions undertaken by opposition armed groups therefore came in handy to justify the repression against any protest, regardless whether violent or not. He thus submitted proofs of crimes committed by the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, established by the United Nations, and used the report of the commission to defend his position of "legitimate defence against the threat of extremist armed groups", thereby seeking to garner international and national support (Human Rights Council of the United Nations, 2012). The regime spread propaganda through the state media, while dissident media were curtailed⁴. This presented a challenge for the peaceful opposition to counter the regime's discourse, forcing it to resort to alternative means, such as the Internet, and to rely on the local coordinating committees to convey messages to the masses (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2012). Further, the access of the international media to cover the Syrian conflict was restricted, making it more difficult for people to obtain balanced accounts of the situation.

A last strategy worth pointing out was the control exerted by the government over basic resources, such as water, gas or electricity as a means of limiting people's participation in the contestation movement. By restricting access to basic services, it hence hoped to reduce the capacity of ordinary citizens to take part in protest actions, under the premise that, if people were compelled to devote their attention to survival needs, they would less likely engage in activities against the regime. Nonetheless, it is difficult to gauge whether such a strategy shall turn to the advantage of the government in the end. Conflict expert Edward Azar thus argued that frustration of basic needs of survival, security, identity or access to political and social institutions leads to protracted social conflict, often generating prolonged violence. In addition, insofar as the government takes a hard line against protesters, it invites militant responses from repressed groups, further exacerbating the conflict (Azar, 1990).

The four main strategies described above succeeded, at least to some extent, in undermining the effectiveness of the nonviolent movement. Yet they also prompted reactions by the latter, which, far from being defeated, proved to be extraordinarily resilient. The deep-rooted grievances of ordinary people, which surfaced with the uprising and were fuelled by the intransigence of the regime, certainly proved to be an endless source of energy and renewal for the movement.

4.3 External Factors

A third key set of factors concerns the involvement of third parties in the situation of conflict. This can take at least two different forms: first, the support of external actors to the opposition or the regime, and, second, attempts by the international community to facilitate a peaceful transformation of the conflict. According to scholars of nonviolence, the first one generally impinges negatively on nonviolent movements, while the second one can foster an environment conducive to the success of such movements, provided outside actors refrain from interfering. Each type of involvement will be examined in turn.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria warned about the possible presence of foreigners that supported both sides in Syria (Human Rights Council of the United

⁴ See, for instance, International Crisis Group (2012).

Nations, 2012). Although there was no direct foreign military intervention in Syria, some states and foreign movements did back either the government armed forces or opposition armed groups in several ways, and the presence of foreign combatants became ever more prominent. Russia, which vetoed the resolutions of the Security Council against Syria in accordance with the principle of non-intervention, at the same time, kept selling weapons to the Syrian government (Spiegel, 2012). Likewise, Iran allegedly provided assistance, through the Lebanese group Hezbollah, to Syrian armed forces (International Crisis Group, 2011). Meanwhile, the Gulf monarchies requested Bashar al-Assad to leave power and offered economic and military aid to the Free Syrian Army. In the same vein some Sunni groups from Lebanon and Iraq are suspected to have provided material and logistical support to the opposition movement (Arango and Duraid, 2012; Putz, 2012).

For scholars of nonviolence and conflict studies, the intervention of foreign actors usually exacerbates conflict, especially when the latter support violent strategies. Instead of giving credit to violent strategies, external actors should support the nonviolent movement and take nonviolent actions to weaken the regime (Sharp, 2010). Yet, this is not what happened with regard to Syria. While the threshold of military intervention was not reached at the time of writing this article, Western leaders increasingly warned about the possibility of intervening, should the Syrian regime employ chemical or biological weapons (Landler, 2012). Additionally, in October 2012 Turkey started conducting targeted military operations at the border with Syria in alleged self-defence against aggressive acts by its southern neighbour and intercepted two planes proceeding from Russia and Armenia, respectively, to reportedly seize material directed at the Syrian military. These developments raised fears of a possible war between Turkey and Syria and heightened tensions between Turkey and Russia (Salloum, 2012). According to Zunes, in the case of Syria, although “military intervention is understandable, it would be a very bad idea” (Zunes, 2012b, p. 18).

Several countries also broke off diplomatic relations with Syria and adopted targeted sanctions against top regime officials. These measures, while resting legitimacy to the Syrian regime among the international community, nonetheless had limited effects to date (International Crisis Group, 2012). This is notably due to the disunity of the international community, reflected in the incapacity by the United Nations Security Council to approve a resolution condemning the Syrian regime, as well as disagreements among Arab countries and within the group of friends of Syria.

On a positive note, the international community overall supported the deployment from April to August 2012 of a UN mission of observers (UNSMIS) to monitor the implementation of the Annan Plan by the Syrian parties, including a ceasefire, which could potentially have helped to reduce violent hostilities and shift the struggle back to a nonviolent arena. However, the regime and the opposition quickly violated the ceasefire, despite their agreement to the plan, demonstrating the limits of outside efforts if conflict parties are unwilling to stop violent actions against their counterpart. The abrupt end of UNSMIS came three months after a short-lived human rights monitoring mission deployed by the League of Arab States similarly failed to meaningfully contribute to a reduction of violence on the ground. The designation of a joint special envoy of the UN Secretary-General and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, with strong backing from the international community, at the end of February 2012 was also a welcome development insofar as he could potentially have helped to channel the Syrian conflict through peaceful means. Yet, five months after initiating his assignment, seasoned diplomat Kofi Annan decided not to renew his mandate, owing to the lack of cooperation of key stakeholders (UN, 2012). His successor, Lakhdar Brahimi, equally faced a daunting task, since by the time he assumed his post the conflict had further escalated, with strong evidence of diverse forms of outside intervention by then.

In sum, the involvement of third parties in the situation of conflict did not help the nonviolent movement to recover more ground after hostilities became increasingly violent. On the contrary, several foreign actors became gradually more enmeshed into the conflict, supporting either of the two violent factions. While efforts to foster an environment conducive to the peaceful

transformation of conflict took place in parallel, the international community only supported these endeavours half-heartedly, and their margin of action continued to decrease in the face of spiralling violence and militarization.

Conclusion

As discussed in the first part of this article, the nonviolent movement in Syria had a long history that went back to before the Arab Spring, which was one of its strengths. In 2011 nonviolent actions intensified against the regime as part of the protest movements that swept Arab countries, generating changes of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. The main achievements of the nonviolent movement were to generate growing awareness among people about their rights and possibilities, the loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy internally and externally, and defections among army and government officials. However, the nonviolent movement soon became overshadowed by the armed resistance led by deserters, who had refused to obey orders to crush nonviolent demonstrations. It was argued that, instead of strengthening the protest movement, violent strategies were counterproductive for at least two reasons: firstly, the government was stronger militarily, and, secondly, the presence of militant groups reinforced the government's claim that the regime was under attack by terrorist groups. In addition, as some scholars assert, violent strategies do not help to establish the basis for a future democratic regime.

Furthermore, some factors, such as the fragmentation of the opposition, the lack of strategic planning, the regime's maintenance of the support of military forces, and the interference of external actors, reduced the effectiveness of the nonviolent movement. The disparity of opposition forces, in particular, made it difficult to articulate a cohesive and representative movement, and this also impinged on the capacity of the movement to plan an effective strategy. The regime also did its utmost to divide the opposition, portraying itself as the best defender of minority rights and the guarantor of stability and disseminating propaganda against the opposition, allegedly backed by foreign actors and involving terrorist groups. Additionally, it employed proxy paramilitary groups, the *shabih*s, to quell resistance and protect itself. Meanwhile, the international community was divided in relation to Syria from the beginning of the uprising: from unconditional support for the regime to outright support for the opposition, and growing antagonism between the two. While some initiatives took place to try to generate an environment conducive to the peaceful transformation of the conflict, these did not manage to alter the increasing militarization of the conflict. The Annan Plan, in particular, while agreed to by both parties, was not implemented, making little difference on the ground.

Yet, in the midst of these adverse conditions the Syrian nonviolent movement was surprisingly resilient. Instead of surrendering to violent strategies, many nonviolent activists kept away from armed opposition groups and, through creative means, successfully convinced these groups to avoid resorting to some of the worst violence. Besides, the more and more brutal response of the regime was in many ways counterproductive and alienated broad sectors of the population, thereby further reducing the regime's legitimacy and increasing the support base of the nonviolent opposition movement. All in all, despite numerous challenges, the nonviolent movement proved that it could play a meaningful role, not least in trying to reduce growing polarization among society and paving the way for a more inclusive transition.

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María Belén Garrido (belen_garrido@hotmail.com) é mestre em Peace Studies na Fernuniversität Hagen, Alemanha. Professora e pesquisadora na Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador.

Cécile Mouly (camouly@flacso.edu.ec) é doutora em International Studies, na University of Cambridge, Reino Unido. Professora e pesquisadora na Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Ecuador.