

A sense of déjà vu: Portugal and the regime change in Syria

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The international community is fast approaching the margins of the Rubicon. Sooner rather than later, it will have to decide if it is willing to cross it. With the ongoing uprising in Syria showing no signs of fading, additional exogenous pressure seems inevitable. One particular venue where such tensions might eventually play out could thus reside in the widespread formal recognition of the opposition forces to the Assad regime as the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people.

Coincidentally, such a potential move would come only a few months after which equivalent political gestures were asked of the world powers for the proper acknowledgment of Libya's own National Transitional Council (NTC) as no longer an opposition group, but a legitimate national government. Indeed, the similarities in the pattern towards achieving such a goal are increasingly striking: as Muammar Gaddafi's embattled rule began to wear down, the Benghazi-based NTC scrambled its emissaries throughout the world in the attempt to secure much-needed political backing that would, in turn, be capitalized upon and skillfully used in obtaining NATO's military assistance for operations developing on the ground.

If we turn our focus to the Syrian conundrum at this point, one can see that the situation is quickly deteriorating to a point of no return. Following a period of disorganized

strife, the Syrian National Council (SNC) emerged at the end of 2011 as the central core of opposition, seeking to aggregate the different Syrian political forces in exile and oversee the rebel developments within the country. Led by Sorbonne professor Burhan Ghaloum, the SNC has since then considerably stepped up its efforts in trying to present itself as the main actor within a myriad of opposition factions currently emerging from Syria.

However, a brief overview of such efforts only allows for a cautious reading. Up to this date, only Libya went ahead with the actual diplomatic recognition of the SNC. On a different level, but with varying degrees of interest, the US called the group a "leading and legitimate representative of Syrians seeking a peaceful democratic transition",¹ Spain deemed it an interlocutor that "is on the right direction",² while the most vocal supporter, France, classified it as "the legitimate interlocutor with which we will continue to work".³

1 Karen DeYoung, "Clinton meets with Syria opposition" (*Washington Post*, 6 December 2011).

2 "Trinidad Jiménez alerta de que las revueltas en Siria pueden desembocar en guerra civil" (*Europa Press*, 28 November 2011); Miguel González, "Jiménez recibe por vez primera a la oposición al régimen sirio" (*El País*, 24 November 2011).

3 Andrew Rettman, "France recognizes Syrian council, proposes military intervention" (*EU Observer*, 24 November 2011).



France's role is likely the one that should be watched more closely. Indeed, as in its previous outspoken position regarding Libya, France is gradually assuming the lead in the international outcry over Syria. President's Sarkozy latest comments that "the massacres being committed by the Syrian regime rightly arouse disgust and revolt in the Arab world, in France, in Europe and everywhere in the world" and that "the Syrian president must leave power", confirm as much.⁴

In the midst of all this, the latest country to display an almost equivalent token of support happened to be Portugal. Throughout the duration of this crisis, the Portuguese Foreign Ministry – under Foreign Minister Paulo Portas since June 2011 – has not shied away from displaying a progressively acute degree of criticism towards the Bashar al-Assad regime, in a slight contrast with the manifested "level of equidistance" of the previous government towards Libya.⁵ For example, in early September, Portas warned that "reform would come sooner or later to Syria"⁶ and in November, following the Arab League's suspension of the country, he highlighted Damascus' growing "international isolation".⁷ Moreover, when any feasible action within the UN Security Council appeared seemingly blocked, he also highlighted the need to "persuade Russia and China that it is not possible in a civilized public opinion, in a desirably democratic and free world, to accept either the systematic continuation of violence, persecution of people, murder or loss of life".⁸ Overall, it quickly became clear that Portas would not resort to the cautious trademark style of his predecessor and would opt instead for openly targeted remarks on Assad's crippling rule.

Still, Portugal's position in this crisis faced significant new developments on January 3rd. Not only did Portas meet with Ghalioun in Lisbon – thus joining the restricted group of countries which had already, in some form, contacted with SNC representatives – but he also took the opportunity to make his harshest declarations on the topic so far by classifying the ongoing violence as simply "unacceptable" and by calling on Assad to leave power "in order for peace to return to Syria".⁹ For all purposes, such statements brought him on par with the likes of French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé or even Sarkozy and can be possibly best explained as symptomatic of

the Portuguese government's increasing will to be seen as siding with the first wave of international support for the SNC. If with the Libyan case Portugal unequivocally treaded a fine line in observing the developments on the ground, with Syria the official position appears to be much lesser accommodating and much more incisive and demanding in terms of actual regime change.

Still, even though one could dwell on the merits of this latest meeting equalling to a *de facto* recognition of the SNC's legitimacy, such a stand does not come without its risks. There are a number of reasons why the Syrian opposition has still not matched the avalanche of formal recognition achieved by its Libyan counterparts a few months ago. Indeed, as in the early days of the NTC, there is an inescapable prudence by many countries in holding off on cutting all official ties with the Syrian regime and going ahead with the SNC's desired recognition. In an interview to the *Wall Street Journal*, Ghalioun himself said as much: "There are complicated legal issues that need to be resolved. (...) [The international community] can recognize us politically as the representative of the Syrian opposition but not as the legitimate alternative yet, or else they have cut off the path of any relations with the regime".¹⁰

Adding even more uncertainty to this process is also the fact that the SNC is currently far from representing the full extent of the Syrian opposition while its control and influence over the Free Syrian Army's operations on the ground remains doubtful at best.¹¹ Recent events have clearly shown "that tension between the armed and political wings of the uprising is [only] matched by the gulf between an opposition in exile rallying international support and the protesters and rebels inside Syria who act largely independently".¹²

In that sense, it is not hard to envisage the difficulties in the way of the SNC's objective of wider international recognition. British Foreign Secretary William Hague best exemplified these hurdles when he stated that, despite meeting with their delegates, the UK would not offer formal recognition to the SNC "partly because there are differing groups (...) There isn't a single national council as there was in Libya (...) and the international community has not yet reached that point," he said.¹³ One can thus easily grasp the main concerns of several world powers before going ahead with such a generalized move. Inevitably, "the legitimacy required to make any demands on the international community, including intervention, on behalf of the Syrian people must be

4 Adrian Blomfield, "Syria: Nicolas Sarkozy demands Bashar al-Assad step down after 'disgusting' massacres" (*Telegraph*, 3 January 2012).

5 Paulo Gorjão, "Portugal and the recognition of the National Transitional Council" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 21, July 2011), p. 1.

6 "Síria: "As primaveras árabes ainda não acabaram" – MNE Paulo Portas" (*Lusa*, 3 September 2011).

7 "Síria: Suspensão da Liga Árabe revela isolamento internacional de Damasco – MNE Paulo Portas" (*Lusa*, 14 November 2011).

8 "É preciso "persuadir a Rússia e a China" de que não é possível aceitar a violência na Síria – Paulo Portas" (*Lusa*, 16 November 2011).

9 Susana Salvador, "Portas pede saída de Assad" (*Diário de Notícias*, 3 January 2012).

10 "Syria Opposition Leader Interview Transcript" (*Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2011).

11 "Syria's opposition: Gaining ground" (*The Economist*, 17 December 2011).

12 Dominic Evans, "Analysis: Doubts over Syria rebel army after escalation threat" (*Reuters*, 4 January 2012).

13 Stefano Ambrogi, "Britain meets Syria opposition, condemns crackdown" (*Reuters*, 21 November 2011).



based on a consensus” with all parties involved.¹⁴ Until that conclusively happens, the SNC will most likely remain at arm’s length of their main political goal.

Be that as it may, there are further alternatives that can be undertaken while simultaneously helping to drum up support for the SNC’s aspirations. One good example lies with the formation of an international contact group – much like what happened with Libya and which Portugal eventually joined – which is gearing up to becoming the next step to be adopted by the cited countries invested in the Syrian crisis.¹⁵ This could provide for a more cohesive forum where positions can be coordinated and subsequently publicly expressed, thus achieving a sense of unity in the face of the continuing violence by Assad’s minions. Keeping in line with Portas’ previously expressed argumentation, there is no reason whatsoever why Portugal should not be a part of such a grouping from its early developing stages.

On the other hand, the Portuguese government has always favored a common stand on this issue, both at the international and European level. With the violence on the ground showing no signs of decreasing, it is safe to expect that the next meeting of the EU’s Foreign Ministers on January 30th will end up approving a new round of extensive sanctions on the Syrian regime. However, the spotlights will invariably continue to be focused on the UN Security Council, hoping that a resolution explicitly condemning the repression is finally voted and enforced. For his part, Portas has already stated that “Portugal, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, is

willing to consider and support further international initiatives”, following the Arab League’s recent efforts.¹⁶

Ultimately, a sense of *déjà vu* is spreading throughout the international community as the Arab Spring of 2011 gradually evolves into the Winter of Discontent for the Syrian regime. The ways to deal with it, however, remain more of the same, even if coupled with added caution about directly intervening in such a crisis. Meanwhile, Portugal is evidently keen on joining the group of countries that have so far vocalized their disapproval and taken steps to support, in some form, the SNC. Only further developments will tell if this decision is a wise one but for the time being, it is undeniable that the Portuguese government has clearly stepped up its stakes and should now continue to follow through with such a stand on a number of multilateral stages in order to achieve the stated goal of ending the repression and violence in Syria.

¹⁶ “Síria: Paulo Portas defende “posição efectiva” da comunidade internacional para o fim da repressão” (*Lusa*, 3 January 2011).

¹⁴ Michael Weiss, “Intervention in Syria? An Assessment of Legality, Logistics and Hazard” (*The Henry Jackson Society*, December 2011).

¹⁵ David Lerman, “U.S. Trying to Form Regional ‘Contact Group’ on Syria” (*Bloomberg*, 9 November 2011); Josh Rogin, “Obama administration secretly preparing options for aiding Syrian opposition” (*Foreign Policy/ The Cable*, 22 December 2011).

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