ARAB UPRISINGS

The New Struggle for Syria

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Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Revolution Reaches Damascus

Recent protests in Syria show that the Assad regime is just as vulnerable to popular rage as the region's other autocracies.

By Foreign Policy, March 18, 2011

DAMASCUS, Syria — Until this week, it appeared that Syria might be immune from the turmoil that has gripped the Middle East. But trouble may now be starting to brew.

On March 18, popular demonstrations escalated into the most serious anti-government action during Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's decade-long rule. Security forces opened fire on a demonstration in the southern city of Deraa, killing at least two protesters. The unrest also does not appear to be contained to any one geographical region: Protests were also reported in the northwestern city of Banias, the western city of Homs, the eastern city of Deir al-Zur, and the capital of Damascus.

The demonstrations began on March 15, when a small group of people gathered in Souq al-Hamidiyeh, Damascus's historic covered market, to turn the ruling Baath Party's slogans against it. "God, Syria, freedom -- that's enough," they chanted. The phrase is a play on words on the Baathist mantra: "God, Syria, Bashar -- that's enough." The next day, around 100 activists and relatives of political prisoners gathered in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus's Marjeh Square to demand the release of Syria's jailed dissidents.

The protests may be small fry by regional standards, but in Syria -- repressively ruled under a state of emergency since the Baath Party came to power in 1963 -- they are unprecedented. An atmosphere of fear and secrecy makes the extent of discontent hard to ascertain. Sources outside the country said demonstrations took place in six of Syria's 14 provinces on Tuesday. Those claims were hard to verify, but the government is clearly rattled: It has beefed up the presence of its security forces, a ragtag-looking bunch in leather jackets, across the country and especially in the northeast, home to a large and often restless Kurdish population, and Aleppo.

The next day's protests were met with a brutal response by Syrian security agents, who far outnumbered protesters. Plainclothes officers wielding wooden batons beat the silent demonstrators -- old and young, male and female.

"They were goons, thugs who reacted disproportionately," one witness said. Thirty-eight people were detained, including the 10-year-old son of a political prisoner. Also arrested were a number of activists -- including Mazen Darwish, the former head of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, which was officially shut down by authorities in 2009, and Suhair Atassi, an outspoken figure who has become a thorn in the government's side.

The protests this week are not the first faint rumblings of discontent in Syria. Two failed "days of rage" on Feb. 4 and 5 fizzled -- a fact that some blamed on the weather, but was more likely because they were organized on Facebook mainly by Syrians outside the country -- but other indirect displays of anger have taken place. On Feb. 16, a group of businessmen in Damascus's al-Hariqa district, a market area in the old city, took to the streets to protest a police beating. On Feb. 22 and 23, groups held vigils outside the Libyan Embassy in solidarity with anti-Qaddafi rebels. They were dispersed violently.

The identities of those organizing this wave of demonstrations remain a mystery. Syria's community of dissidents is a small, disparate, and disconnected bunch. But protest seem to be coming from varied sources -- Tuesday's protest was not organized by the usual suspects of activists and former political prisoners. This is a sign of disorganization, perhaps, but also that discontent is not confined to one group and that there may be a growing unhappiness at the grassroots level.

"People are angry that they are not respected, that there

are no jobs, education and health care are poor, that corruption is draining their money, that they do not have real freedom, that the media does not reflect our problems and that there is no system because everything happens by opaque presidential decrees," said Abdel Ayman Nour, a Syrian dissident who runs the website All4Syria from abroad. "Syrians simply want to be respected as citizens and are angry they are treated as sheep."

The Syrian regime, usually a savvy player, seems confused about how to respond to these signs of unrest. It has veered between offers of reform to denial, arrests, intimidation, and beatings. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal published on Jan. 31, Assad claimed that "Syria is stable," crediting his anti-U.S. and anti-Israel foreign policy for being in line with his people's beliefs. The president also promised political reforms would take place this year -- but simultaneously, media run by or with close ties to the state have accused infiltrators and Israel of being behind protests.

March 16's beatings, which were more severe than those used to break up the vigil on Feb. 23, may signal a new zero-tolerance approach by the government. And that would mark a dangerous course for the regime.

"Such a reaction only makes us more angry," said one civil society activist who asked not to be named. "It is further humiliation of an already humiliated population. How can you talk of reforms and at the same time beat us and treat us as stupid?"

Reforms may be the wiser path to pursue, but the Assad regime faces a daunting task in assuaging its citizens' economic grievances -- let alone their political gripes. The country suffers from double-digit unemployment and GDP growth that appears too sluggish to improve the lot of its rapidly growing population. To make matters worse, a years-long drought in the north has been disastrous for the country's beleaguered farmers.

Nobody in Syria is sure what will happen next. And there are still sound reasons to believe the protests are one-off events. The core reasons Syrians have stayed quiescent remain: tight control by the security forces, worries of sectarian fallout in the absence of a strongman, and, in many quarters, a fondness for Assad, whom many see as a reformer.

The bloody events in Libya have also scared the population. Remembering what happened to the city of Hama in 1982, when Bashar's father brutally suppressed an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, Syrians fear the response to any unrest here will be similar to that of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi: a violent and sustained bid to cling to power.

"There is no doubt the regime will resort to anything to stay in power," said Nour. "When Hafez al-Assad died there were tanks on the street, and there are rumors this is happening again. Any uprising will not be dealt with gently."

But on the ground, there is a feeling that the fear barrier is being broken. Activists who dared not speak their name have piped up. Others meet more openly with diplomats than they dared before. While many Syrians are nervous, others in Damascus's smart cafes and streets discuss what the future holds more boldly. On Tuesday evening, one cafe turned on Orient TV, an independent Dubai-based channel, to watch coverage of the protests, before quickly switching back to Rotana TV music videos.

Further demonstrations -- and bigger, more diverse ones -- will be a key sign of the protests' staying power. Thus far, Syria's minorities have been hesitant: Christians have traditionally feared upheaval, while the Kurds have largely focused on their own dreams of independence. But on the Kurdish new year of Nowruz, which arrives on March 21, a number of Syria's Kurdish parties have pledged to raise the national flag rather than the Kurdish standard.

A "you first" mentality has taken hold in Damascus. If nobody moves, Syria may remain quiet. But if a few brave souls are willing to risk the inevitable government crackdown, it will become clear just how deep the desire for change runs in Syria.

The writer is a journalist in Damascus, Syria. Foreign Policy *has withheld the author's name due to security concerns.*

The Syrian Time Bomb

Forget Libya. Washington should pay closer attention to the violent protests imperiling the Assad regime in Damascus. If there's one country where unrest could truly set the Middle East alight, it's Syria.

By Patrick Seale, March 28, 2011

While one war rages in Libya, another rages in Washington as to the necessity of U.S. action there. Indeed, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said as much this weekend, noting that Libya was not a "vital national interest." But if Washington is looking for an Arab state in the throes of unrest, one that is key to its regional and national interests, planners might want to pay more attention to Syria, which is currently undergoing upheaval not seen since the early 1980s.

Syria lies at the center of a dense network of Middle East relationships, and the crisis in that country -- which has now resulted in the deaths of well over 100 civilians, and possibly close to double that number -- is likely to have a major impact on the regional structure of power. The need to contain pressure from the United States and Israel, for decades the all-consuming concern of Syria's leadership, has suddenly been displaced by an explosion of popular protest highlighting urgent and long-neglected domestic issues.

If the regime fails to tame this domestic unrest, Syria's external influence will inevitably be enfeebled, with dramatic repercussions across the Middle East. As the crisis deepens, Syria's allies tremble. Meanwhile, its enemies rejoice, as a weakened Syria would remove an obstacle to their ambitions. But nature abhors a vacuum, and what will come will be unpredictable, at best.

The protests started in mid-March in Daraa, in southern Syria, a city that has suffered from drought and neglect by the government in Damascus. The heavy hand of the ruling Baath party was particularly resented. Because it lies on the border with Jordan, and therefore in a security zone, all land sales required the security services' approval, a slow and often costly business. This is one of the particular grievances that have powered the protest movement, though certainly the ripples of the successful Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings played a hand. The government, to put it bluntly, responded poorly. Troops in Daraa fired live rounds against youthful demonstrators and virtually all communications -- Internet and telephone -- were shuttered to prevent the seepage of unrest.

To make matters worse, Damascus blamed Israeli provocateurs, rebel forces, and shady foreign agents for the bloodshed -- anyone but its own forces. Civilian deaths at the hands of security forces there, and more recently in the coastal city of Latakia, have outraged opinion across the country, setting alight long pent-up anger at the denial of basic freedoms, the monopolistic rule of the Baath party, and the abuses of a privileged elite. To these ills should be added severe youth unemployment, devastation of the countryside by a grave shortage of rainfall over the past four years, and the impoverishment of the middle and lower classes by low wages and high inflation.

In response to the public unrest, the regime has released some political prisoners and pledged to end the state of emergency in force since 1963. A government spokeswoman has hinted that coming reforms will include greater freedom for the press and the right to form political parties. President Bashar al-Assad is due to address the country in the next 48 hours. His speech is eagerly awaited, but it remains to be seen whether it will be enough to defuse the crisis and win time for the regime. If not, demonstrations could gather pace, triggering still more violent repression by the security services -- an escalation with unpredictable consequences.

The protesters have in fact challenged the fundamentals of Syria's security state, a harsh system of controls over

every aspect of society, put in place by the late Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, who ruled for 30 years from 1970 to his death in 2000. By all accounts, the debate about how to deal with the growing protests has led to increasingly violent confrontations inside the regime between would-be reformers and hard-liners. The outcome of this internal contest remains uncertain.

What is certain, however, is that what happens in Syria is of great concern to the whole region. Together with its two principal allies, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Lebanese Shiite resistance movement Hezbollah, Syria is viewed with great hostility by Israel and with wary suspicion by the United States. The Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis -- of which Syria is the linchpin -- has long been seen by many leaders in the region as the lone bulwark against Israeli and American hegemony. With backing from Washington, Israel has sought to smash Hezbollah (notably through its 2006 invasion of Lebanon) and detach Syria from Iran, a country Israel views as its most dangerous regional rival. Neither objective has so far been realized. But now that Syria has been weakened by internal problems, the viability of the entire axis is in danger -- which could encourage dangerous risk-taking behavior by its allies as they seek to counter perceived gains by the United States and Israel.

If the Syrian regime were to be severely weakened by popular dissent, if only for a short while, Iran's influence in Arab affairs would almost certainly be reduced -- in both Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. In Lebanon, it would appear that Hezbollah has already been thrown on the defensive. Although it remains the most powerful single movement, both politically and on account of its armed militia, its local enemies sense a turning of the tide in their favor. This might explain a violent speech delivered earlier this month by the Sunni Muslim leader and former prime minister Saad Hariri, in which he blatantly played the sectarian card.

Cheered by his jubilant supporters, he charged that Hezbollah's weapons were not so much a threat to Israel as to Lebanon's own freedom, independence, and sovereignty -- at the hand of a foreign power, namely Iran. The Syrian uprisings may have already deepened the sectarian divide in Lebanon, raising once more the specter of civil war and making more difficult the task of forming a new government, a job President Michel Suleiman has entrusted to the Tripoli notable, Najib Mikati. If Syria were overrun with internal strife, Hezbollah would be deprived of a valuable ally -- no doubt to Israel's great satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Turkey is deeply concerned by the Syrian disturbances: Damascus has been the cornerstone of Ankara's ambitious Arab policy. Turkey-Syria relations have flourished in recent years as Turkey-Israel relations have grown cold. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, have actively sought to mediate local conflicts and bring much-needed stability to the region by forging close economic links. One of their bold projects is the creation of an economic bloc comprising Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan -- already something of a reality by the removal of visa requirements as well as by an injection of Turkish investment and technological know-how. A power struggle in Syria could set back this project; and regime change in Damascus would likely put a serious dent in further Turkish initiatives.

Turkey's loss, however, may turn out to be Egypt's gain. Freed from the stagnant rule of former President Hosni Mubarak, Cairo is now expected to play a more active role in Arab affairs. Instead of continuing Mubarak's policy, conducted in complicity with Israel, of punishing Gaza and isolating its Hamas government, Egypt is reported to be pushing for a reconciliation of the rival Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah. If successful, this could help defuse the current dangerous escalation of violence between Israel on the one side and Hamas and still more extreme Gaza-based Palestinian groups on the other. But Syria's internal troubles might just as easily have a negative effect.

Undoubtedly, the failed peace process has bred extreme frustration among Palestinian militants, some of whom may think that a sharp shock is needed to wrench

international attention away from the Arab democratic wave and back to the Palestine problem. They are anxious to alert the United States and Europe to the danger of allowing the peace process to sink into a prolonged coma. Israeli hard-liners, too, may calculate that a short war could serve their purpose: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government may sense weakness and quietly dream of finishing off Hamas once and for all. Syria has been a strong supporter of Hamas and has given a base in Damascus to the head of its political bureau, Khaled Mashal. Turmoil in Damascus could deal Hamas a severe blow.

On all these fronts -- Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel -- Syria is a key player. But its internal problems now threaten to reshuffle the cards, adding to the general sense of insecurity and latent violence in the region. And of all the threats facing the Middle East, perhaps the greatest -- greater even than of another Arab-Israeli clash -- is that of rampant sectarianism, poisoning relationships between and within states, and breeding hate, intolerance, and mistrust.

Several of the modern states of the Middle East -- and Syria is no exception -- were built on a mosaic of ancient religions, sects, and ethnic groups held uneasily and sometimes uncomfortably together by central government. But governments have themselves been far from neutral, favoring one community over another in cynical power plays. Many Sunni Muslims in Syria and throughout the region feel that Assad's Syria has unduly favored the Alawites, a sect of Shiite Islam, who constitute some 12 percent of the population but control a vastly greater percentage of the country's wealth. Open conflict between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria would profoundly disturb the whole region, creating a nightmare scenario for Washington and other Western capitals.

Meanwhile, Washington seems at a loss as to how to respond to the growing unrest in Syria. In tempered language, the administration has condemned the use of violence against civilians and encouraged political reform. But the undertones are evident: Stability in Syria may still preferable to yet another experiment in Arab governance. Assad will need to act quickly and decisively -- and one hopes not harshly -- to quell the rising current of dissent. Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed to offer the regime some modest support this weekend, noting that she believed Bashar to be a "reformer." But reform has never been a primary goal of the Assad clan, which has long favored stability over change.

This edifice may now be crumbling, and the United States would be wise to spend a little less time thinking about Libya and a little more time thinking about a state that truly has implications on U.S. national interests. If things go south in Syria, blood-thirsty sectarian demons risk being unleashed, and the entire region could be consumed in an orgy of violence.

Patrick Seale is a British writer who specializes in Middle East affairs. His latest book is The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East.

Eyes on the prize

Posted By Steven Heydemann, Monday, April 4, 2011 - 12:24 PM

The regime of Bashar al-Asad faces unprecedented and unexpected challenges from peaceful protestors demanding political change. Across Syria, citizens have taken to the streets, initially calling for little more than political and economic reforms. The regime responded with force, killing dozens of unarmed demonstrators. As in other cases across the region, regime violence has hardened the determination of the opposition, and mobilized growing numbers of Syrians to participate in mass protests. Regime collapse in Syria remains a distant prospect, but contrary to the expectations of most observers, Damascus is now in play.

The mass protests and regime violence have left officials in Washington uncertain about how to respond. Faced with the opportunity of actively supporting an uprising against one of America's most determined and brutal opponents in the Middle East, the Obama administration has demurred. Subsequent regime violence has not yet produced a noticeable shift in the administration's seeming ambivalence about what to do with Damascus. Given the stakes involved in the Syrian case, caution and prudence are not inappropriate. Sooner rather than later, however, the administration will need to figure out both how much support it is prepared to offer the Syrian uprising, and what it is prepared to do, both now and in the longer-term, should this wave of protests be snuffed out.

This was not supposed to happen. For more than two months, Syria seemed insulated from the wave of popular uprisings sweeping the region. From the regime's perspective, quiescence reflected the legitimacy it derived from its nationalist credentials and its leadership of the "resistance front." On Jan. 31st, President al-Asad told the Wall Street Journal that despite its "more difficult circumstances than most Arab countries," Syria was stable because its government was "very closely linked to the beliefs of the people."

Many analysts accepted the claim that Syria was stable, if not for the reasons Asad claimed. Stability was the result not of the regime's legitimacy or its purported nationalist credentials, but its long history of brutally repressing dissent. Elsewhere in the region, mass uprisings shattered the "wall of fear" that had been carefully cultivated by authoritarian regimes over the course of decades. Not in Syria, where the mukhabarat state continued to cast a long, dark shadow. Moreover, many Syrians had internalized the regime's rhetoric about the risks of disorder if the regime were not present to defend social peace at home, and the cause of resistance abroad, or the ease with which sinister forces might drag Syria into the conflicts and instability that surrounded it in Lebanon and Iraq. These, we believed, were the real reasons that Syria remained "stable."

No longer. The courage and defiance of Syrian protestors has given the lie to regime claims of legitimacy. Its nationalist identity and anti-Westernism could not indefinitely insulate it from demands for accountability -- the radical and destabilizing notion that the regime might be held to account. Beginning with a tiny gathering of human rights activists in Damascus on March 16, moving south to the dusty border town of Deraa and its surrounding region on March 18, small gatherings of peaceful protestors signaled that the Syrian regime was not immune after all to the discontent and alienation that is fueling uprisings across the Arab world.

Nor it seems, did the Syrian regime demonstrate any greater creativity or insight in how it has responded to protests than did its counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. In his long-awaited speech on March 30, President Asad talked about learning. "We tell them," he said, "that you have only one choice, which is to learn from your failure, while the Syrian people have only the choice of continuing to learn from their successes." Precisely what the Asad regime has learned from recent events, however, is unclear. Despite the President's rhetoric, the Asad

regime has adopted the same combination of repression and concession, real bullets and false promises of reform, that have failed to appease protesters in every other case in which it has been used.

Yet the end of "Syrian exceptionalism" does not mean that the regime's fate is inevitable. Protests have spread well beyond Deraa, yet they remain small and scattered. Opposition groups are poorly organized, fragmented, and face formidable obstacles to coordination. In some areas, such as Lattakia, repression seems to have forced the opposition into near silence. Protests in Syria have not yet congealed into a mass uprising. The regime could yet regain its footing, reassert its authority, even with its claims to legitimacy severely frayed.

Violence being deployed against the opposition is stiffening resistance, but it is also taking a toll. So are the regime's counter-measures, including not only its carefully orchestrated pro-Asad demonstrations, but its willingness to deploy the oldest moves in the Ba`thist playbook: demonizing protestors as traitors, agents of foreign powers, and enemies of the Syrian people. However ham-fisted the President's speech appeared to outside observers, and to many Syrians, it was virtually pitch perfect in its evocation of classic Ba`thist themes: foreign plots, Syrian steadfastness, the virtues of order, and the determination of the regime to crush its adversaries and prevail against formidable odds. Unfortunately, the courage of Syrian protesters may not be enough to prove Asad wrong.

In channeling his father's generation of ruthless autocrats, Bashar al-Asad has dismantled the last residual hopes that somehow, despite all the evidence to the contrary, he might seize this moment of crisis to resurrect his self-claimed identity as a reformer. He has also thrown a large wrench into initial U.S. responses to the Syrian uprising. After the March 30 speech, the willingness of some U.S. politicians to characterize Asad as a reformer -- an improbable gamble, perhaps, that by ensnaring Bashar in his own reformist claims he might be compelled to act like one -- is not a viable position. It is time for the administration to re-boot its Syria policy, address the dilemma of just how much risk it is willing to take, what it will do if uprisings succeed, and how it will respond if they are successfully put down.

For the U.S., the temptation to assist in ushering in the end of the Asad regime is no doubt enormous. The possibility of tipping Syria, of supporting a transition that would not only eliminate a determined and vicious adversary of the U.S. in the Middle East, but fundamentally transform the balance of power in the region, is a prize of such vast consequence that it is hardly surprising to hear calls mounting for the Obama administration to seize the moment and actively back regime change in Damascus.

We are encouraged to imagine the possibilities such a change might bring: Iran hemmed in, its regional project in tatters; Hizballah and Hamas weakened by the loss of a leading regional sponsor and supplier of weapons; a possible democratic government in Damascus, a possible negotiating partner for Israel, perhaps even an ally of the West? Heady stuff, to be sure. Even if such gains do not materialize, is it not in our interest to assist in removing a brutal adversary from power? Do the potential gains not outweigh the possible loses, as one prominent former U.S. diplomat to the region suggested.

Perhaps. Yet this grand vision of a truly new Middle East rest on exceptionally wobbly foundations. This is certainly the moment for the U.S. to lend support to Syrians struggling against the Asad regime. Yet the administration should not be lulled by the sirens of regime change into acting on the presumption that things could not be worse. Even if we acknowledge that fears of instability play into the regime's hands, regime collapse might well be followed by a period of violent social conflict, the Lebanization of Syria, and the emergence of a regional order that is much darker and less compliant than the one held out by advocates of regime change. The growing sectarianism evident across the Gulf reminds us how quickly identity conflicts could arise in the Levant, with potentially devastating consequences.

Moreover, regime change is not the only outcome of Syrian protests that works to the advantage of both

Syrian reformers and the U.S. A wounded Asad regime could become even more dangerous, seek out even closer ties to Iran, and exploit Hizballah more fully - and the U.S. should be prepared for this possibility. Yet previous episodes of vulnerability, especially the 2003-2006 period, compelled the regime to be more responsive to internal demands for change, not less so. It was only when the regime regained its confidence, from 2006 onward, that it reverted to form and launched a sharp crackdown on dissidents. This time, moreover, the regime has offered up reforms -- even if with little intent to honor its commitments -- that create possibilities for sustained pressure from the West. Efforts to hold the regime accountable for its behavior during the uprising offer additional leverage. Collectively, these prospects suggest the need for the U.S. to plan beyond the present and put in place the elements of a long-term strategy of regime transformation in Syria, even while making more explicit its support for the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians to live in freedom.

One critical element of such an approach must include expanded efforts to develop a coherent, capable Syrian opposition. Ultimately, the one way to respond to concerns about the instability that might accompany regime change, or the fear that what replaces the Asad regime might be worse, is to contribute to the development of a viable, democratic, alternative Syrian leadership. Rather than holding out for the vain possibility that Bashar al-Asad might bring reform to Syria, the U.S. should immediately begin to back Syria's true democratic reformers, and strengthen the prospects for long-term regime transformation in Damascus.

Steven Heydemann is a senior vice president at the United States Institute of Peace.

A Regional Response to Syria

Posted By Marc Lynch, Wednesday, April 27, 2011 - 10:20 AM

The escalating violence and repression unleashed by Bashar al-Asad against protestors in Syria has been as horrific as it was predictable. It has posed a deep dilemma for the Obama administration, which understands both the strategic significance of upheaval in Syria and the limits of American influence over the outcome. I am outraged, if not surprised, by Asad's brutality, and I would dearly love to see democracy and human rights come to a Syria long oppressed by obsolescent Ba'athist rule. As with Libya, I want to see the international community move strongly to reinforce the norm that using force against citizens will hasten rather than prevent the fall from power of these regimes.

But I don't see a great deal of leverage which the U.S. can on its own bring to bear on the course of events in Syria. There are no magical democracy words which will tip the balance. The reality is that the U.S. has few good policy options. There are some obvious steps, of course. The administration should focus on aligning its rhetoric and actions towards Syria with its broader regional strategy, without being drawn into ill-advised escalations. It should increase the spotlight on Syrian human rights abuses, and consider carefully targeted sanctions against regime figures involved in the repression. It should not recall the U.S. Ambassador from Damascus, or consider any form of military intervention. But it should make clear to Bashar al-Asad that he is on the path of Yemen's Ali Abdullah

Saleh. The price of his choice to abandon serious reform efforts and unleash brutal violence will be steep, and work quickly to formulate a coherent regional response which can help broker a serious political transition in Damascus.

The key next step is to build a strong regional consensus among Syria's neighbors on a Yemen-style plan for a meaningful political transition. This can not be a unilateral American initiative. It could only work with the active support of a diverse group of states who do not always work well together, including most crucially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with the rest of the GCC, and Turkey, which has gone from a painful silence to recently hosting a conference of Syrian opposition figures. (Ideally Iraq would be a part of this, though its current political tensions and Bahrain-fueled spats with the GCC make this unlikely.) There would have to be significant carrots offered in order to entice key Syrian actors to accept the offer, and fierce Iranian resistance would need to be overcome. The risks of such a regional initiative are high, and the continuing uncertainties about the Yemen deal certainly show that it won't be easy. But the potential payoffs are enormous, and there are few more attractive alternatives on offer. It done successfully, such a gambit could rescue the Arab spring from the violent, bloody cul de sac into which desperate dictators have driven it, and hold out the prospect of fundamental positive transformations of the region.

The core of the problem is that on its own, the U.S. has very limited leverage over Damascus or events on the ground in Syria. The administration has already done most of the few concrete things which have been suggested by its critics, including sharpened rhetoric, convening an emergency session of the UN Human Rights Council, and preparing targeted sanctions. But since Syria has long been an American adversary in the region, such efforts have limited impact. Rhetoric demanding political change in Damascus will largely fall on deaf ears since most people in the region already assume that the U.S. supports regime change in Syria, and wouldn't have the impact of similar statements about Mubarak, Qaddafi, or Saleh. The U.S. already has a daunting array of sanctions in place against Damascus, leaving it little room for tightening. In short, even the strongest concrete policy proposals on offer are not likely to have much effect on Syria's course.

One common demand which the administration should reject is that it withdraw Ambassador Robert Ford from Damascus. That demand has been most forcefully made by the same people who fought tooth and nail to prevent an Ambassador from going to Syria in the first place. Doing so would be a symbolic gesture with real costs. The U.S. has few points of contact into Syrian civil society, partly due to the reality of crushing Syrian authoritarian rule and partly due to the long years during which the U.S. Embassy stood empty. We would be far better off right now if Ambassador Ford had been able to establish his presence in Damascus much earlier, instead of being held up by hawkish Congressional skeptics of engagement. There has never been a more crucial time to have high quality representation in Damascus, somebody who is able to communicate both with the Asad regime and with as many parts of Syrian society as possible. Withdrawing him now would be a self-defeating, pointless gesture which would actively undermine America's ability to respond effectively to a fast-changing situation.

On the other hand, the administration should toughen its rhetoric against the Asad regime. This should be consistently framed within the broader administration arguments in favor of non-violence, universal rights, and the urgent need for meaningful reform. The time has passed for modulating America's response in order to give Asad the space to offer real reforms, since he's made clear that he has no interest in doing so. His regime's widespread use of violence forces the administration's hand. The Libya intervention, while directly triggered by the need to prevent an impending massacre, also sought to put teeth behind the administration's efforts from Tunisia onward to establish a norm against the use of violence against protestors to stay in power. Obama should say something like "The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of force by the Syrian government against demonstrators. This outrageous use of violence to quell protests must come to an end now." (Oh, he already did? My bad. You wouldn't know it from the punditry.)

There are no grounds for a Libya-style military intervention in Syria. It is difficult to imagine any scenario which would make U.S.-led military action appropriate. But there are some political tools which could help push in this direction. The increased focus on Syria's human rights violations, including the referral to an emergency session of the UN Human Rights Council which has now been scheduled for Friday, is a good start which continues the multilateral, institutional approach to the regional upheaval. Targeted sanctions against regime officials responsible for the repression would also follow the same logic.

The regional and international environment also makes it difficult to do a great deal more in Syria. The U.S. did very well to overcome internal opposition at the United Nations to get an emergency session of the Human Rights Council scheduled for Friday. A Security Council Resolution comparable to the one authorizing the Libya intervention seems highly unlikely, however. The Arab media, including al-Jazeera, is increasingly focused on the horrific news out of Syria, but there have been none of the Arab demands for Western intervention which characterized the Libya debate in the weeks leading up to that intervention. The muted response from governments across the region, from Israel and Turkey to the Gulf, reflects their very real concerns about the risk of insecurity in Syria, which in turn points to the difficulty of building any regional consensus for escalation.

But there could be a regional consensus for a guided political transition. And that is where American efforts should now be directed. Regional leaders have slowly begun to accept the magnitude of the challenge to the Asad regime, and fear the chaos which might follow a full-scale civil war. If a plan for change in Syria were tied to a clear overarching U.S. strategy for the region, there is a chance that they could be enlisted in support of something which would align them and the U.S. with the aspirations of Arab public opinion while advancing their strategic interests. It won't be easy, but the potential benefit might just make it worth the risks.

Even if Bashar wins, he has already lost

Posted By Mona Yacoubian, Tuesday, May 3, 2011 - 11:15 AM

Six weeks into Syria's unprecedented unrest, it seems increasingly apparent that the key cornerstones buttressing President Bashar al Assad's regime -- iron-fisted rule and geostrategic depth -- may be irreparably damaged. While estimates are nearly impossible to confirm, the regime's ruthless repression has reportedly left more than 500 dead. Yet, ongoing demonstrations signal that the "wall of fear" inside Syria is crumbling. Meanwhile, the regime's crackdown is leading to Syria's deepening isolation, undercutting its ability to leverage its role as a critical player in the region. Taken together, these developments suggest that the Assad regime may not be salvageable in the long run. It may withstand the current unrest, but the brutal tactics required to quell the demonstrations have not only destroyed any shred of legitimacy at home, but will also preempt any possibility of Western engagement. In seeking to preserve itself, the regime is laying the foundations for its ultimate undoing.

Syria is not Tunisia or Egypt. The regime's unraveling will not occur over days or weeks with relatively limited violence. Nor is there a Syrian "Tahrir Square" or CNN's

Anderson Cooper covering the events as the world cheers on the protestors. Syria's transformation will be far messier, marked by significant bloodshed and violence, and without the benefit of the international news media's bright lights helping to protect the protestors. There may be little the international community can do to shape the outcome. It will not likely end for months, quite possibly much longer.

To date, there are only limited signs that the unrest has gained critical momentum. Syria's uprising has centered in the countryside, starting in the sleepy southern border town of Dera'a and moving to the coastal cities of Banias and Latakia. But the unrest has not rocked Aleppo, Syria's second largest city and a stronghold of the Sunni merchant class. Nor has the capital Damascus witnessed huge protests in the tens of thousands. Despite unconfirmed reports of splits within the military, the Syrian army still appears intact and willing to obey orders. Defections of Baath party members and two members of Syria's rubber stamp parliament suggest some small cracks in the regime apparatus, but high-level defections have not taken place.

Cracks in regime cohesion or a societal broadening of the demonstrations would constitute key tipping points. For example, a decision by Syria's Sunni merchant class to join the protests would be a "game-changer." While they have thus far sat out the demonstrations, frustration may be growing as the Syrian economy grinds to a halt. Cross-border trade reportedly has slowed to a trickle. The widespread unrest has essentially shut down businesses, potentially spurring lay-offs in an economy already hobbled by high unemployment. As their financial interests become increasingly threatened, the Sunni business elite could calculate that the regime no longer represents their best interests.

The security services will likely remain loyal to the regime, but scattered reports of army troops refusing to fire on civilians could signal broader disaffection within the military. Moreover, the army may fray simply from the fatigue and stress of maintaining the current high state of alert, characterized by multiple checkpoints around the country. As the regime heightens its repression and is forced to rely increasingly on the army -- as is now the case in Dera'a -- these cracks may become more substantial.

Even without a critical turn of events that precipitates the regime's downfall, Syria's unrest marks a watershed event from which there is no return. The barrier of fear has been broken. Today's Syria is a far cry from that of Hafez al Assad's dictatorship when people were fearful of even uttering the word "politics" (as-siyassah), let alone engaging in open demonstrations. It is a very different Syria from even three months ago. As with so many other Arab countries, the alchemy of conditions propelling popular protests -- pervasive corruption, a repressive regime, a frustrated and disproportionately young population, broad-based socioeconomic disaffection -- are present in Syria, provoking unrest which will not be easily corked.

Thus far, Syrian President Bashar al Assad does not appear to have moved far along the learning curve. His hollow promises of change -- most recently a lifting of nearly half a century of emergency rule -- are belied by blatant brutality on the streets. Four weeks ago such a pledge would have been a deemed significant concession to the protestors and could have stanched the unrest. Instead, over the past few weeks, Assad has squandered important opportunities to implement genuine reform, opting to ratchet up brute force. Such moves have further enraged the demonstrators who insist on taking to the streets despite the inherent dangers, perpetuating the cycle of protest, regime repression and more protests. While Assad may have mistakenly drawn the lesson that Mubarak and Ben Ali caved early and simply needed to apply more force, he should instead consider the example of the Shah's Iran, where repression simply fed more protests, alienating larger segments of the population who ultimately opted to abandon their leader. In the absence of genuine reform, massive, lethal repression will be required to put down the protests.

As a result, any basis for Western engagement with Syria has now vanished. While the Arab world and Iran have remained silent, lacking the courage to denounce Syria as they did with Libya, the Syrian regime's brutal response has rightly earned it widespread, international condemnation.

The United Nations Human Rights Council's recent vote condemning Syria and calling for an investigation is just one example. New sanctions by the Obama administration will surely be followed by similar measures in Europe, currently considering an arms embargo and additional economic sanctions. The United Nations Development Program recently announced that it was postponing aid to Syria because of the violence. Even Turkey, a key Syrian ally and trading partner, is voicing concerns over Assad's repressive tactics. Should Istanbul decide to disavow the Assad regime, a critical threshold would be crossed, marking Syria's heightened isolation.

Unlike Iran, which has thus far managed its isolation, Syria does not possess the vast natural resource wealth necessary to sustain itself over a lengthy period as an international pariah. On the contrary, even prior to the current unrest, the Syrian economy was reeling from years of drought and economic mismanagement. Syria's economic needs were a key impetus for its outreach to the West. Countries such as Russia and China likely will continue to resist calls for isolating Syria, and the conservative Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, could seek to buffer the Assad regime from collapse given their reflexive opposition to the popular unrest sweeping the region. Yet, it is not clear that these ties will be sufficient to compensate for any shortfall in foreign investment and increased economic isolation.

Not only has Assad's harsh crackdown deprived him of any legitimacy at home, but these brutal tactics -- if unabated -- will cement his international isolation. Assad's regime may survive the near-term unrest, but ultimately a severely isolated and heavily repressive Syria is unlikely to have any real longevity in the new Middle East.

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Will the Syrian army join the dissent movement?

Posted By Bilal Y. Saab,Wednesday, May 4, 2011 - 3:01 PM

The strong motivations and deep grievances of the Egyptian people and the opportunities that were available to them to demonstrate in large numbers and great determination were the underlying causes of the success of the Egyptian revolution. But what made the critical difference on the ground was the fact that the Egyptian army refused to intervene and fire at the protestors. Had the Egyptian army reacted to the demonstrations differently, it is not at all clear that the outcome would have been positive. As the bloody showdown between the Syrian protestors and the Assad regime escalates, the attitude and behavior of the Syrian army may prove equally pivotal. Will it?

The Syrian army's calculations will depend first and foremost on the endurance and growth of the Syrian dissent movement. Harsh repression and brutal killings by the regime so far have not deterred the courageous Syrian protestors. On the contrary, the dissent movement seems to be growing and it may only be a matter of time before it reaches the heart of the capital. So far, the Syrian army has intervened militarily in Daraa and other towns and villages where dissent is present. Yet it appears that most of the killings have been perpetrated by the regime's private militias and internal security forces. If the Syrian dissent movement continues to spread, attracts a larger portion of Syrian society including Sunni members, and mobilizes

and organizes more effectively, will the Syrian army kill thousands of civilians like it did in February, 1982 against the Muslim Brotherhood in Hamah?

Analysts are divided on that crucial question. Some have argued that the Syrian army will not hesitate to commit mass atrocities, given its organic link to the Assad regime and the many privileges it enjoys from that relationship. What is more, by giving in to the dissent movement and allowing a more democratic order to emerge in Damascus, the army might lose money, power, and prestige. Others have maintained that while the Syrian generals do enjoy a favorable clientelistic relationship with President Bashar Assad and his cronies in the Ba'ath party, the foot soldiers do not. Therefore, the poor Syrian soldier is more likely to sympathize with the plight of the Syrian people, refuse to engage militarily, and potentially split with the army. Witnesses on the ground in Daraa have already seen signs of that happening, though it is difficult to confirm these developments given the lack of foreign media access to Syria.

The dissent movement has also tried to convey to foreign journalists through blogs, videos on YouTube, and interviews that there have been numerous defections in the Syrian army and that several assassinations of military officials said to be sympathetic to the protesters have been taking place. The minority Alawite sect forms the backbone of the Assad regime and controls the military and intelligence apparatus in Syria (including the notorious Air Force Intelligence Directorate which spearheaded the Hamah crackdown), but the army's ranks are mainly composed of Sunnis. Therefore, any divisions within the Syrian military are likely to be along sectarian lines, with Sunnis siding with the dissenters and Alawites siding with the regime, though the Alawite community is not homogenous and could possibly witness cracks within its members as well.

As the United States anxiously monitors events in Syria, there is very little it can do to assist the Syrian protestors. It lacks the deep personal connections and financial sources of leverage which it enjoyed with the Egyptian military.

But the Obama administration is not without options. The options usually proposed -- such as withdrawing the U.S. ambassador in Damascus, freezing the assets of regime leaders, and denouncing human rights violations -- are important. But what could make a more immediate difference and directly help the dissent movement is to focus on altering the cost-benefit calculations of the Syrian military. By making it more costly for the Syrian military to side with the regime and more rewarding to abandon it, Washington could be doing the biggest service to the dissent movement.

For Washington to effectively manipulate the Syrian military's calculations it is essential that it know what the Syrian military values most and what are some of the reasonable and realistic concessions it may be willing to make. Like all modern national military organizations around the world, the Syrian military's number one priority is the wellbeing and modernization of its forces, and specifically, their ability to guard against internal and external threats, protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation, and advance its foreign policy goals. Prestige, private benefits, sectarian politics, and political influence, while certainly important and relevant especially in the Syrian context, come after the crucial mission of defense and foreign policy.

The United States has the diplomatic capacity to positively or negatively influence the Syrian military's ability to carry out its national mission. Let's start with sticks: Washington can work both unilaterally and multilaterally on that front. Unilaterally, the U.S. Department of Treasury can apply harsh economic sanctions against the regime's several paramilitary, intelligence, and internal security forces, like it did with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The United States can also work with its allies on a UN resolution that forbids arms sales to the Syrian army (the Europeans, led by the UK, France, and Germany are already working on that proposal). Obviously, this would be a far more challenging diplomatic approach to pursue given that Russia and China are likely to veto such a resolution and Iran and North Korea would continue to supply Syria with weapons. But by raising the issue at international forums

and showing diplomatic unity and resolve, the United States and its allies can make it more politically costly for non-cooperative states to torpedo the initiative.

But the United States should also make it clear to the Syrian army, both publicly and privately, that there would be extensive rewards for joining the dissent movement and splitting with the regime. Public statements by senior U.S. officials, be it President Obama or Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, highlighting the role the Syrian army should play in this crisis can help clarify Washington's intentions and policies. Washington should also send private messages to the Syrian generals, preferably through Turkish emissaries and diplomats, detailing what kind of U.S. financial and military assistance the Syrian military would receive in the event it cooperates. The Syrian military is likely to snub Washington's proposal, but this is not inevitable. After all, Syria's generals may calculate, out of their sense of national responsibility, that they have an opportunity to not only save the country from descending into total chaos or civil war but also modernize the military and turn it into a respectable and powerful force.

This begs the question what kind of role the Syrian military would possibly play in post-Assad Syria. Ideally, the Syrian military would oversee the transition from dictatorship to relative democracy and eventually step aside and play the role of the Turkish military, as a guardian of political stability and the democratic process. In reality, the Syrian military may be tempted to wage a coup against Assad and assume all powers in the country. Hence the critical need for that public and private channel of communication between Washington and the Syrian generals. Washington would have to make it very clear to the Syrian military leadership that substituting one dictatorship with another is out of the question. The United States and its allies may want to seriously consider offering credible guarantees to the Syrian military that they would protected from international prosecution, but only on the condition that bloodshed would stop now before casualties mount and it becomes too late.

Sanctioning Bashar Assad and his cronies is all good and well, but those who have a more immediate handle of the security situation on the ground are those who carry the guns. All U.S. diplomacy should focus now on finding ways to persuade the Syrian military to be on the right side of history. It won't be easy to do and the chances of success may be minimal, but it is a high-impact, low-cost strategy that is well worth pursuing by Washington.

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Twisting Assad's Arm

U.S. diplomats are always complaining they have no leverage over Syria. They're wrong.

By Andrew J. Tabler, April 14, 2011

A little over two years ago, I had to leave my eight-year career as a journalist in Damascus because of a report I had written on the Syrian opposition that the regime didn't like. Since arriving in Washington, I've had the pleasure to share views on the Syrian regime with well-meaning U.S. officials charged with engaging my former home base. But it's become something of a mantra in Washington -- as the regime has perpetrated a brutal crackdown on opposition activists -- that the United States simply has no leverage in Syria.

But after sitting through countless discussions about President Bashar al-Assad and his Alawite-dominated government -- especially since the protests erupted in recent weeks -- it is now clear to me that the problem isn't a lack of leverage, but the strategy being used.

Assad rules through ambiguity and duplicity, and his speech on March 30, in which he blamed unrest sweeping his country on foreign "conspiracies" and refused to announce any specific reforms, indicates that he is not about to change his ways -- at least not without a push from the outside. Assad has spent the last 11 years promising political "reform," but has never got around to delivering it. This is a well-established pattern. He talks about peace with Israel while at the same time delivering Scud missiles to Hezbollah. He promises to keep his hands off Lebanon, but recently worked with Hezbollah to bring down the government in Beirut. He says, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, that he wants a nuclear-free Middle East, but stonewalls International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors investigating the rubble of his North Korean-designed nuclear program.

Applying pressure on Assad has worked in the past. U.S.-led multilateral pressure -- in the face of mass protests similar to those now sweeping Syria -- proved decisive in forcing him in April 2005 to end Syria's 29-year occupation of Lebanon. And U.S. sanctions on the Assad regime have also had an unexpected impact on its worsening finances and the ability of its members to invest internationally. While the Assad regime may have few or no investments in the United States, the "knock-on" effect of U.S. sanctions has deterred most foreign banks and companies from doing business with Damascus -- making lifting sanctions a key Syrian demand in talks with the United States. After all, what major international company would risk its U.S. business to make deals with an economy roughly the size of Pittsburgh? Why couldn't similar efforts work in the current crisis?

Up until now, Barack Obama's administration has engaged Assad with the primary goal of restarting peace talks between Syria and Israel while trying to mitigate the regional damage from Syria's worsening policies. Washington has attempted to test Assad's intention and ability to reorient his country away from Iran and toward the West in Syria-Israel peace talks by putting him on the horns of a dilemma: Either you get back the Golan Heights, or you keep supporting Hezbollah -- but not both. So far those well-intentioned efforts have not broken the gridlock: Israel watches Assad's transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, doubts his peaceful intentions, and refuses to make the risky political decision to rejoin talks. With Washington unable to deliver Israel to the negotiating table, Assad has not yet been compelled to show his hand.

The Obama administration is right to use dilemmas as a negotiating strategy -- it causes people to make clear choices. They are also key instruments to revealing a person's character and intentions, as their choices speak for themselves. But the dilemma has to fit the context. Assad, who in his recent speech repeatedly attributed the unrest in his country to Israeli and American meddling -- and has already lost significant public support by using live

fire on protesters -- is not likely to risk further alienating his supporters by signing on the dotted line with Israel anytime soon.

Dilemmas also only work if they are set up properly. So far, the Obama administration has tried to administer its test by talking behind closed doors with Assad about peace with Israel and his destructive policies -- while keeping U.S. sanctions in place. But it has not introduced new negative incentives in response to Assad's regional meddling and hardhanded tactics that diametrically oppose U.S. interests or values. And thus Assad has little fear that Washington will, especially when U.S. officials make his case for him by repeatedly emphasizing their lack of leverage in Damascus. Pressure alone, much like engagement alone, will not be enough to change Assad's policies. Both stand a far better chance of being effective if used in concert. That requires focus and creativity: two things Washington's Syria policy has historically lacked.

The current unrest sweeping Syria and the rest of the Middle East provides Washington with an opportunity to launch a hybrid Syria policy that would allow the administering of more tests in better ways. This will involve expanding the focus of U.S.-Syria policy beyond the Israel question.

First, Washington should shine a light on the Assad regime's human rights violations by bringing it before the U.N. Human Rights Council. On the multilateral front, the administration should be working closely with France and other allies to establish an effective sanctions regime -- including diplomatic isolation -- against Assad to push him to stop his bloody crackdown on protesters and follow through on his reform promises. Second, the Obama administration, in the spirit of its declarations in Libya, should issue a new executive order on human rights abuses in Syria, allowing the Treasury Department to freeze accounts of individuals responsible for the crackdown. Third, it should use this remit to designate more Syrian officials and figures under Executive Order 13460, which targets rampant regime corruption -- the mortar that holds Assad's regime together and a key issue that has brought protesters out into the streets.

With these additional measures in place, Washington could rally allies around a common cause, send a strong message to Assad that his crackdown will cost him, and establish clear boundaries in terms of the scope of U.S. engagement with Syria. Washington can also use these instruments on Assad's worsening domestic position to extract concessions on his relationship with Iran, be it his relationship with Hezbollah or -- eventually, when the time is right -- peace talks with Israel. It will also teach Assad that Washington will judge him on his actions, not just his words to U.S. officials behind closed doors.

High-level U.S. officials or senior senators talking with Assad and wagging their fingers at him when he's bad will not change his ways. A good Syrian friend once told me that the key to dealing with the Assad regime is to always keep your options open and be prepared to walk away with no obligations. Only by making clear when it will do so, and what will be the consequences, will Washington ever have a hope of getting a straight answer out of Bashar al-Assad.

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Assad's Survival Strategy

The Syrian president is relying on a blend of repression, promises of reform, and anxiety about what comes next to defuse an unexpected challenge to his rule.

By Gary Gambill, April 6, 2011

Two months ago, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad famously told the Wall Street Journal that he had nothing to fear from the wave of popular protests convulsing the Arab world because his government reflects "the beliefs of the people." While his boast was surely disingenuous, his confidence appeared quite genuine. Notwithstanding the recent spate of mass demonstrations and violent government reprisals in Syria that have left more than 100 people dead, Assad's ability to weather this storm should not be underestimated.

If grievances alone could bring down governments, Assad would be in a world of trouble. Most Syrians suffer from the same economic hardships that have fueled popular uprisings in other Arab countries (high unemployment, rising cost of living, rampant corruption, and so on) while their political and civil liberties have been violated in greater measure. Adding insult to injury for Syria's large Sunni Muslim majority, the ruling elite is dominated by Alawites, an Islamic sect comprising roughly 12 percent of the population.

The Assad family has produced decades of virtually unblemished political stability in Syria by denying aggrieved citizens the resources and structural opportunities needed to mobilize collectively. There are no independent political parties, labor unions, professional associations, or other civic organizations through which Syrians can advance their interests. Of the 183 countries surveyed in the World Bank's 2010 "Doing Business" report, Syria ranked 168th and 176th, respectively, in access to credit and contract enforcement, the two indices most critical to the aggregation of economic power independent of the state. All media outlets are owned by the government or individuals sympathetic to it, while the Internet is heavily censored and monitored by the mukhabarat (secret police).

This virtually unparalleled dominion of state over society is integrally linked to Alawite control of the military-security apparatus. Whereas Tunisian and Egyptian military officers refused to administer the kind of violent repression needed to keep their recently deposed presidents in power and Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi suffered a rash of security defections when his people began rebelling, Assad doesn't have to worry that his generals will hesitate to punish his enemies. Not one of them has a future in Syria if the regime falls.

Although the fruits of power are distributed among a corrupt political and commercial elite that is reasonably representative of Syria's diversity, the perception that Syria has an "Alawite regime" is widespread among Sunnis, many of whom consider the sect heretical. While Assad has managed this sectarian resentment by advancing regional causes that resonate with Sunnis (most notably anti-Zionism and resistance to the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq), it is never far from the surface.

The regime has compensated for this scarlet letter by cultivating a kind of "negative legitimacy" deriving from the undesirability of perceived alternatives. Most Syrian Christians, Druze, and Ismaili Shiites -- roughly 12 to15 percent of the population, all together -- and many secular Sunnis fear that the collapse of Assad's regime will lead to an Islamist takeover or catastrophic civil unrest (or both).

Assad has also managed to convincingly cast himself as the least nefarious member of Syria's power elite (it helps to have a psychotic brother). Though he never delivered on the sweeping change he promised when taking office 11 years ago, many Syrians still credit him with desiring reform, attributing his failures to a reactionary "old guard" within the regime. Even embittered Syrian exiles often acknowledge that the Assad regime

would be more repressive without Bashar in it. So while Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak served as a lightning rod for demonstrations by uniting otherwise disparate groups to demand his ouster, Assad's image discourages mobilization against the government, as nearly everyone has some grounds for fearing what comes next. Similar considerations have contributed substantially to Western tolerance of Assad's excesses.

The proliferation of uprisings around the Arab world nevertheless pose an acute challenge for Assad. The demonstration effect of common people toppling tyrants live on Al Jazeera has helped persuade his ordinarily fatalistic subjects that they have the power to shape their future. Equally important is what one might call the "coordination effect." Most citizens will abstain from banned political activities, such as participating in protests, if the likelihood of severe punishment is great. However, the risks decrease rapidly once the number of participants exceeds the government's capacity to punish every infraction. By signaling to citizens that now is the time to act and giving them confidence that others will do likewise, the Arab Spring makes it easier to reach this critical mass.

Efforts by Syrian activists to launch their own uprising progressed slowly at first. Two attempts to organize rallies via Facebook fizzled due to the heavy advance deployment of security personnel (no one wants to be the first to provoke a squadron of riot police). Solidarity rallies in support of the Egyptian and Libyan people provided a clever pretext for small numbers of dissidents to shout generalized condemnations of dictatorship at the top of their lungs, but they were quickly dispersed.

On Feb. 18, anger over the police beating of a Damascus merchant led 1,500 people to assemble in Al-Hamidiyah Souq demanding justice. Although the protest was relatively tame, it exposed a glaring loophole in the regime's security screen -- spontaneous demonstrations in response to local grievances are virtually impossible to anticipate and pre-empt.

The real game-changer came on March 6 with the arrest of 15 teenagers in the southern city of Deraa for having scrawled anti-government graffiti on a wall. Ordinarily, their families would have quietly sought the intercession of tribal and religious leaders and prayed for a miracle. This time, however, the continuing detention of the children sparked massive demonstrations centered on the city's historic Omari mosque, its loudspeakers demonstrating how easily even the most carefully state-vetted Sunni preachers can get swept away by popular passions.

Assad's initial response to the crisis was badly botched. By the time the authorities released the 15 children, altercations between protesters and police had claimed many lives, fueling a cycle (familiar to students of Iran's 1979 revolution) whereby funerals for each wave of martyrs become rallying points for the next. By the time Assad fired the regional governor and promised an investigation into the killings, the crowds in Deraa and nearby Sunni areas were torching offices of the ruling Baath Party and destroying other symbols of the regime on sight.

As anti-government demonstrations began spreading across the country on March 15, there was a revealing disparity. Secular liberal dissidents took to the streets in relatively small numbers and avoided confrontations with the police, while Kurdish groups largely abstained. In contrast, the demonstrations in Deraa and other predominantly Sunni flashpoints were 20 to 30 times larger, organized under the semi-inviolable protection of mosques and clearly intended to provoke the security forces. While it is premature to characterize the protests as an Islamist uprising, there is little doubt that those most eager to risk death or severe bodily harm are overwhelmingly Sunni and deeply religious.

Although many commentators quickly concluded that Assad must either crack down relentlessly or implement sweeping reforms, neither extreme makes much sense for the Syrian leader. Giving his security chiefs free rein to squash the uprising plays into the hands of radicals, who hope that mass casualties will turn a majority of the people squarely against the regime and facilitate defections by hitherto quiescent Sunni political,

religious, and business leaders. On the other hand, lifting restrictions on freedom of expression only gives dissidents a free hand to mobilize the public and make greater demands from a position of strength.

Instead, Assad has sought to deflate the protests through selective minor concessions (increasing public sector wages, releasing a few hundred political prisoners, etc.), while instructing the security apparatus to employ suppressive tactics that are less visible or can be plausibly denied. The mysterious rooftop snipers who opened fire on protesters in Latakia on March 26 served two purposes -- punishing Sunnis who dared to make trouble in the Alawite heartland, while hinting that there are malevolent forces beyond Assad's control ready to wreak havoc on civilians but for the protection of the state.

As in the past, Assad has tried to deflect personal responsibility by cultivating the perception that he is not fully in control of his regime. The spectacle of his close advisor, Bouthaina Shaaban, proclaiming at the height of the violence that she had personally witnessed him ordering security forces not to fire "one bullet" was intended less to deny that they were shooting people (this much was plainly evident to the public) than to plant the belief that the president of Syria was powerless to stop them. Likewise, her seemingly premature announcement that Assad was preparing to introduce a range of sweeping reforms -- days ahead of a televised speech in which he conspicuously made no such promises -- encouraged speculation that regime hardliners had blocked him from taking action.

Whether or not the Syrian public will buy into this "blocked reformer" pitch remains to be seen, but it is already an overseas hit. Last week, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said -- without a hint of sarcasm -- that many American lawmakers view the Syrian president as a "reformer."

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Why Syria will be next

Posted By Radwan Ziadeh, Wednesday, April 6, 2011 - 11:49 AM

Mawa Goumian, a Damascene girl who is neither an activist nor politician, became the symbol of the Syrian Revolution with a YouTube video. She was holding the Syrian flag and shouting "Long live free Syria," when suddenly she was interrupted by six security men who surrounded her before they took her to an unknown place. Her example brought Syria squarely into the focus of the other revolutions which have swept the Arab world.

Mawa's video gave the lie to the confidence of Syrian President Bashar Asad, who told the Wall Street Journal in late January that Syria is immune and far from what other countries have recently experienced in the region. According to President Asad, Syria is stable "because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance." This suggests

how Asad sees the "revolutions" around him -- and what happened last week in several Syrian cities proved that President Asad was wrong.

The massive demonstrations in Daraa last week -- before they spread to other cities like Damascus, Latakia, Hims and Doma -- put an end to the "Syrian exceptionalism." Contrary to the widespread belief that Syria would be immune, it is in fact an ideal case for revolution, a country where a lack of political rights meet economic failure. Indeed, Syria offered its people neither bread nor freedom. With 32 percent of Syrians under the poverty line, according to the United Nations Development Programme, there was quiet outrage over widely circulated stories of the corruption of Rami Makhlouf (cousin of president Bashar Asad), and other business nouveaux who relied mainly on the allegiance with the security services in order to build their wealth.

To be clear, the protests in Syria today, like those in Tunisia and Egypt, are about domestic issues -- and have nothing to do with foreign policy. The slogans of Syrian protestors focus on freedom and corruption, not Israel, Lebanon or Palestine -- where the regime spent all its energy, time and money in the last four decades. Yet, nor were the protests purely a result of deteriorating economic conditions, an increase in unemployment rates and loss of job opportunities. This misplaced diagnosis has led many of these regimes to resort to the introduction of temporary economic measures, such as increasing public subsidies for basic food products or increasing salaries of public sector employees believing that this would eliminate the reasons for any popular protest.

In reality, what took place was simply a revolution to restore human dignity; since dignity and honor have a special value to all mankind and no less to the Arabs among them. Syrians endured long decades of continued degrading and humiliating practices at security and intelligence branches such as fatal torture; blatant discrimination in educational opportunities and promotions in public sector jobs; health services based on party affiliations, as well as a general sense of corruption, embezzlement and lack of transparency in the country. All of these experiences that directly or indirectly fall under the scope of humiliation are usually overlooked by totalitarian regimes and are only recognized after its overthrown by popular revolts.

The delay in the uprising in Syria was mainly due to fear of repression from the security services who used to repeat that they would not hesitate to use violence against demonstrators, stimulating the memory of fear which has its deep roots among the Syrians. After all, the 1980s resulted in more than 30,000 deaths, 125,000 political prisoners and 17,000 who are still missing. In addition, Syrians have become accustomed to stories of torture after generations which have created a psychological trauma inside the Syrian.

However, with the success of the youth in the southern Syrian town of Daraa in breaking the fear barrier through dozens of demonstrations demanding freedom, these protests were able to expand to include more cities. A small but significant demonstration that was suppressed inside the Umayyad mosque indicated the determination of the Syrian youth to follow through with their "revolution." This determination is strong enough today, despite the increase in the number of those killed, and people will continue to participate despite the enormous arrest campaign launched by the security services.

The Syrian security apparatus did as the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes did, using excessive force to disperse demonstrators with live bullets, as evidenced by many human rights organizations. However, as it was apparent in the other revolutions, killing with live ammunition does not deter protesters as much as it inflames and incites others to break the wall of fear and silence.

The reaction of the security authorities often inflame both rebellions and demonstrations; their reactions used to deal with these movements has been in accordance with the state's security concerns, using words like "spies" and "traitors" to describe the protesters. Accusing the demonstrators in Syria has led to even more anger

among the rebellious youth toward a regime that seems determined to ignore decades of hidden tension and anger among the citizens. This has lead to a state of enormous determination that will be difficult to suppress. If we analyze the slogans used by the demonstrators, we realize that they have fully understood the mentality of the ruling party and the state media; since the Syrian regime uses the language of treason to discredit the activists and its opponents by accusing them of being traitors for Israel or the United States, so the young Syrian demonstrators used the same tactics through their slogans: "The traitor who will kill his own people."

We should also refer to the significance of Daraa as a starting point of the revolution. This southern province has experienced -- like many other provinces -- a lack of infrastructure and low levels of medical care and education. It possesses nearly all causes of a persistent revolution that will not end until it achieves all its goals. We should also refer to the nature of its community, which offers solidarity and support among its citizens -- something which is not available in big cities where the regime has been working for decades to destroy the sense of solidarity among people by planting suspicion and mutual fear instead. Because of this well-connected community, when a few children of the tribe (Abazid) were arrested, maximum solidarity was shown by all the other tribes who remained firm on one position: to call for the release of these schoolchildren.

In addition, the Syrian regime can't isolate the province of Daraa militarily and politically. Daraa is not Qamishli or Hasaka, where the majority of the population there are Kurds. It would have been easy for the Syrian regime to isolate these provinces by accusing the Kurds of planning to secede. Even if demonstrations had begun in Hama or Aleppo, it would have been easier to isolate them by accusing them of having been instruments of the Muslim Brotherhood (a crime which would result in a death sentence, according to Law 49 of 1980). And since it's really difficult for the uprising to begin in Damascus or Aleppo because of the heavy security presence there, we can see that Daraa was the perfect choice for the "revolution."

The final reason why the Syrian regime may be prevented from using extreme violence or even massacring Daraa as it did in Hama in 1982, is that three out of the 10 leaders of the Syrian Army divisions are from Daraa. The Syrian regime is fully aware of a possible division among the Syrian army and of what the consequences of that would be. In addition, the Syrian regime also realizes that the increased repression and casualties will generate more protestors -- and the slogans will only became stronger and stronger. It is clear that the "Syrian Revolution" will triumph in the end, as each day more cities get involved in demonstrations and rebellions demanding their freedom.

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As quiet returns, Syrians ponder the future

Posted By Joshua Landis, Tuesday, April 5, 2011 - 2:17 PM

Syria experienced its first day of political calm in over two weeks on April 3. The tsunami of protest and youth awakening that swept over Syria as part of the earthquake that hit the Arab world over two months ago has profoundly shaken Syrians. So accustomed to being the "island of stability" in the Middle East, Syrians are now wondering how long the Assad regime can last.

The Baathist regime has presided over Syria for 48 years; Bashar al-Assad has been president for 11 since inheriting power from his father. Although badly bruised and shaken, both remain in firm control. Western accounts of the protest movement in Syria have been exaggerated. At no time was the regime in peril. No officials resigned or left the country as has happened in Libya. Unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian armies, the Syrian army remained loyal to the president, and the protest movement that grew large in the Syrian countryside failed to take root in the cities. The number of demonstrators that turned out in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama, three of Syria's four largest cities, counted in the hundreds and not the thousands.

Damascus was the only one of these three cities to have demonstrations. There were four in all. The two most significant protests occurred early in the process on March 16 and 17. Dozens of young demonstrators marched through the al-Hamidiyeh and Hariqa souqs on March 16 shouting, "God, Syria, Freedom -- is enough," a chant that became the standard slogan of the movement that spread to other parts of Syria in the following two weeks. The day after, scores of human rights activists and the relatives of political prisoners demonstrated in front of the Interior Ministry. After Deraa flared up, the citizens of Damascus fell quiet rather than jumped on the bandwagon.

Aleppo, a hotbed of Muslim Brotherhood support in the 1970s, was completely unaffected by the anti-government movement. Instead, Aleppines turned out in sizable numbers to support the government.

Hama was also unaffected. It was the city that the Muslim Brotherhood was able to take over in 1982 before having its old districts destroyed brutally by the regime. A friend from Hama was asked, "Why isn't Hama rising against the regime and taking revenge?" He answered: "Syrians demonstrate for their own reasons. Don't ever think anyone in Daraa will shed a tear for Hama or the other way around." He said there is no great Syrian revolution -- "just locals having internal issues."

In Homs, by contrast, a sizable protest took place near the old city on Friday. Demonstrators chanted "Allahu Akbar" and called for "freedom". Violence flared up at the end. Both security forces and demonstrators were wounded. The protest in Homs therefore indicates that the cities are not immune to the movement. But the hallmark of the successful Middle Eastern revolution thus far has been protesters' ability to overwhelm security forces in the capital city. Damascus dispatched over a million of its inhabitants to a pro-Assad rally, leading many to conclude that the broad public remains on Bashar's side.

All the same, many suspect that the protest movement, even if contained and sporadic, may become a nagging problem for the regime. Business will be reluctant to invest. The five-year economic plan that was rolled out last year already looks wildly unrealistic. Its centerpiece is based on the gamble that Syria can attract 10 billion dollars of foreign investment per year. This year foreign investment will most likely be less than 2 billion dollars. Economic failure will compound the regime's problems. Opposition members insist that the barrier of fear in Syria has been punctured for good, even while regime supporters argue that the government will hit hard at the opposition to rebuild the wall of fear and make the protest movement a short lived phenomenon.

Deraa has been the site of the greatest demonstrations and the most violence. Tens of thousands took to the streets,

some 100 persons were killed there and in the neighboring towns, many more were wounded. A local reason sparked the protests: 15 high school kids were arrested for scrawling anti-government graffiti on the walls. But the long-term causes were not entirely local. The slogans chosen by the school kids mimicked the calls for freedom used by protesters in Egypt. A six-year drought has also hit the entirety of Eastern Syria hard, devastating agriculture and ruining the wheat crop along with incomes, just at the time that the youth bubble generated by decades of an elevated birthrates brought frustrated and unemployed young onto the streets of Syria's provincial cities.

What is more, Deraa is a tribal region, and many blamed these loyalties for the severity of the demonstrations. Tribal leaders called for members of the tribes to come out in force to protest the incarceration of children. Even today, the tribes can provide a vehicle of resistance to the central state. Arab and Kurdish tribes were some of the last social units in Syria to buckle in the face of central authority and national identity.

Latakia, situated on Syria's coast, also saw several days of demonstrations and violence. This was surprising because it is the capital of the region dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Islam and the group to which the Assad family belongs. 12 were killed, and a number were also killed in Duma, a town outside of Damascus. Demonstrations broke out in many provincial cities, indicating that opposition demands for curtailing corruption, lifting the emergency law, and enacting greater freedoms and speedy reform have resonance across the country.

What has changed?

Even if the government in Damascus remains powerful for the time being and Syrians cling to the stability it promises, there can be little doubt that we are witnessing a profound break from the past. The Arab street has finally come into its own. Rulers will have to think twice before treating their people like sheep. Leaders will be accountable for economic failure. The video phone has become the Arab equivalent of the six-shooter in the American West. It is the new "equalizer." It offers a modicum of power and justice to the ordinary man who can now hold his phone aloft to capture police brutality and post it on Youtube. Technology has been transformative. The recent unrest could not have been sustained without it.

The Syrian community abroad has been irrevocably reunited with Syrians inside the country. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this change. The young of Syria can no longer be isolated from foreign movements and intellectual trends. Those who go abroad used to become dissociated from Syria. Calling home was prohibitively expensive and mandatory military service made returning unpalatable. Technology, specifically Skype, Facebook, and email, has reunited the two communities. In the past, brain drain siphoned off Syria's best and brightest, and opposition leaders were sent into exile, where they were rarely heard from again. Now they are leading the charge against the regime, pumping sedition into every Syrian household with Youtube and Twitter updates.

A number of Arab states, in particular Tunisia and Egypt, have earned the right to be called nations. Their people have stood up as one to demand sovereignty. Although emergency rule has yet to be lifted in Egypt and a stable government has yet to take shape in Tunisia, there is good reason to believe they will.

For other Arabs, particularly those of the Levant, it is too early to make such bold statements about national integrity. The leading reason Syrians did not take to the streets in larger numbers is fear of communal strife and possible civil war. Also, they do not dislike their government enough to risk going the way of Iraq. Among large segments of Syrian society, Bashar al-Assad remains popular. As a multiethnic and religious society, Syria could come unglued.

But how many years will it be until the next generation of Syrian youth will have only a dim memory of the turmoil in Lebanon or Iraq? Instead of the sentiments of defeat and hopelessness invoked by failed states, young Arabs may

well find inspiration in the examples of Egypt and Tunisia. A successful Arab democracy will be a powerful example for others. This begs the question of how long the Assad regime can last.

Syria's youth are no longer apathetic. They have tasted revolution and their own power. Surely they will want to taste that elixir again. Many commentators have remarked on Bashar al-Assad's stubbornness. He may be a "modernizer" but not a "reformer," is how Volker Pertes recently explained it. This is a polite way to say that he is not preparing the way for an eventual transfer of power. Many fear that Assad's refusal to prepare the present regime for a soft landing spells bad news for Syria. Over the last century, Syria's diverse religious communities have lived together more peaceably than in any other country of the region. In no small part this coexistence is due to the stability that the Assad family has enforced in Syria and to the vision of tolerance and secularism they have promoted. But to preserve that legacy will require preparing Syria for the day when the majority community can assume the lion's share of power. After the last two weeks of protest, that day seems closer at hand.

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Syria's race against the clock

Posted By Peter Harling, Monday, April 11, 2011 - 2:55 PM

The Syria we knew is no longer. Together with the rest of the region, it has entered an era of uncertainty and incessant flux. For now it has settled into a slow-motion revolution, as protests both fail to reach a critical mass and prod authorities to successfully respond to far-reaching demands. Two conflicting trends currently coexist. The regime has laid out a body of reforms which have the potential to win over enough popular support to ensure a peaceful way forward. But it has also failed to bring violence to an end, whether due to senseless scare tactics, well-ingrained habits of the security apparatus, possible provocations staged by the regime's many enemies (from dissident members of the ruling family to hostile parties abroad to home-grown die-hard Islamists) and the increasingly tense general atmosphere -- or a mix of all the above.

Although many view the present through the prism of the past, with memories still fresh of the ruthlessness with which the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising of the early 1980s was crushed, it is doubtful that all-out repression today would put an end to protests that enjoy a much broader base -- even if they have taken on Islamist undertones in some places. Alternatively, quick-fixes, cosmetic changes and empty promises would only postpone an explosion.

This leaves Syrians the choice between two perilous journeys: either radical reform or outright revolution. Neither offers easy answers to the deep-seated issues at stake, including preserving Syria's fragile secular model, addressing its severe economic predicament and maintaining its regional standing.

The authorities' initial crude and predictable response did much to push people toward the second option. The

dynamics then changed somewhat after President Bashar al-Assad's speech on March 30. Anticipated as the pinnacle of a strategy blending fear of chaos, a spectacular (albeit partly orchestrated) demonstration of popular support for the regime on the streets, and a package of reforms, the address in fact was an anticlimax -- a show of self-confidence and a demoralizing flashback to the ways of yesteryear.

This flop nonetheless had a flip-side: it served as a useful eye-opener to all. On one hand, it dispelled the broadly-shared perception of Assad as a savior who somehow could side with the people against the regime. On the other hand, it convinced many regime insiders that they would have to do better than simply count on the president's popularity to magically erase the legacy of generalized mismanagement.

The regime thus appeared to adopt a more constructive approach. A variety of officials expressed their realization that deadly clashes, whoever provokes them, create more problems than they solve. They stressed dialogue as a key component of their strategy, and showed an unprecedented willingness to listen. And they figured that the pace of reforms must not only keep up with the speed at which protests spread throughout the country, but beat them in the race for public opinion. Indeed, the regime began acting much faster than announced by Assad during his speech.

And then more blood was spilled when protests picked up after prayers last Friday. Whatever positive trends were apparent lost much of their value. Striving to prove the regime's innocence -- for example by broadcasting on live state television the misdeeds of so-called agents provocateurs that state security somehow fails to stop -- will only add insult to injury for the many Syrians who believe that authorities are at least partly to blame. Worse still, the regime may now attempt to stamp out the more Islamist strand within the protest movement, triggering a vicious cycle of violence in more parts of the country than it can control.

Even assuming violence is contained in the days to come, there are several missing ingredients to what could qualify as a positive dynamic. Authorities have spoken to the public's craving for dignity only with respect to Syria's regional interests and principles, but this was achieved at the expense of domestic issues that now need to be addressed. Dignity must also be at the heart of how this is done.

Forthcoming elections to a parliament that is viewed as shameful by the population may have to be put on hold, pending new legislation that ensures the institution is truly representative. The army of cronies singing the regime's praise in the media and plastering propaganda in the streets must be reined in. Tackling tough economic issues will take time, patience and self-sacrifice, which is hard to expect when the symbols of corruption remain untouched. Most importantly, families of the martyrs will need far more than material compensation; they will settle for nothing less than full accountability.

The regime, pressed for time and seeking to placate numerous constituencies, has yet to define a framework that could lend consistency to its various decisions, lest today's steps lay the basis for tomorrow's crises. Before raising expectations, it must ask itself how far it is genuinely prepared to go on the path to political reform. In particular, can Assad's term be renewed in 2014 through yet another landslide plebiscite? To what extent is the leadership prepared to jeopardize secularism for the sake of containing the Islamists? And what resources is it willing to spend without risking either bankruptcy or a costly dependence on foreign donors?

Finally, the regime's efforts have been plagued by ill-communication on both sides. Authorities are struggling to identify reliable interlocutors within society even as the protesters are finding it hard to select credible interlocutors within the regime, given the depth of mistrust in its traditional representatives. Citizens currently express their deeply-felt frustrations in the most chaotic ways, and officials tend to respond in kind. There is an urgent need to base dialogue on a thorough and inclusive assessment of

the specific grievances that have developed in each part of the country -- a legacy of negligence that is precisely what frustrated citizens want to see redressed above all.

Time is running out as every new casualty makes the clock tick faster. To open the space required for a radical reform agenda to take hold, the regime's top priority must be to ensure a period of relative calm. Prospects will look grim were the country to witness yet another bloody Friday.

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Unmasking the false reformer

Posted By Hisham Melhem, Friday, April 22, 2011 - 11:30 AM

Over the last ten years many Western politicians and scholars took the road to Damascus holding out hope that the young Syrian President Bashar Assad who inherited power from his father Hafez Assad -- who created the first political dynasty in an Arab republic -- would lead Syria out of the political wilderness and place it on the path of political and economic reform. There was a naïve assumption that Bashar had the makings of a modern leader because he was in part Western educated, spoke relatively good English, and married a professional woman who worked as an investment banker in London. Many projected their own wishful thinking and illusions on the new leader who spoke about reform and modernization, believing that he would end more than 40 years of repressive Baathist monopoly on power that has arrested the development of a once vibrant country that boasts Aleppo and Damascus, two of the most important cities in the history of the Levant. The view was that engaging Bashar and dangling political and economic incentives would encourage him to reform domestically, remove him from Iran's orbit, and distance him from the radical Islamists in Hamas and Hezbollah, paving the way for eventual peace with Israel.

Before the demonstrations began last month, Syria had the distinct shame of being the only country with the oldest and the youngest political prisoners in the world: The 80-year old human right activist, Haitham al-Maleh, and the 19 year old student blogger, Tal Mallouhi. In a chilling scene in one of the videos distributed by the opposition, "the banality of evil" is on full display. Rustum Ghazali -- who tormented Lebanon as head of Syrian intelligence prior to the forced pullout of Syrian forces in 2005, and who was sent by Bashar Assad to Dara'a to assure the notables of the city of their president's good intentions, says matter-of-factly: "We have released the children", a reference to the spark that ignited the uprising -- the arrest of a few children caught writing anti-regime graffiti.

In the last few weeks, Bashar's words and deeds in the face of nationwide peaceful, popular demonstrations demanding freedom and empowerment show once again how contemptuous he is of his own people. The reaction has been predictable -- a mixture of brute repression, live ammunition, mass arrests, thinly veiled bribes in the form of salary increases, some vague talk about reform, the use of paramilitary elements from the Alawi community as snipers directly targeted protesters in the city of Latakia, and now today's reports that at least 25 have been killed by security forces in a day of mass protests across the country. The regime has been true to form in trying to demonize and delegitimize the opposition as "traitors", "dupes" and

"spies" serving Syria's enemies. When Bashar spoke days after protests started and with scores of dead and injured, he was his usual self: Smug, petulant, arrogant, and in denial. He accused his people of being tools in the hands of outside "conspirators" and, like other Arab despots, accused satellite television stations of incitement. His contempt for those millions of Arabs from Algeria to Yemen -- yearning to be treated as real citizens and not as mere subjects by their governments -- was jarring, especially when he described their uprisings as a "crazy fad".

Some of the elements that sparked the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya exist in Syria: a young population alienated from a narrow, predatory ruling coalition (with the president's extended family and the Alawi minority at its core), a degraded economy with a growing army of unemployed and underemployed, increased repression of human rights, and a suffocating culture of corruption, discrimination and intimidation. Yet the demonstrators initially framed their struggle in bold moral terms. Whereas in Tunisia and Egypt the collective cry was "the people want to bring the regime down," in Syria the aching cry was "the Syrian people cannot be humiliated."

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From his early days in power, Bashar tried to ameliorate the stark predicament of his regime -- a lack of legitimacy -- by raising the possibility of reform, releasing some political prisoners, and tolerating the short lived "Damascus spring," a period during which reformers and human rights activists tried to engage in real politics. However, when reformers began to call for the dismantlement of the draconian Emergency Law -- in effect since 1963 -- and sought the end of the "leading" role of the Baath party in politics and society, the regime returned to form and the promising spring morphed into a dark winter. At best, Bashar merely wanted to be a modernizer: to add more computers into an ossified bureaucracy, to allow the Syrians the privilege of owning cell phones, to create the fiction of an independent media by licensing a new newspaper that serves the regime, albeit in a less vulgar fashion. A nascent banking system and a bourse to serve the interests of the new business monopolists, including his extended family, would look nice, too.

But the underlying reality is much gloomier: Syria does not have a serious university or research institution, a notable press, hospitals with reliable medical care, or any efficient state agency -- save the institutions of repression. Indeed, the ingrained inertia of the current Assad regime, its hollow and brittle institutions, and the very nature of the political system, including its instruments of coercion, prevents it from engaging in serious reform or from delivering on the requirements of regional peace. The regime may well have finally lifted the country's Emergency Law this week, but that will do little to change the underlying authoritarian realities: Article 8 of the constitution (which establishes the primacy of the Baath party in state and society), the illegality of political parties, and an ongoing media environment of censorship and craven dependence.

In many of these ways, Bashar has simply carried on the authoritarian legacy of his father, Hafez Assad. But whereas the elder was also known for political cunning and considerable tactical dexterity, these are qualities markedly absent in his son. Indeed, it was said that Hafez Assad could have written the sequel to Machiavelli's The Prince. He was a cold-blooded realist, not averse to the use of violence when faced with a challenge, but not necessarily as the first option. The elder Assad understood power, and more importantly, its limitations; he was painfully aware that Syria was a truncated state lacking the resources of Iraq and the historic cultural and political weight of Egypt. But he compensated for that by his ceaseless quest for alliances grand and small, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and managed to give Syria a leadership role that was incommensurate with its economy, geography, and demography. Hafez Assad was not driven by ideological considerations, although he wrapped himself with the cloak of Arab nationalism. He was willing to collaborate with the Islamists, but he deeply disliked them and was more than willing to match their violence with greater ferocity. When he began his opportunistic alliance with Iran in 1979, he was in the driver's seat because

revolutionary Iran was weak and it needed Syrian military and political support after Iraq's invasion in 1980.

By contrast, Bashar lacks his father's patient cunning and understanding of the limits of power. While the elder Assad was deliberate, cautious, and laconic, the younger is reckless, flippant, and loquacious. And he has based Syria's regional standing on the naïve assumption that leading a foreign policy based on "resistance" to the West and Israel would provide it with immunity against its domestic opposition -- which is now proving to be a case of diminishing returns. After more than a decade in power, Bashar has squandered much of his father's pan-Arab legacy and weakened Syria externally in its over-dependence on a pervasive Iranian influence throughout the region. As a result, Syria has lost much influence in its own backyard and has seen its power in the Levant wane.

In Lebanon, Bashar's almost subservient relationship with Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, especially after the humiliating forced withdrawal from Lebanon, has made Syria hopelessly dependent on a non-state actor to help it exert its regional influence. And many in Lebanon and beyond believe that there is more than circumstantial evidence implicating the Syrians and Hezbollah in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his companions in 2005. This is in addition to those who were assassinated subsequently, including parliamentarians, politicians journalists, and intellectuals -- among them my two colleagues at Annahar newspaper, Samir Qassir and Gibran Tueni .

During Bashar's reign, Syria's influence in the Eastern Mediterranean has been largely a function of its willingness and ability to engage in proxy wars with its enemies. In so doing, Bashar has done nothing, for example, to alter a regional environment that might be conducive to pursuing a peace with Israel (admittedly risky), and has in general continued the dynastic inclination for Syria to flagrantly exploit the tragic conditions of its Palestinian, Lebanese, and Iraqi neighbors.

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It will be difficult even for a regime that survived for years on its brutal legacy of repression to snuff out the desire for change and democracy, now that the barrier of fear has crumbled. For almost 30 years, the regime survived in part because of the horrific legacy of the Hama massacre. Hama was the unfortunate city where four years of low intensity civil war between the Assad regime and the militant Islamists came to an end in February 1982 in an orgy of violence that left in its wake at least 10,000 dead, mostly civilians.

However, the proliferation of Arab satellite television stations, cell phones, and social media will make it more difficult for the regime to engage in such acts of mass killings without the world knowing about it; but that does not mean that the regime will not fight back ferociously. To be blunt, given the nature of the political system and the makeup of Syrian society, genuine political change in Syria will likely not be as peaceful as it has thus far been in the case of Tunisia and Egypt. The violence that the Syrian regime could unleash against a threatening uprising could make the violence in Yemen today look modest in comparison. Minority based regimes such as the one in Syria will fight back with tenacity and show no mercy. The regime has convinced many members of other religious minorities, mainly Christians and Druze, that it is the only guarantor of stability and that its demise will lead to civil war. But recent demonstrations in Homs and other cities show that Syrians from all religious backgrounds are participating in the protests, thus undermining the regime's threat of sectarian chaos, although sectarian tension and even violence is still possible.

The gifted Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghout summarized it best when describing the Syrian republic of fear thus: "I enter the bathroom with my identification papers in my hand." For all of the previous reasons, we must see Bashar as he truly is: The product of a cruel system, steeped in parochial loyalties, nurtured by graft and corruption, and justified by deceptions, lies and revisionism, all the while hiding behind a façade of militant Arab nationalism claiming "Resistance" against Israeli-American hegemony.

Standing opposite this is the prospect of a representative and accountable government in Syria that struggles to regain its occupied territory by peaceful means and focuses on rebuilding its economy and civil society. This would transform the whole Levant. It would inject new positive dynamics in Lebanon and Palestine, strengthen the peace camp in Israel, and contribute to the peaceful development of the new Iraq, in addition to checking the harmful ambitions of Iran and its allies. Nor is this a pipe-dream: Modern Syria has had a long and proud tradition of nationalist and secular political movements and parties, despite the fashionable claims to the contrary that insist (especially after the events in Egypt and Tunisia) that the only alternative to Assad is the "dreaded Islamists."

If the Obama administration wants to be "on the right side of history" in Syria, as it was in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, it has to forcefully say that and act on it. The U.S. cannot of course determine the future of Syria; this is the responsibility of the Syrian people. But the U.S. can help shape and influence the behavior of both the regime and the opposition, assuming that the demonstrations will continue and produce a more cohesive leadership. Clear, consistent messages of support should be sent to all those Syrians willing to invest in positive political change. The U.S. should assure the Syrian people that it will use its influence to prevent and avoid sectarian violence, that it will not tolerate retribution by any group, and that it will lean on its friends in the region to refrain from exploiting events to serve their narrow interests. Putting Syria on the path of political reform and democracy will be long, painful, and yes, costly. Developing a cohesive and organized opposition with broad popular appeal will be daunting. But watching the brave Syrian men, women, and children exercising their rights as citizens in the face of one of the most repressive regimes in the Middle East leads one to believe that the Syrians have started their long and arduous march toward freedom.

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Crunch-time for the Syrian regime

Posted By Peter Harling, Friday, April 29, 2011 - 12:09 PM

Seen from Damascus, the crisis that is gripping Syria is fast approaching crunch-time. The regime appears to have stopped pretending it can offer a way out. More than ever, it portrays the confrontation as a war waged against a multifaceted foreign enemy which it blames for all casualties. This narrative, which informs the security services' brutal response to protests, has cost the authorities the decisive battle for perceptions abroad, at home, and even in central Damascus -- a rare bubble of relative calm that has now entered into a state of utter confusion.

The primary benefit of observing events from the Syrian capital is to measure just how unreliable all sources of information have become. Local media tell a tale of accusations and denials in which, incredibly, security services are the sole victims, persecuted by armed gangs. Where the regime initially acknowledged civilian martyrs and sought to differentiate between legitimate grievances and what it characterized as sedition, such efforts have come to an end.

For its part, the foreign media, denied access by the regime, relies virtually exclusively on material produced by on-the-ground protesters, the dependability of which has proven uneven. The novel phenomenon of "eye-witnesses" further blurs the picture. Outside observers have sought to counter the state-imposed blackout by recruiting correspondents, often haphazardly, flooding the country with satellite phones and modems. Several cases of false testimonies have cast doubts on such procedures but, for lack of an alternative, they largely continue to shape coverage of events.

Under the circumstances, Damascenes have but one option: to work the phones, calling relatives, friends, and colleagues throughout the country in a desperate attempt to form their own opinion. They hear and tell stories that are self-contradictory. Some tend to confirm the existence of armed agents provocateurs; many others credibly blame the regime for the bulk of the violence. Instances of sectarian polarization surface in some areas, while examples of cross-community solidarity burgeon in others. Neighbors often provide inconsistent accounts while people who share socio-economic backgrounds react to similar events in contrasting ways.

Such chaos is inherent in times of crisis, but it also is a reflection of the profound mistrust between citizens and their state, which has failed to offer any point of reference around which undecided Syrians could rally. To the contrary: the regime has systematically fostered a sense of bewilderment and anxiety. Most damaging of all has been the constant contradiction between its words and deeds.

Regime assertions notwithstanding, evidence regarding excessive use of force by security forces in circumstances that cannot plausibly be described as representing an immediate threat is piling up. Given the extraordinary deployment of forces and security lockdown in and around the capital last weekend, it is simply impossible to imagine that so-called agitators could be behind the bloodshed. Even where the regime's responsibility in both the onset and escalation of confrontation is beyond doubt, as in the southern city of Deraa, the regime feels the need to undertake an endless "investigation" before holding anyone accountable, even as arbitrary arrests remain the norm when dealing with protesters.

On the political front, the regime has lifted the emergency law but allows security services to conduct business as usual, illustrating how irrelevant the concept of legality was in the first place. It authorizes demonstrations while stating they are no longer needed and labeling them as seditious. It speaks of reforming the media and, in the same breath, fires an oh-so-loyal editor-in-chief for straying from the official line. It insists on ignoring the most outrageous symbols of corruption. It promises a multi-party law even as it proves how little power is vested in civilian institutions. Finally, and although it has engaged in numerous bilateral talks with local representatives, it resists convening a national dialogue, which might offer a slim chance of finding an inclusive and credible way forward.

In more parts of the country than one can count, protesters now face only the most brutal, repressive side of the regime. For those who mourn the dead and know them not as saboteurs and traitors, but as relatives, neighbors, and friends, there is nothing left to discuss. Slowly but surely, these ink spots of radicalized opposition are spreading and joining in an increasingly determined and coordinated movement to topple the regime.

Many Syrians -- even among those without sympathy for the regime -- still resist this conclusion. Their arguments should not be ignored. They dread the breakup of a state whose institutions, including the military, are weak even by regional standards. They fear that sectarian dynamics or a hegemonic religious agenda could take hold. They suspect Syria would cave in to foreign interference. And they distrust an exiled opposition that is all too reminiscent of Iraq's.

The regime appears to be calculating that the prospect of a bloodbath will prove the strongest argument of all. The scenario is both risky and self-defeating, for if it will be a tragedy for the Syrian people, it will also spell disaster for the regime itself. Instead, it should immediately rein

in security services, take decisive action against those responsible for state violence, and initiate a genuine, all-inclusive national dialogue. This could provide an opportunity for representatives of the popular movement to emerge, for their demands to be fleshed out, and for authorities to demonstrate they have more to offer than empty words and certain doom.

Peter Harling is the Iraq-Syria-Lebanon project director with the International Crisis Group

Who's Who in the Syrian Opposition

Meet the brave souls who dare to stand up to the guns of Bashar al-Assad.

By David Kenner, April 29, 2011

Bashar al-Assad never saw it coming. In a Jan. 31 interview with the Wall Street Journal, the Syrian autocrat boasted that his regime was immune from the revolutionary wave spreading across the Middle East because it "very closely linked to the beliefs of the people."

Over the past month and a half, Syrians have made a liar out of their president. Small protests broke out in Damascus on March 15 and have slowly spread to towns and cities throughout the country. And as the movement has gained strength, Assad's crackdown has increased in brutality. The Syrian regime has killed at least 450 people since the uprising began, according to human rights groups, and this week sent tanks into the mutinous southern town of Daraa to quell the protests.

So far, the regime's attempts to quash the demonstrations have only caused them to increase in size. Tens of thousands of Syrians came out to the protests this Friday, with crowds demonstrating in more than 50 towns throughout the country. The protests' growing strength has produced a reaction in Washington: Following days of escalating statements, President Barack Obama issued new sanctions today against three of the regime's most notorious officials, including Bashar's brother, Maher al-Assad. The U.N. Human Rights Council also denounced Assad's use of violence against peaceful protesters on Friday, calling for a team to visit Syria in order to "ensur[e] full accountability" for those who perpetrated the attacks.

So who's leading the charge against Assad? The president has accumulated no shortage of enemies over his decade-long rule, many of whom have little in common besides their enmity toward the Syrian president. If he continues his ruthless crackdown, however, it just may be enough to unite them.

E-activists

With most foreign journalists banned from Syria, a small group of Internet activists are playing an outsized role in spreading information about the nascent revolt inside the country.

One of the most prolific is Ausama Monajed, who, from his home in Britain, tracks the death toll across Syria, connects eyewitnesses on the ground to international media

organizations, and links to the most recent gruesome YouTube videos from inside the country. Monajed uses the Syrian Revolution News Round-Up group on Facebook, as well as an active Twitter feed, to distribute information across the globe.

Wissam Tarif, the Lebanese-born executive director of the international human rights organization Insan, also plays an important role in sifting through the massive stream of videos and firsthand reports coming out of Syria. "#Daraa streets isolated. City cut into slices. Information coming out from specific few streets. rest in Dark for 4th night," reads one representative tweet from his frenetic feed.

But neither Tarif nor Monajed are a one-man operation. Both depend on brave witnesses of events on the ground and a coalition of volunteers that translate material and confirm its accuracy. Shortly after the first protests broke out on March 15, Monajed held a conference call with the administrators of the largest Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and activists on the ground to pool their efforts. This coalition, he said, has only expanded his reach. "As anyone who has studied business would tell you, when you merge two groups with 20 percent of the market, you don't end up with 40 percent -- you end up with 60 or 70 percent of the market," he told FP.

Monajed, a professed devotee of non-violent protest guru Gene Sharp, said that he is thankful that Syria's uprising occurred after the revolts elsewhere in the Arab world. It has given Syrians a chance "to learn from these past experiences," he said. "From Libya, for example, we have learned never, ever to use violence."

"Damascus Spring" Veterans

Following the death of Bashar's tough-minded father Hafez in 2000, a brief window of political debate appeared to open in Damascus -- before being slammed shut as the younger Assad consolidated power. But in this abortive moment of political liberalization, a number of regime critics continue to play a prominent role to this day.

Among the best known is Michel Kilo, who defines himself as "a democrat, an Arab, and a leftist, in that order" in Dreams and Shadows, journalist Robin Wright's book about reform in the Arab world. It's not an ideological combination that has endeared him to the Assad regime. Kilo was one of the organizing forces behind the 2005 Damascus Declaration, which called for political liberalization in Syria and denounced the Assad regime as "authoritarian, totalitarian, and cliquish." He was then jailed in 2006 for three years for signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration calling for a normalization of relations between Lebanon and Syria, which then occupied Lebanon.

Kilo has treaded more carefully during the current round of protests. In an article published in the Lebanese daily As-Safir earlier this month, he called for a negotiated solution to the Syrian unrest rather than a revolution. As the protests gained strength and the government crackdown has grown more brutal, however, Kilo's rhetoric has sharpened. If the Assad regime attempts to quell the protests solely through force, "they will be turning Syria into a breeding ground for all kinds of extremist movements," he warned on April 20.

Riad Seif, a businessman and a former MP in Syria's rubber-stamp Parliament, was moved to oppose the Assad regime after his attempts to change the system from within failed. Seif would write that his time in the legislature convinced him that the Assad regime was incapable of internal reform, and that "corruption is a natural result of tyranny and its legitimate offspring."

Seif went on to found one of the most important forums of political debate during the short-lived "Damascus Spring." For his efforts, he has spent the last decade in and out of prison. In 2001, the Syrian regime accused him of "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means" and "inciting racial and sectarian strife," jailing him for five years. He was imprisoned again from 2008 to 2010 for his support of the Damascus Declaration. He currently resides in Damascus, though is reportedly in hiding as the regime tightens its grip on its old enemies.

The Ancien Régime

Bashar's ascent to a leadership role in 2000 was not entirely smooth, and he earned himself enemies among former regime stalwarts that persist to this day. Former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam, an architect of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in the 1990s and a prominent ally of Rafiq al-Hariri, the late Lebanese prime minister, was the most prominent casualty of this changing of the guard in the House of Assad. After being excluded from any role in Syria's political affairs, and following the 2005 assassination of Hariri, Khaddam abruptly resigned his remaining government positions and fled to Paris.

Khaddam has spent the years since trying to organize an opposition movement from France, to little effect. He forged an alliance with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 2006, only to see it collapse in 2009.

Khaddam's failure is at least partially due to the fact that regime opponents detest him for the same reasons that they detest the Assads -- and often for the same crimes. Only a particularly naïve observer could believe that Khaddam's true objection to Assad is his failure to liberalize, rather than his anger at being excluded from the political spoils.

Khaddam's widespread unpopularity has made him a useful boogeyman for the Assad regime as it attempts to discredit the protest movement. Wiam Wahhab, a staunch Syrian ally in Lebanon, revealed on Saturday a check for $400,000 allegedly signed by Saudi Prince Turki bin Abdul Aziz made out to Khaddam's son, Jamal Khaddam. Syria's government-controlled press has also recently accused Khaddam, a Sunni from the restive village of Banias, of sponsoring armed gangs and trying to foment chaos in the country.

Muslim Brotherhood/Kurdish Opposition

The Assad family relies on support from the Alawite population, an Islamic sect that makes up perhaps 10 percent of Syria's population, to perpetuate its rule. Over the Assads' four decades at the top of Syria's political pyramid, they have curbed the political influence of groups outside their clique and brutally suppressed communities viewed as a threat. Infamously, Hafez al-Assad put down a revolt by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 by massacring tens of thousands of Sunnis in the city of Hama -- a lesson in indiscriminate brutality and collective punishment that came to form the "Hama rules" of Syrian politics.

The Brotherhood, though a shadow of the organization it was before Assad's crackdown, has thrown its weight behind the protests. The organization released a statement Friday accusing the regime of "perpetrating genocide" and urging the Syrian people to "not let the tyrants keep you in slavery." Former Brotherhood leader Ali al-Bayanouni, based in London, also penned an article for the Guardian assailing Assad as a "dictator," while disavowing claims that the Brotherhood organized the protests.

Perhaps more interesting than the Brotherhood's support of the demonstrations is the country from which they've issued their denunciations of Assad: Syria's erstwhile ally, Turkey. The group's Secretary General Riad al-Shaqfa and political chief Mohamed Tayfur held a press conference in Istanbul in early April, pouring cold water on the idea that Assad would ever reform Syria's political system and encouraging the protests.

It's not only the Muslim Brotherhood that would be eager to see the Assad regime go. Syria's Kurds, who make up around 10 percent of the country's population, have long been marginalized by the Syrian regime; one of Assad's first concessions as protests escalated was to grant Syrian nationality to as many as 300,000 long-stateless Kurds on April 7. That doesn't appear to have been enough to assuage Kurdish anger -- protesters have turned out en masse in the city of Qamishli, a Kurdish stronghold in Syria's northeast.

New Enemies

Just as the Damascus Spring inspired the rise of a small cadre of regime critics, the current unrest is bound to elevate new opposition leaders to the forefront. For now,

however, many of the organizers remain underground due to Assad's efforts to squash the movement.

There are, however, a few names to watch: Nasser al-Hariri and Khalil al-Rifae, two Syrian members of Parliament representing Daraa, resigned their seats on April 23 to protest the government crackdown. More than 200 members of the ruling Baath Party from the regions around Daraa also resigned during the past week, as well as at least two dozen Baathists from the city of Banias. There are also reports that a Syrian army division made up of conscripts from Daraa defected to the side of the protesters, leading to clashes with a loyalist army unit.

And that's not even counting the thousands of Syrians who have lost a family member or friend during the crackdown. Even if Assad manages to cling to power, these new opponents will be a thorn in his side for years to come -- and a constant reminder that the president's boast of his close relationship with the Syrian people was nothing more than self-delusion.

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Hezbollah's most serious challenge

Posted By Randa Slim Tuesday, May 3, 2011 - 10:41 AM

The popular uprisings in Syria represent the most serious challenge to Hezbollah since the 2006 war with Israel. A regime change in Syria would threaten a major arms supply route to Hezbollah; deny the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas axis its Arab linchpin; weaken Hezbollah's deterrence capacities vis-à-vis Israel; and deny the Hezbollah leaders and their families a safe haven when they feel threatened by Israel, as was the case in 2006. This poses a unique challenge to Hezbollah, which had comfortably sided with the revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. When Hezbollah's Iranian mentor Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour was dismissed from his official post last April because of his sympathies with the Iranian opposition, Hezbollah was silent despite a heated debate inside the party ranks. The uprisings in Syria pose a challenge similar to the one they faced with the 2009 repression of the Green Movement in Iran.

How does Hezbollah really view the prospect of regime change in Damascus? In a recent round of interviews I conducted with Hezbollah officials in Beirut, all those I spoke to agreed that a regime change in Syria would not occur easily or peacefully. So far, Hezbollah officials believe that Bashar al Assad will survive. They believe that unlike Hosni Mubarak or Zein Ben Ali, Assad still enjoys a wide base of support especially in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo. As a senior Hezbollah official pointed out, "Alawites and Christians will not abandon Bashar." The Assad regime and its wide base of support, they said, will fight back. Should Bashar al Assad fail to rein in the protests quickly, they fear a protracted civil war that would engulf Syria, spill over into Lebanon, especially in the north, and destabilize other countries in the region, including Turkey. Above all, even more than the loss of military and financial supply lines, these Hezbollah leaders fear a mortal blow to the "Resistance Axis" which has been central to their place in the Middle East.

While Syrian President Bashar al Assad was initially taken back by the protests, he and his close associates quickly

closed ranks and opted for brute force to deal with future protests. Hezbollah's reading of the Assad speech made on April 16 is that while responding to the people's demands by offering a series of reform measures mainly focused on the lifting of the emergency law, Assad also made it clear that further protests will be met with an iron fist. Hezbollah officials to whom I spoke viewed the internal opposition as old, disorganized and decimated by years spent in Syrian jails. If regime change were to happen soon, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is the only organized political force in the country and would likely emerge as the main power broker in the country.

Hezbollah officials now believe that negotiations between the regime and the protest movement can no longer be expected to occur. They further argue that the critical factor in other Arab revolutions was the neutral role played by the army. In the case of Syria, they believe that the army still sides with the regime. It has yet to show signs of dissension, especially at the top levels. When questioned about the possibility of an internal coup d'etat led by an Alawite army official, these Hezbollah officials discounted this scenario - as one of them put it, chiefly for lack of an acceptable alternative to Bashar al Assad. They also pointed out that both Alawites and Christians fear the consequences to themselves of a Sunni take-over. A protracted civil war in Syria would eventually lead to a break-up of Syria into a number of mini-states divided among the country's three major religious and ethnic groups: Alawites, Sunnis, and Kurds.

Why is Bashar al Assad's survival so important to Hezbollah? Unlike his father, the late Hafez al Assad, who kept his distance from the "Lebanese file" and relied mostly on a coterie of associates to deal with the Lebanese political players, Bashar al Assad owned the Lebanese file and from the beginning of his reign, developed a personal relationship with Hezbollah's secretary general, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah's resistance movement was just one component in Hafez al Assad's toolbox, used to strengthen Syria's weak hand in Arab-Israeli negotiations; he often sought to limit Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics. Bashar al Assad, on the other hand, saw in Hezbollah his most important Lebanese ally and worked assiduously to protect and strengthen its military arsenal to the detriment of alliances his father's regime cultivated with other Lebanese political players. So even if another Alawite were to replace Bashar al Assad, Hezbollah officials believe that the relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian leadership would never be the same.

The end of the Syrian shipment route would not be the most important loss to the party. According to one of my interlocutors, the party has developed alternative routes -- more important is the political dimension. As a Hezbollah official told me last week, "Syria is the resistance camp's gate to the Arab world." For Hezbollah, resistance to Israel and to U.S. hegemony in the region remains their raison d'etre and their principal claim to leadership in the Arab region. Being an indispensable player in the Arab-Israeli conflict without whom a regional peace process cannot be actualized, Syria is the Arab leader of the resistance camp and the guarantor of Hezbollah's leading role in this camp.

Despite the facade of unconditional support for the Syrian regime which Hezbollah is offering, I sensed a level of discomfort among some Hezbollah cadres, especially in the second and third-tiers, with regard to this policy. I heard three lines of argument from Hezbollah officials about the issue of what Hezbollah's policy should be vis-à-vis the Syrian uprisings.

The first argument is that Hezbollah should not display a double standard in its approach to the uprisings in the Arab region. As a party founded on the principles of social justice, fairness, and respect for the people's right to resist oppression, Hezbollah risks compromising its principles if it continues supporting the Syrian regime as it moves to forcibly suppress the yearnings of its people. Hezbollah could lose the respect of a large segment of its Arab constituency if it were to continue supporting a regime that is brutally repressing its own people. After all, it is these same constituencies that threw Mubarak and Ben Ali out of power, are now challenging Saleh in the streets of Yemen, fighting Qaddafi's forces, and suffering in Bahraini jails for challenging the authority of a monarch. While

respectful of Hezbollah's military achievements in the struggle against Israel, these constituencies will not look kindly at Hezbollah's support for another Arab regime that clings to power by killing its citizens.

A second argument suggests that it is in Hezbollah's interest to support the emergence of democratic regimes in the region but not necessarily Islamist regimes. This voice inside Hezbollah argues that, of course, Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood must have a role in the emerging Arab governments along with other secular parties including leftists, liberals, and nationalists. But the rise of Sunni Islamist groups to power, if unchecked by equally prominent secular and liberal groups, would eventually lead these new regimes to espouse the same policy as the Saudi regime vis-a-vis Hezbollah, a policy that is fueled by the age-old Sunni-Shiite conflict in Islam. One of my interlocutors noted that even inside the leadership ranks of Hamas, a party long considered a close ally of Hezbollah, there are members who look at Hezbollah as a Shiite movement that cannot be trusted. And while Hezbollah must show loyalty to the Syrian leadership, Hezbollah should become more vocal in calling for reforms in Syria because democratization would be to the benefit of the Syrian regime and its allies in the region. In this view, democratic regimes, in which power is shared among a variety of political actors, Islamist and secular, serve Hezbollah's interests better than Islamist regimes in which political power is controlled by a Sunni Islamist party.

A third argument in this debate holds that the Syrian people have historically had a deep commitment to the resistance strategy and that it behooves Hezbollah, in case of a regime change in Syria, to start building its relationships with the Syrian people who, in the end, will continue to share with Hezbollah an ideological agenda built around the principles of resistance to Israel and the struggle to liberate Arab lands from Israeli occupation in the Golan Heights, Palestine and Lebanon. Siding with the Syrian regime in the face of mounting popular opposition will undermine Hezbollah's future chances of establishing a relationship with a new Syrian regime if or it takes place.

For now, similar to their stance during the last Iranian uprisings, Hezbollah leadership remains firmly in support of its ally, the Syrian president. It is unlikely that in the near future, we will see Sayyed Nasrallah address the crowds in the Lebanese southern suburbs in support of the Syrian popular uprisings as he did on March 19 when he declared that the Arab popular revolutions will succeed. Yet has Hezbollah begun making contingency plans for the possible overthrow of Assad? One Hezbollah official denied it because, as he put it, the topic is so sensitive and doing so might be perceived as an act of betrayal of a long-standing ally. However, if Hezbollah behaves true to form, contingency planning must be quietly underway.

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