

COMMENTARY

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Before We Take Down Assad

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Is Syria burning? Most emphatically not. This was the overwhelming impression after a visit there late last month. Nor does it look as if the regime is on the verge of collapse. As an international group of journalists invited by the Syrian government, we visited, in addition to Damascus, Hama and locales near Homs. From the many Syrians we met, the common refrain was, “We do not want to become the next Libya”—referring to the total disarray there months after NATO intervention. Given its pivotal position in the eastern Mediterranean, any precipitate international action to provoke change in Syria would affect the entire region, including Israel.

Media reports clearly biased against the Syrian regime make reality appear far worse than what we encountered on the streets of Damascus. Yet under an overlay of calm, the tension was palpable, especially in Hama.

There is much that is wrong in Syria, and much that has to be fixed, if the Syrian people are to enjoy their democratic political, economic and social rights. But, the reprehensible brutality reportedly employed against the protesters still does not justify armed groups’ violence against the state. The reform plan offered by President Bashar Assad on 22 August—local and parliamentary elections within six months and an end to the predominance of the Arab Baath party—though a first step, is the last chance for the regime’s survival.

Escalating with each passing Friday, the protests have themselves changed in character. All the centres of protest have been Sunni-majority cities—Daraa, Jisr-al-Shughour, Deir Ezzor and Homs—bordering each of Syria’s fractious neighbours. Cross-border smuggling of arms and funds to the protesters was repeatedly mentioned by local observers. Hama, in the centre of the agricultural heartland, is a case in itself, with a long history of antipathy to the regime among its

Sunni business and land-owning classes. In 1982, this led to the infamous military operation against the city.

The escalating anti-regime sentiment has at least five distinct causes: First, 40 years of a heavy-handed security system that has quelled dissent; soaring real-estate and rental costs in the major cities that has placed a heavy burden on a population already living at the margin; widespread corruption and capitalism dictated by cronyism; neglect of agricultural and rural infrastructure; and finally, a lack of jobs and educational opportunities for a growing proportion of youth.

In considering Syria's future, many factors need to be weighed. First, is regional stability. Under the Assad regime, the border with the Golan Heights has been kept quiet for decades, unlike Israel's borders with Gaza and Lebanon. An abrupt disruption of the regime could open all options, as with the new dispensation in Egypt.

Ever since the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005, relations with Lebanon remain a continuing problem, given Syria's salience in that country. Relations with Turkey, too, have grown distant, given that country's unsuccessful attempts to get Damascus to legitimize the banned Muslim Brotherhood, as well as to succour Syrian opposition groups. Turkey's aim is to assert its own position in the region in contraposition to Iran, and to convince Syria to cut its link with Iran. The fact that it is widely perceived that even the United States is complicit in these plans does harm to America's image in the region in the post-bin-Laden period.

Excessive US reliance on Syrian exiles in determining policy is also being compared among international observers to Washington's dependence on Ahmed Chalabi in the initial years of the Iraq war.

Second, the regime has studiously avoided giving the protests a sectarian colour, just as targeting of Alawites by the protesters has not been reported. The Baath ideology that separates church and state is still deeply ingrained among the majority. Syria is today a secular island amid the raging tide of Islamism in the region. The fracturing of this ethos will have profound negative consequences for the diverse populations of the region.

The third concern to keep in mind is the state structure. Bashar Assad, as *primus inter pares* within his immediate and extended family, can count on the loyalty of three interlinked groups: the Baath party, with about three million members, which wields overarching power across the state; the trade unions, with a membership of 2.5 to 3 million, especially as the state is Syria's largest employer; and, the army, about 400,000-strong, which has mainly been used to protect the *nomenklatura* and keep a lid on Lebanon. The three groups account for six million out of a population of 22 million.

The fourth major factor is the economy. Despite a growth rate of 3.2 percent in 2010, down from 9 percent a year earlier, the economy is moribund. Agricultural growth is nonexistent and industrial growth is still almost exclusively in the state sector. Privatized industries have gone to cronies of the leadership, as happened in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco.

Fifth, oil and gas are drivers here too. The recent discovery of up to 30 trillion cubic meters of natural gas in the offshore Levant Basin Province, encompassing Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus, has introduced a new reason for stability and not conflict. Syria, like Israel and Lebanon, is looking to exploit its share. Only a new peace initiative that leverages this factor will enable its exploitation by all.

These factors strengthen the belief that dislodging the regime by external action, as in Libya, is unlikely to succeed. Rather, the Syrian regime has to be given an opportunity to make changes within a finite period, and with agreed-upon benchmarks, for implementing political and economic reforms. Given Syria's crucial position in all issues besetting the region, trying to precipitately dislodge them may open the entire front. It is essential to consider what is in the best interest of the Syrian people and the region as a whole.

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