

The Future of Syria: New Era of Democracy or Rise of Sunni Fundamentalism

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Faced with a rebellion of unprecedented scale and crushed by international pressure, Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime is in its death throes. But how did it get there? Does it still have any chance of survival? How should the international community act to prevent its downfall from bringing about terror and chaos in the Middle-East?

A locked-up Political System

Since Saddam Hussein's fall in April 2003, Ba'athist Syria has been the last stronghold of Arab nationalism. Resulting from Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970, Syria's regime is sustained by four pillars: the army, the security services, the Ba'ath party¹ and the Alawi clan², to which the Assad family belongs. These pillars have become largely interconnected over the years. Thus, members of the Alawi community control most of the army and security services like Military Intelligence, Special Security, Political Security, Homeland Security and Special Forces. Similarly, the Army is particularly involved in the Ba'ath party, the country's unique political party, and represents about a third of its Congress members.

In order to give the illusion of pluralism, but also to counter the Sunni majority which is largely under-represented in the state's institutions, power has amply relied on minorities and in particular on Christians and Druze. The ultimate paradox is that although the regime has been repressing Islamist movements for years in the name of secularism and the defense of national unity, it has been the main ally of Islamists in the Middle East for decades. These include the Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, just to name a few. Since 1970, any opposition attempt towards the Assad regime has been repressed and has ended in bloodshed. Amnesty International's latest annual report on human rights throughout the world condemns the methodical —and completely unpunished— use of torture in Syrian prisons³. It also reports the arbitrary arrests of opponents according to the state of emergency rule⁴, and the disappearance of prisoners on a regular basis⁵.

¹ The original Ba'ath Party was created in 1947 in Damascus in order to gather the different Arabic states into one large nation. The etymological origin of the word Ba'ath comes from the Arabic and means "resurrection". After several events (including the split of the party and the exile of its founders), the Ba'ath party came to power in Syria (1963-1966 and then from 1970 to nowadays) and in Iraq (1963, chased the same year, and then from 1968 to 2003).

² Alawis are also called Nusairis (pejorative nowadays); they constitute a religious community stemming from the Shi'ism. Because their beliefs are quite different from those of Orthodox Islam, they are considered as heretics by both Shiites and Sunnis. They were Syria's unloved ones for a long time before Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. This community is settled mostly in Syria.

³ Amnesty international, 2011 Annual Report, The state of the world's human rights, p. 334.

⁴ In Syria, the state of emergency has been in effect since 1963. It confers large powers to the authorities, particularly as regards arrests and detention.

⁵ For instance, the Syrian Government hasn't explained yet what happened to the 49 prisoners missing since the 2008 events in the Saidnaya military prison.

The Mismanagement of Regional Crises

Foreign policy was former President Hafez al-Assad's priority; he had become a key player in all the peace negotiations in the Middle East. Although he defended radical anti-Zionist stances, he did not blindly support the Palestinian cause. Assad senior gave priority to calculation rather than conviction and often held a versatile position. During the Black September events⁶, he refused to send air support and help the Palestinian coup attempt in Jordan. A few years later, in Lebanon, he supported the Maronites against the Palestinian *fidayees*⁷, even though the latter were about to crush the former at Mount Lebanon. Nevertheless, such uncompromising anti-Zionism has turned Syria into a key power on the regional scale. It is, among other elements, in order to measure up to Israel that the subjection process of Lebanon took place. This also enabled Hafez al-Assad to compete once more with Saddam, his old enemy. Damascus hence supported Tehran's Ayatollahs during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Later on, anticipating the Iraqi defeat, Hafez al-Assad sent his troops to the Arabic Peninsula during the Liberation of Kuwait Campaign in 1991.

When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000, he left his heir — his son Bashar⁸, aged 34 then, and with less political charisma - with significant challenges: an economic crisis, the old guard's stranglehold on the country's power and wealth, the Iraqi instability, and the unresolved Palestinian conflict. Human rights defenders in Syria were hoping for a kind of liberalisation of the country. This did not happen; in February 2011, the security services suspended the activities of some timid existing intellectual, cultural and political forums by arresting their leaders. On the regional scale, such inflexibility led to a phase of tensions with Syria's Arab neighbours and with the international community. According to the Bush administration, Damascus had three unforgivable flaws: radical anti-Zionism, endless interferences in Lebanon and material support to terrorists in Iraq.

The Syrian regime undoubtedly made its most crucial mistake in Lebanon. Indeed, the American pressure increased greatly after the terrorist attack in which Rafic Hariri died. The United Nations' inquiry into the former Lebanese Prime Minister's murder found "converging evidence" of Syrian intelligent service officers' involvement in the attack, along with their former Lebanese allies. Ghazi Kanaan, former Interior Minister and former head of Syria's Military Intelligence services in Lebanon, "committed suicide" and was found with two bullets in his head in October 2005; his death increased suspicion with regard to Damascus's involvement in the attack. Kanaan was indeed attacked from all sides and his name had been mentioned in a UN report. Another source of accusation came from Paris where Abdel-Halim Khaddam is exiled. Through a series of interviews for Al-Arabiya, a UAE-based satellite TV channel, this prominent member of the Ba'ath party during Hafez al-Assad's leadership and former Vice President of Syria denounced "the lack of freedom, the corruption and the unwillingness to reform shown by the head of Syria". Khaddam also denounced Bashar al-Assad's strong pressure on Rafic Hariri shortly before the latter was killed. Pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolution 1559, Syria was forced to remove its troops from Lebanon in April 2005. The first UN Investigation Commission report led by German Detlev Mehlis came to the conclusion that there had been "a highly probable involvement of Syrian and (pro-Syrian) Lebanese officials" in this murder, although Damascus refused to cooperate with the Commission. The crisis in Lebanon strongly

⁶ This refers to the killing of tens of thousands of Palestinians by the Jordan army in September 1970 after Yasser Arafat's coup attempt against King Hussein of Jordan.

⁷ Palestinian commando group.

⁸ On 26 June 2000, the Parliament unanimously proposed Bashar al-Assad's candidacy (he was the only candidate); it was ratified by universal suffrage on 10 July 2000 by 97.29% of the voters.

weakened Syria: it was now deprived of its historical ally in the region (Lebanon) and was clearly discredited in the eyes of the Arab League and the international community.

The regional instability caused by Damascus led some rulers in the area to consider the idea of overthrowing the regime. The option had actually been advocated by some American neoconservatives in the euphoria which followed in the first few months after the fall of Baghdad, in April 2003⁹. It was quickly dropped because of the problems faced in Iraq and also due to the major risk of seeing a fundamentalist Islamic regime come to power, which would have been even more dangerous for Western interests. A solution of a similar kind, although less radical and less risky, consisted of supporting internal movements defending institutional and political reforms. This did not happen. Then the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in France in 2007 and his invitation to Assad to the 14th July parade in 2008 enabled the Syrian power to escape from its isolation. Only after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt did the Syrian population rise against dictatorship, in the wake of the Arab Spring.

A Political Transition Threatened by Communitarianism

On March 15 2011, Syria joined the regional protest movement, at the cost of a serious humanitarian crisis. Of all the regimes affected by the Arab Spring, the Damascus regime has been the most tenacious, the toughest, but also the deadliest with more than 20,000 dead in 17 months, more particularly in the Sunni towns in the heart of Syria. Bashar al-Assad ordered the army to crush the popular rising by all possible coercive means. Most of the members of army and security services remained loyal to Assad even while several soldiers split from the army and joined the protesters. Some of Assad's close relatives or friends deserted him but they only represent a minority. How could we explain the fact that unlike all the other Arab dictators, Assad enjoyed such loyalty from his collaborators? The answer to this question lies in just one word: communitarianism.

Indeed, in Syria, power —especially military and sectarian— is centralised around the Alawi community, even though the latter only represents 10 to 12 percent of the total population, while Sunni Muslims make up more than 70 percent¹⁰, alongside other minorities such as Christians and Druze. Today, the vast majority of Alawis are convinced that should they lose power, they would fall victim to violent retaliation and, as a community, they would fall prey to the revenge of the Sunni majority after decades of despotism and atrocities. The racist and hateful views held by some Sunni clerics from Syria, given ample publicity thanks to the communication and information means made available to the masses, add fuel to the fire. For instance, dissident Syrian satellite channel Al-Safa regularly hosts excited sheikhs calling for revenge and broadcasts anti-Alawi and anti-Shiite songs and programmes all day long. The strong presence of Sunni fundamentalism on the side of the rebellion is also a source of worry for other minorities throughout the country, as constantly reminded by Syria's Catholic authorities, along with many other key cultural and artistic Syro-Lebanese figures. The likely presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in future governments is worrisome, even though the Brotherhood has promised equality among all communities in its manifesto.

However united these religious minorities might be they will not be in a position to compete with the Sunni majority, which is supported by the Arab world and the international community. In spite of the propaganda by the official Syrian media, the regime's army does not control several governorates anymore. The long Syro-Iraqi border and several Syrian

⁹ This was actually the case for Richard Perle, major advisor to the American Defense Secretary of State who claimed, about Syria: "We should find a way of overthrowing the regime" (Associated Press, 14 October 2003).

¹⁰ These are approximate figures since no census based on religion is available.

towns are held by the rebels. Even if it is true that the areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army seem like disconnected islands devoid of any strategic value, they have been expanding for several weeks. The region's countries are globally supportive of the rebels, with the exception of Lebanon's Hezbollah (which is armed and financed by Bashar al-Assad) and the Iraqi government, which fears the rise of Sunni radicalism on its border. Syria's aggressive attitude, its heavy legacy, and the tensions it has fuelled with the neighbouring Arab states and Turkey do not allow for wide breathing space. Its logistic support to the Hezbollah and the provision of weapons recently will not go unnoticed by Israel. Even its international alliances are dwindling. Where are Syria's South American friends? Where is the Third-World Left? Even Tehran's Ayatollahs' support to Damascus has become discreet; Iran's public opinion seems to disapprove the Rais's methods even more. The Russians are asserting their renewed power but how long will they keep their support to such an isolated and shaky regime? The recent opening of a communication canal between Moscow and the Syrian National Council shows that the Russian position is not fixed and that a compromise might be found with the Kremlin couple.

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Objective elements indicate that Bashar al-Assad's days as the head of Syria are numbered. Incapable of learning the Iraqi lesson, the ruler persists until the end, sacrificing, in vain, the lives of thousands of innocents, and perhaps of his own family. Today's major stake is to protect the Syrian people from an interreligious war similar to the one Iraq went through after its former regime collapsed, and to pave the way for an orderly political transition. Firstly, it would be preferable that Syria's neighbours get together and commit to respecting Syria's sovereignty and to jointly protect their borders with Syria after Assad's fall, so as to prevent the infiltration of terrorists and to avoid the influence of al Qaeda in the eastern part of the country. Secondly, the countries in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, should ban TV channels fuelling anti-Shiite hatred and terror¹¹ and take more serious action against radical Sunni groups. Thirdly, guarantees should be granted by the Syrian National Council to Syria's religious minorities and also to members of the Assad regime who did not participate in the killings. The next few months will reveal if the Syrian revolution will lead to a new era of democracy or, on the contrary, to the rise of Sunni fundamentalism.

¹¹ For instance Salafist Egyptian channels Al-Nass, Al-Rahma, and Al-Hekma daily broadcast calls for anti-Shiite hatred and call for terrorist actions in total impunity. Extracts may be viewed on the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) website - (www.memritv.org).