

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

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Syria and the International Society

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An analysis of the contemporary political history of Syria can give us a clear picture of the reasons behind its revolution. Four centuries of Ottoman rule (1516-1918), the 26-year French mandate (1920-1946), and then the control of military regimes from 1949 to 2012 indicate that Syria had lived a democratic period of only 3 years, 1946-1949. It is only natural then that the Syrian people, who began their uprising on 15 March 2011, demand and fight for democracy, freedom, equality, dignity, morality, justice, and better economic and political conditions in addition to their national identity in the Middle East.

The chronic inertia of al-Assad's regime regarding the issue of political reforms combined with the failure of governmental economic development programs essentially had made Syria a candidate for rebellion. However, the state of emergency (martial law) which has been effective since 1963,¹ corruption, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, the lack of democratic institutions, the state's monopoly on media, the violation of human rights, the suppression of the religious sphere and rapid population growth are factors that really boosted the uprising.

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked 127th from a total of 180 countries in 2010² (and 15th of the 22 Arab countries). Today, corruption is a long standing obstacle to the national economy and estimates show that at least 30% of the 23 million Syrians live below the poverty line.³ In addition, the media law restricts freedom of expression and provides for the state's monopoly on information. In accordance with Article 8 of the constitution, the Baath Party leads the state and society in the name of the National Front (the coalition that includes other small pro-regime political parties that appear to be part of the opposition). Seizing power in a coup in 1963,⁴ the party has held the legislature for the last 50 years. It controls 126 of the 250 seats in parliament, which means that no bill can be passed without its approval.⁵

Furthermore, the 17,000 missing persons;⁶ the policy of converting of Sunnis Muslims, which comprise the country's majority, to Shiism with the support of the regime; and the 300,000 Kurds that remain without Syrian citizenship because of the 1962 census in Al Hasaka⁷ are some of the major issues impeding national cohesion. There are certain factors that distinguish the Syrian regime from its Arab Spring counterparts and give it popular legitimacy including the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and, initially, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories as well as Syria's state of war with Israel over the ongoing occupation of the Golan Heights.

Bashar al-Assad's assumption of power in 2000 marked a new phase of reform, especially in the earlier years. The opposition saw this period as the "Damascus

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Spring."⁸ Along the way, though, the conservative wing of the ruling party managed to prevail and freeze the process of reform and political dialogue. One example of this was the well-known Damascus Declaration that was signed in 2006 by five political parties and nine independent members and sought the peaceful transition of power.⁹ However, the regime responded negatively and many dissidents were taken to jail while others were exiled, thus putting an end to any hope for reform in Syria.

To understand the difficulty and complexity of the Syrian question, it is important to revisit the composition of the society, which is a rather unique mosaic that consists of at least 18 different religious and ethnic communities.¹⁰ Significantly, this structure affects the course of the uprising and future developments in Syria. Hence, if the current or future system of government deliberately disregards it, the unity of the state will be in jeopardy because each community has its peculiarities, rules and role in the society.

The violent and arrogant behavior of the security forces in tackling the protest movement and the success of the Egyptians, Tunisians and Libyans later combined with the inertia and unwillingness of the regime to make political and economic reforms were the main reasons for the expansion of the insurgency to several of the country's provinces. Moreover, replacing the emergency law with counter-terrorism laws and the resignation of the government of Naji al-Otari did not satisfy the insurgents.

Twenty-two months have passed since the start of the revolution and the pace of demonstrations and conflict continues to accelerate. Thousands of protesters have been killed, tens of thousands have been arrested, and thousands are missing. The injured cannot be counted because they do not dare to seek treatment at hospitals because of the regime's reprisals.¹¹ Al-Assad attempts to justify the bloody operations carried out against insurgents with the claims that there are armed groups that disturb public security and that there is an external conspiracy against his regime, but fails to provide any evidence.

The military solution seems to have failed to end the revolt and the rebels, as developments have indicated, are the decisive factor of future developments and the key to any solution. So, while rebels continue to struggle for victory, the regime in creates sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Alawites, mainly in the province of Homs, that resemble sectarian conflicts in Iraq between Sunnis and Shiites. As far as the dissidents are concerned, the fall of the regime is the only satisfactory solution after so many massacres and so much bloodshed.

Determinants of the future developments of the uprising are the participation of the merchant class and the position of minorities such as the Christians, Druze, Kurds, Ismailis, etc. The merchant class and minority communities tend to hesitate to take sides, preferring to wait instead, out of concern for their futures. However, another important factor is the positions of Damascus and Aleppo,

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which contain at least 35% of the Syrian population. The brutal control of government forces enables the regime to delay its fall. The power of the elite presidential guard, which has not been used so far, serves the purpose of prohibiting all forms of demonstration and clashes in Damascus, deciding the future of the insurgency and the country.

The economy is deteriorating rapidly because of disturbances and sanctions imposed on the regime by European countries and the United States.¹² The decrease of oil exports and the limitedness of foreign capital led to the reduction of the central bank's foreign currency reserves and the Syrian pound has lost over 51% of its value,¹³ and the withdrawal of foreign investment has exacerbated the economic and developmental course of a country that suffers from high rates of unemployment, especially among youth.

The Position of the Opposition

Before 15 March 2011, there was no formal opposition in Syria because of fear and terror of the intelligence apparatus within and outside the country. But the outbreak of the uprising led to the emergence of new political parties that came together under the Syrian National Council (SNC). However, the conflicting views of the members and the involvement of regional and foreign powers (the United States, Russia, France, Turkey, Iran and Qatar) are the main problems that challenge it and directly influence its policies.

The establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of defected military officers, is considered a focal point in the crisis. The number of the FSA members has increased following the adoption of guerrilla warfare against regime forces, but the main setback of the breakaway military is the lack of weapons and funding. Apart from that, relations between the FSA and the SNC are weak due to the mutual lack of trust. The role of the former could be promoted by Turkey if it finds support from the regime for Kurdish PKK rebels in Turkey.

The establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has been the most critical initiative since the start of the uprising because it succeeded in gaining recognition from many governments. It is open to all of the opposition forces that are interested in joining it. The job of its president, Moaz al-Khatib, is certainly no easy task because of the complexity and size of the Syrian issue; and the coalition could be given the responsibility of forming of a transitional government after the fall of al-Assad.

The Positions of Regional and Foreign Powers and the United Nations

To Iran, the collapse of the Syrian regime means the collapse of the Iranian strategy in the Middle East and the Arab world. That is why Iranian leaders supply al-Assad's regime with money, military equipment and oil. It also provides Syrian

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security forces with the training necessary for tackling the insurgency. The Syrian regime is Iran and Hezbollah's key ally, and thus its fall will prove to be a strong blow the Iranian-Shiite crescent in the region.¹⁴ It then becomes clear that in Syria, Iran fights not only for the regime but also for itself.¹⁵

To Turkey, the existence of over 850 kilometres of common border increases Turkish interests and considers the stability of Syria central to its national security. Ankara is particularly worried by the potential autonomy of Kurdish areas in Syria, which opens the way for Kurds in Turkey to do the same. Turkish officials are also concerned about the large influx of Syrian refugees and the difficulty of hosting more. They also fear the penetration of extreme Islamist and Kurdish elements (PKK) on Turkish soil. Al-Assad's stay in power, as a factor of instability and threat, prevents the application of the new Turkish policy toward the Middle East.

The Turkish government went a step further in dealing with the Syrian crisis when it hosted members of the SNC and the FSA. It also hosted the Muslim Brotherhood, which has unfinished business to settle with the regime because of the 1982 Hama massacre but Damascus refuses to negotiate with it. Turkey could accept a Sunni Islamist Syrian government (that would resemble Erdogan's Turkish) after the fall of al-Assad that would deal with the Iranian "invasion" of the region.

Israel does not seek to change the status quo in Syria because it feels that, despite the occupation of the Golan Heights, it has shared quiet borders with al-Assad's regime since 1973. Apart from that, Tel Aviv is worried that some Islamist extremists will seize power and govern the country. The fear that Israel instills about the transformation of the countries of the Arab Spring, to theocratic regimes is unlikely in Syria in particular because of the mentality of the Syrian people, contacts and links to Western countries that have existed for years as well as the existence of other political forces whose ideologies are not compatible with theocracy. The strengthening of opposition forces in battle forced the Israelis to reconsider their alliance with al-Assad. For this reason, they endeavor, through pressure on Western countries, to delay the outcome of the revolution until the country's infrastructure is destroyed and the new regime is left to reconstruct the country for two or three decades.

Permanent members Russia and China have vetoed a UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on the regime. Moreover, Russia seeks to safeguard its national interests by using a Syrian naval base in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Syria is one of the top five countries (from a total of 80) that import weapons from Russia. Unfortunately, the Russians invested in al-Assad to safeguard their interests but lost Syria. China had adopted the same stance as Russia for international reasons. Last year's meeting in Geneva at the United Nations' European headquarters did not result in the outcomes expected

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because it did not clearly call for the departure of al-Assad, and as a consequence, the opposition rejected the decisions that were made.

The United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on the regime in order to restrict its sale of oil and gas but they have not shown determination to save the Syrian people. However, the dedication of the Syrian people to change has forced Western countries to change their positions gradually and officially recognise the national coalition. Comparably, the United Nations waited five whole months before condemning the repressive actions of the regime because of disagreements between major players.

A report published in November 2011 by the UN Agency for the Protection of Human Rights reported that the nature and extent of violence practiced against Syrian civilians by the security forces have rendered it committed crimes against humanity with offenses such as murder, rape, torture, illegal detentions and disappearances carried out.¹⁶ There is also evidence that security forces – mainly paramilitary groups, the *shabbiha*¹⁷ – have shot protesters without a warning on several occasions; carried out arbitrary arrests and detentions; caused disappearances; exercised intimidation; tortured civilian activists, lawyers and journalists, and destroyed property. All of this exhibits the implementation of a plan for a broad and systematic attack supported by the regime against the civilian population. As such, a condemnation of the regime for human rights violations came from a large number of UN members.

Conclusion

The youth, the driving force of developments, have broken the barrier of fear and terror that has existed since 1982. The regime's superficial reforms failed to satisfy the majority of the Syrian people. There are, of course, that have not participated in the revolution and thus cannot provide an image or assessment of the future especially as the revolution already suffers from the lack of clear political vision and unified leadership.

The establishment of democratic regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and soon in Libya and Yemen puts the regime in greater isolation, and the emergence of a democratic political system in Syria cannot exclude eliminating Tehran and Hezbollah from the arena.

So far, events indicate that al-Assad refuses to surrender power to the people and the failure of international organisations and the Arab League to find a solution has led the country to destruction because of the resulting internal war and the possible development of religious extremist elements. Plans for the dissolution of Syria remain weak and limited scenarios.

The regime has already lost its legitimacy as a representative of the Syrian people but it is important for the opposition to unite and in such case the national

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coalition, being the sole representative of the Syrian people, may reach out to international organisations to resolve the crisis.

Western intervention in Syria is unlikely because Syria lies at the heart of the Arab world, and such an operation will generate more responses; probably lead to uncontrollable situations in both Syria and the broader Middle East;¹⁸ and, more importantly, destroy the country. So far, the opposition will only consider the establishment of a no-fly zone over the country, the implementation of maritime interdiction,¹⁹ and the provision of the Free Syrian Army with weapons for its struggle to overthrow al-Assad. Moreover, military intervention could take place in two cases: if al-Assad refuses to implement security zones for the protection of refugees, and after the collapse of the regime for the control of chemical and biological weapon depots.

If security zones for the protection of internally displaced refugees²⁰ the borders with Turkey, Lebanon²¹ and Jordan are set up, the regime must agree to maintain them and it is likely to do so if events lead to civil war. Also, the effort of establishing a safety belt on Syrian territory could strengthen the position of Turkey internationally. Turkey would avoid a military solution and maintain its policy of soft diplomacy in the Middle East while it offers material assistance and security to Syrian refugees.

The conflict between Iran and Turkey affected the internal situation in Syria when it reinforced the social and religious controversy between Alawites and Sunnis. Iran supports the regime while Turkey backs the people, and the gap between the people and the regime is immense. Also, this difference in Ankara and Tehran's positions between Ankara and Tehran has been detrimental to the movement of Syrian rebels.

The collapse of the Syrian economy is visible and could be used as a means of overthrowing al-Assad if additional sanctions are imposed on the regime and the support of Russia and Iran is limited.

The weakness of the Syrian opposition, the politicisation of the national army, the inactive roles of Damascus and Aleppo and the inertia of the middle class and the minority communities are factors that directly affect the future of the Syrian crisis and favour al-Assad.

The rise of Salafism is also an important phenomenon in the Syrian crisis and is due to the hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers residing in conservative Gulf states and the indifference of the international community to resolve the crisis.

The Salafists seek to control conservative Islam in the post-Assad era. Also, the most organised political movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, is in disarray and the composition of Syrian society does not allow for the emergence of an Islamic regime, and secularism unites many different political ideologies and movements

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that will resist any Islamist group's attempt to seize power. Therefore, the cooperation of Islamist factions with non-Islamist groups is not likely.

The regime's efforts – military action, the creation of sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Alawites, the utilisation of minorities, and the exploitation of Iran and Russia – do not appear sufficient to ensure its stay in power. But a coup could happen albeit only by Alawite generals from within the president's circle.

The dependence of the future of the regime on an external factor such as Turkey, Iran, the United States, Russia and Israel converts the crisis from national to regional and international because of the interference and different positions of competing regional and international forces. For this reason, it is necessary that the Arab League directly intervene to keep the crisis under Arab control. To conclude, it can be said that because of the strategic importance of Syria, the revolution's success could change the map of the Middle East, and its failure could transform the Arab Spring into an 'Arab Fall.'

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Endnotes

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¹⁸Recently, clashes transferred to Lebanon, Tripoli in particular, between Sunnis supporting the opposition and Alawites supporting the regime. This event is a critically destabilising factor in the region.

¹⁹The aim of the opposition is to prohibit the access of Iranian and Russian ships and aircraft carrying military equipment to al-Assad's forces.

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