

## *COMMENTARY*

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# **Syria and the Arab Spring**

**Vaishali Ramamoorthy**

**Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi**

The Arab Spring has opened up the fault lines amongst the various ethnic, religious and social groups in the Middle East. Every country in the region has felt the vibrations, which has accelerated the demand for political changes. Following the toppling of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the focus now rests on Syria. According to the UN, over 9,000 persons have been killed in the sectarian violence in that country since mid-March 2011. The Alawite-dominated army remains loyal to the regime. President Bashar al-Assad has been less than successful in containing the dissent and adding to this, the international pressure is mounting and the Arab League is taking a strong stand and demanding Assad's resignation.

The Syrian uprising has wider implications for the region. The US-Israel led isolation of Iran over the nuclear controversy weakens the position of Syria, which is often referred to as "Iran's Achilles heel." Iran is by far the strongest ally of Syria in the region and Damascus acts as the safe haven for Hezbollah and other allied networks, which further Tehran's regional agenda. Iran, therefore, has been jolted at two levels. Firstly, the nuclear programme, which has led to international embargoes, and secondly, the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria, which have provided the US and other US-backed monarchies a "legitimate" reason to interfere. Hence, stifling the Assad regime serves as a blow to Iran and its regional ambitions.

Another critical aspect that needs to be factored in is the role of Turkey. Ankara's ambitions to emerge as a regional leader have been made apparent by its leadership since the onset of the Arab Spring. Turkey has been projecting itself as the best-possible option - featuring a moderate Islamic party (the Justice and Development Party - AKP) in power; a secular constitution; a professional military—albeit strong—back in the barracks; and an ongoing economic boom. The

fact that it is endorsed by the western powers just strengthens Turkey's stand further, and encourages its regional aspirations.

In the Syrian case, Turkey's involvement has become important. It has not just been harbouring a number of Syrian opposition leaders, including some from the Free Syrian Army—a militia drawn mainly from defectors from the Syrian armed forces—but some media reports also suggest that Ankara is arming the rebels or allowing arms to be supplied to them from neighbouring Arab countries. Moreover, the main opposition faction, the Syrian National Council, has been demanding a greater Turkish intervention. Instability in Syria also threatens vital trade routes linking Turkey to lucrative Arab markets. However, the pro-active role now being played by Turkey definitely goes beyond the defence of its interests and points to a more ambitious pursuit of opportunities. Regime change in Damascus in favour of the Sunni majority would deal a severe blow to Syria's strategic ally Iran, Turkey's main competitor for regional influence.

From Israel's perspective, the toppling of the Assad regime would definitely prove to be a benefit. It will not only undermine the Iran-Syria alliance but also weaken the Hezbollah and Hamas network. Both these non-state actors have proved to be an issue of concern for Israel. Hezbollah and its allies have been dismayed in equal measure. If the Syrian regime, based on the Shia-offshoot Alawite minority, were to collapse and the Sunni majority to take over, Hezbollah's lifeline from its Iranian patrons would risk being severed, leaving the movement weakened in both the Lebanese political arena and militarily vis-à-vis Israel.

The final outcome in Syria—survival or downfall of the regime—raises a clear potential for violent repercussions in Lebanon. The sectarian fault lines that have strong connections in Syria run sharply through Lebanon and this has been evident in the tensions between pro-regime Alawites and hostile Sunnis in the north of Lebanon. Apart from the sectarian divide, that might fuel up a civil war, not just in Syria but also in the neighbouring Lebanon, another outcome of the Arab Spring that many believe will affect Syria is the rise in Islamic extremism.

Syria, despite being a close ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran and groups such as Hezbollah, has been considered a secular country. The minority Alawite regime ruling the country, which is an amalgam Shi'a, Sunni, Druze and Christian populations has been a beacon of secularism in the region. Islamic extremism will definitely hurt the plurality of the Syrian society. This will affect not just that country, but also have wider implications for the region as well. If the Assad regime falls and a Sunni faction comes to power, then it will cut through the widely accepted notion of Shi'a crescent that stretches from Bahrain in the Persian Gulf to Bekaa valley in Lebanon.

With countries like Tunisia and Egypt having elected parties with Islamist tendencies, experts are of the opinion that the region would come under the heavy influence of similar groups. This apprehension drove the US and the Arab League for demands in UNSC for Assad to step down. Ironically, the Arab League, which is dominated by monarchies of the region, has pushed for a “democratic” and “peaceful” end to the Syrian crisis. Though the UN resolution failed due to the veto by Russia and China, the League’s proactive role surprised many.

Russia and China clearly have stake in the Assad regime staying in power. Syria not just hosts Russia’s only Mediterranean naval base in the port city of Tartus but also gains heavily from Russian arms sale. This also helps Russia and China to play an important role in the region, which otherwise is dominated by the Americans and their allies.

The Arab Spring might have started on a positive note, by deposing dictatorial regimes in the aforementioned countries, but the most important question remains—what happens next. With Islamist parties winning the election in Egypt and Tunisia and violent tribal clashes dominating the post-Qaddafi Libya, Syria has a lesson to learn. Only time will tell whether Assad stays in power and strengthens the prospect of Shi’a dominance in the region, or does Syria become a theatre of civil war. Whichever route it takes, the region will definitely feel the wider reverberations.

**Vaishali Ramamoorthy is pursuing her research in the School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi. Email: [vaishaliramamoorthy@gmail.com](mailto:vaishaliramamoorthy@gmail.com)**

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