



# Syria's Stormy Spring

ON JANUARY 31, SYRIA'S PRESIDENT BASHAR Assad cockily told the "Wall Street Journal" that Syria was immune from the tsunami of popular protests that had overthrown Tunisia's pro-Western president and were about to do the same in Egypt. Unlike those regimes, he declared, his government and the Syrian public were like-minded on core issues, especially the need to support the Lebanese and Palestinian "resistance" against Israel and to maintain a reserved attitude towards the US.

Since then, two months of steadily spreading protests have resulted in the most serious challenge to the regime in decades, marked by the deaths of more than 800 anti-regime protesters at the hands of the security forces and the incarceration of many thousands. Although the regime appears to still have the upper hand on the ground, its room for maneuver has shrunk drastically and its legitimacy may well have been fatally compromised.

Fashioning a viable, cohesive political entity out of the heterogeneous, formerly Ottoman, Syrian lands was fraught with difficulties from the outset. Post-1945 independent Syria was a weak and unstable entity, the focal point of inter-Arab and Soviet-American rivalries; between 1958 and 1961, it even ceased to exist, having essentially given itself away to Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser in the name of Arab unity. Over time, power passed into the hands of army officers, particularly those belonging to the small Alawite community (some 10-12% of the population), who ruled over Syria's Sunni Muslim majority, and Druze and Christian communities in the name of a common Arab identity.

It was only after Hafez Assad seized power in November 1970 that Syria gradually achieved a measure of internal stability. To be sure, the road remained rocky: a violent rebellion by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s was put down at great cost, including the bombardment of the old quarter of Hama and the deaths of some 20,000 persons.

In developing greater state capacity, bureaucratically and militarily, Syria became a regional actor with some influence, particularly in Lebanon and the Palestinian camp. More generally, Assad pursued a pragmatic foreign policy, maneuvering through the regional minefields by keeping all foreign policy doors open: to the West, to conservative Arab states, to its vital ally in Tehran since the 1979 Islamic revolution, and eventually to Turkey.

The hasty anointing of Bashar as president in May 2000, following his father's death, did not speak well for Syrian state institutions. Still, the London-educated Bashar generated hopes both at home and abroad for political and social reforms in what had long been a police state. But the initial signs of liberalization and openness that encouraged would-be Damascus reformers were quickly replaced with business-as-usual

repression, even as many old-guard members of the security establishment were replaced by a younger coterie presumably loyal to Bashar.

Similarly, economic reforms, such as there were, merely transferred state wealth into the hands of regime cronies, such as Rami Makhlouf, a business tycoon who became a focal point of the protesters' anger.

The last few years have actually produced foreign policy successes for Assad: a restoration of Syria's hegemony in Lebanon, a rapprochement with Turkey, a strengthening of its Palestinian ally Hamas, and contributing to American difficulties in the region. But like other Arab autocrats, Assad was either unable or unwilling to take advantage of the moment and pursue a strategy of political reform at home, a sine qua non if he was to maintain his legitimacy.

Syrian society, particularly its overwhelmingly youthful population (with an average age of 21) suffers from a variety of economic and social ailments familiar throughout the region – unemployment, the effects of prolonged drought, alienation and high-level corruption. Specific sectors, from the long-suffering Kurds in the northeast to the Sunnis in peripheral towns such as Deraa and Baniyas, have an extra measure of grievances. As a result, and with the Arab Spring protests

unfolding around them serving as inspiration, the complete absence of political freedom and the continuation of the decades-old state of emergency could no longer be justified in the name of "resistance" (*muqawwama*), the regime's guiding ideological mantra.

While following in the footsteps of Facebook-savvy youthful Arab protesters elsewhere, initial demonstrations called for reform, not regime change. But Assad's initial promises to be attentive to their demands proved hollow and a familiar cycle ensued – escalating protests, violent repression, more protests, now insisting on regime change, and more repression.

The ruling Alawite elite, particularly the inner circle of the Assad family, appears to have circled the wagons, deciding to follow the approach used two years ago by its allies in Tehran to crush dissent, while also offering the carrot of a "national dialogue." But its reputation abroad has been severely damaged: its Turkish ally is embarrassed; Arab commentators and the Arab media across the spectrum, and even some Iranian commentators, have condemned it; Hamas, feeling the ground shaking in Damascus, ran to Cairo to sign a long-rejected unity agreement with its Fatah antagonist; and Western governments, while making it clear that military intervention, à la Libya, was not in the cards, have reluctantly concluded that Assad will not don the mantle of reform and have begun imposing sanctions. Most importantly, the regime's legitimacy is in tatters, and Syria's future, as a society and as a political entity, has become extremely clouded. ●

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