

Beyond the Fall of the Syrian Regime

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Syrians are approaching the one-year anniversary of what has become the most tragic, far-reaching and uncertain episode of the Arab uprisings. Since protesters first took to the streets in towns and villages across the country in March 2011, they have paid an exorbitant price in a domestic crisis that has become intertwined with a strategic struggle over the future of Syria. The regime of Bashar al-Asad has fought its citizens in an unsuccessful attempt to put down any serious challenge to its four-decade rule, leaving several thousand dead. (...) Events have aided the regime in its attempt to dismiss the protest movement and further tip the balance from nominal reform to escalating repression, fueling a vicious cycle that has turned sporadic clashes into a nascent civil war. (...) (...) At the start of February, the regime stepped up its assault by using heavy weapons against rebellious neighborhoods of Homs, the third-largest city in Syria and the most religiously mixed one to become a hub of the uprising. The escalation was bolstered by Russia and China, which on February 4 blocked the Arab League-inspired, Western-backed attempts to pass a resolution at the UN Security Council condemning the violence and suggesting a plan for a negotiated solution by which Asad would hand over power to a deputy, who would form a unity government ahead of elections.

The assumption in Moscow, which fears instability and views the struggle in Syria as a contest with the West, is that the regime will succeed in defeating both the ongoing protest movement and the emerging insurgency. In so doing, runs Russian reasoning, Syria's regime will reassert its control over the country and compel at least significant parts of the opposition to negotiate on its own terms – preferably in Moscow.

Losing Control

This outcome seems unlikely. Behind all the bloody, one-off battles lies a picture of this country of 23 million slipping out of the regime's control. Over a period of 11 months, the regime has altogether failed to cow protesters through its mixture of violent intimidation and offers of paltry reforms.

Time and time again, the regime has proved its promises to reform, already grudging and tardy, to be largely empty as well. (...)

(...) Rather than reform, the regime's default setting has been to push society to the brink (...) Many see Syria, with its wealth of ethnicities and sects surrounding a Sunni Arab majority, as doomed to fail; parallels with fractious Iraq and Lebanon, which suffered long years of civil war, are frequently drawn. Yet there is reason to think that, given the chance, Syrian society could survive the family-based regime that has ruled it since Hafiz al-Asad came to power in a bloodless coup in 1970. All depends on whether society will surrender to, or face up to, its own demons, as a deep political crisis devolves into a no less profound social predicament.

The Struggle

The struggle over Syria pits two symmetrical narratives against each other. For the regime, its supporters and its allies, Syria's is an immature, if not disease-ridden society. They posit – with evidence both real and invented, and generally blown out of proportion – that Syrian society shows sectarian, fundamentalist, violent and seditious proclivities that can be contained only by a ruthless power structure. (...) The regime's opponents, by contrast, posit that any and all change is desirable, given the regime's own nature. Over its four decades in power, the Asad dynasty has increasingly treated the country as family property, plundering its wealth for redistribution to narrowing circles of cronies. (...)

(...) Although the two narratives appear mutually exclusive, they both hold a measure of truth. The regime and the opposition in exile, who accuse the other of being the mother of all ills, have each tended to conform to stereotype.

Throughout the crisis, the regime has proven more sectarian, unaccountable and vicious than ever. (...) For its part, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main opposition group that is composed mostly of exiles, has failed to offer an inspiring alternative since it was formed in September 2011. Its mainly unknown and inexperienced members have done little to counteract the regime's propaganda. Unable to agree on any positive political platform, the SNC has refused any negotiation with the regime and called for "international intervention" that is conveniently left undefined, leaving to their anxieties the many Syrians who simultaneously loathe the regime, dread foreign interference and panic at the idea of a high-risk transition. (...)

Social Shifts

(...) Today's protest movement is surprisingly broad-based and cross-cutting (...) The uprising has caused parts of Syrian society, which had long been apathetic and fragmented, to undergo a sort of renaissance. Protesters have been extraordinarily dedicated and creative. (...)

(...) Precisely because the regime has sought to exploit every source of possible strife, its opponents have had to work hard to contain the more thuggish, sectarian and fundamentalist strands in their midst. Their efforts are what have kept society together, despite a growing and worrying pattern of confessional, criminal and revenge-inspired violence. The protest movement would have degenerated into chaos long ago if it were not for an overriding desire among the majority of its members to recover their country, their dignity and their destiny, rather than forfeit them.

There is a distinctly Syrian character to the crisis. Unlike Libyans, who in a matter of hours defected en masse, took up arms and called upon the outside world to step in, Syrians took months to resort to weapons or cry out for international intervention. Unlike Egypt, where revolution was a sublime but somewhat shallow moment of grace, the Syrian uprising has been a long, hard slog: The protest movement has gradually built itself up, studied the regime's every move and mapped out the country to the extent that small towns such as Binnish in the northwest are now known to all.

Troubling Times Ahead

(...) Syrian society is better prepared to manage a transition than it would have been had the power structure collapsed early on. It has been forced into learning how to organize itself to prevent its own collapse. The regime's divide-and-rule tactics have been a key unifying factor for large swathes of society, which to survive has had to reach across geographic, communal and socio-economic boundaries. (...)

(...) Spurred on by Iran and Hizballah and bolstered by Russian support, while facing an increasingly potent insurgency backed – politically if not militarily – from abroad, the chances are that the regime will neither survive nor “fall,” but gradually erode and mutate into militias fighting an all-out civil war. But assuming the power structure does give way before that corner is turned, there are at least three threats that could quickly derail a political transition.

The first is the reality of Bashar's power base, which has narrowed spectacularly but remains an incontrovertible fact on the ground. (...)

(...) Secondly, judging by the SNC's performance, there is cause for concern if it were to play a key role in such a transition. Its leading members, hindered by personal rivalries, unable to formulate clear political positions for fear of implosion and seemingly consumed with having a spot in the limelight, may fall back on sectarian apportionment as the only consensual criterion for power sharing. (...) A political process including the SNC, but built primarily around locally led organizations, along with technocrats and businessmen, would have more legitimacy and a greater chance of success. Finally, as increasingly desperate protesters call for help, there is a danger that the outside world will make matters worse as it plays at being savior. (...) The Gulf monarchies, Iraq, Turkey, Russia, the US, Iran and others all see geostrategic stakes in the fate of the Asad regime. The greater their involvement, the less Syrians will remain in control of their destiny. (...) All told, on a domestic level Syria has entered a struggle to bring its post-colonial era to a close. It is not simply about toppling a “regime” but about uprooting a “system”. (...)

(...) This awakening, in a sense, is precisely what the regime has been fighting. Although foreign interference is a fact, there is less a conspiracy in Syria than a society on the move,

headed along a path that the regime simply will not follow. The road ahead is a dangerous one, and the chances are real that it will lead Syria, and the region, into the maze of civil war. But for all too many Syrians there is no going back. The regime was given a year to stake out a safer way forward, but has clung ever more fiercely to its old narrative, ultimately recasting itself as a historical cul-de-sac.

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