

# COMMENTARY

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## Regime Change, the only Option for Syria

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Syria is today on the verge of a creeping and bloody civil war. Internally, it faces widespread dissent, fuelled by violence between the government and the opposition groups. Externally, the regime has been abandoned by all its neighbours. The coup de grace came last weekend when the Arab League suspended Syria, a member state that had long seen itself as the “bleeding heart of the Arab world,” the fulcrum upon which Arab solidarity rested.

The sectarian divisiveness that the government had long said it was intent on preventing has come to the fore. In a piece for this page on 2 September, I suggested that the reform plan of 22 August offered the regime its last chance for survival. The government was promising to implement it within six months, by March 2012. Syria’s neighbours and the international community were ready, against their better judgment, to give Bashar Assad the time he sought in the hope of avoiding dangerous regional turmoil. Yet in the two months since then, the Assad regime has single-handedly alienated Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and bolstered the already virulent opposition it faced from the United States and Europe.

The regime’s cynical interpretation of that initial readiness provoked it to delay action on reforms and strike out relentlessly in all directions. As a consequence, it is evident that the minority regime has lost whatever domestic support it once possessed. Slowly, but surely, most of Syria’s major cities have become “killing fields” for both the government and the opposition groups. The Arab League was treated no better than the international community when its formula for ending the violence and moving to the negotiating table was rebuffed.

Today, regime change looks like a better option than a creeping civil war—post-Qaddafi developments in Libya notwithstanding—if it can stop internecine violence and foster a

movement toward participatory governance through an acceptable interim leadership. This is not going to be easy, with the opposition divided between the Istanbul-based Syrian National Front, the internal National Coordination Committee and the defector-sponsored Free Syrian Army.

The Syrian regime, the last survivor in the “first round” of the Arab Spring, failed to read the mood of either its people or the international community, and to tailor its steps accordingly. Its self-serving perspective has reinforced the overwhelming impression that its demise is imminent. With its wanton disregard of a widespread domestic desire to avoid having Syria become the next Libya, the Assad regime missed an opportunity to turn the situation to its favour and show quick gains on its reform package.

As state violence against the Syrian people grows, so does international opposition to the regime. By its own actions, the regime appears to have swelled the size of the opposition within its own ranks, thus weakening the state structure. Increasing numbers of defections are reported from the 400,000-strong army – the bulwark of Assad’s support – and opinion is likely to have turned as well within the two other pillars of traditional support: the Arab Ba’ath party, with its 3 million members, and the trade unions, with another 2.5 million.

With each passing Friday, the protests have spread inward from the frontier towns of Daraa, Jisr-al-Shughour, Deir Ezzor and Homs. Even Damascus no longer appears immune from the unrest, with reports this week of the opposition hitting an intelligence facility there. With officials from the Russian foreign ministry already having met the opposition, Syria’s strongest supporter in the UN Security Council appears to be hedging its bets as well, throwing considerations of regional stability to the wind.

Relations with Lebanon, one of Syria’s two remaining supporters in the Arab League, are tenuous, with its proximity to Homs laying it open to charges of providing weapons to the protesters there. Turkey, a friend and partner, is now openly hostile to the regime, playing host to both the Syrian National Front and the Free Syrian Army, allowing these opposition organizations to regroup on Turkish soil. Even Iran, Syria’s staunchest supporter, has called on the regime to stop the violence and engage with the opposition.

The situation has united the various political and military groups within the fractious Syrian opposition, blurring, for the moment, the religious dividing line. Syria’s status as the only secular island amid a raging tide of Islamism has taken a beating. The fracturing of this ethos will have profound negative consequences for the diverse populations of Christians and Jews already under pressure both in the country and regionally.

These developments strengthen the perception that dislodging the regime may be the only alternative left for the Syrian people. The Arab League’s abandonment of Assad may well be seen as provoking external intervention, although we still appear to be far from a Libyan-type UN Security Council resolution.

In the interest of Syria’s long-suffering people and the country’s crucial role in all issues relating to the region, it would be best if the Assad regime were to call it quits if it is unable even at this

late stage to “walk the talk.” As was the case in Iraq, it is evident that whatever regime replaces it will be dominated by the majority Sunni population.

In fact, the people will demand it. Whether the successor regime will preserve Syria’s secular ethos is a moot point, given the tensions experienced by the new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, which are struggling to retain the fullest possible democratic rights within an underlay of Islamic orientation. Yet, considering the divided nature of the Syrian opposition, and the instability that is likely to accompany a second round of the Arab Spring in this volatile region, the prospect of regime change must remain a fraught prospect.

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