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Report

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➤ Syria's Bloody Arab Spring

Christopher Phillips

When the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia and Egypt were toppled by popular unrest few expected Syria to follow. Despite suffering under dictatorship for over 40 years and facing similar economic and social challenges that had prompted rebellion elsewhere, Syrians appeared to support their young president, Bashar al-Assad, who had cultivated an image as a populist anti-western moderniser. When protests did eventually reach Syria in March 2011, in the southern town of Deraa, they called on Assad to reform not resign. Yet any faith in Assad as a reformer soon evaporated. His security forces responded with live fire, killing hundreds in Deraa and elsewhere, while the president offered only piecemeal reforms. The regime fashioned a narrative that protests were led by criminal armed gangs, intent on stirring up sectarian divisions within Syria's heterogeneous population. Yet in these early stages it was mostly regime-backed Shabiha militia from Assad's own Alawi sect that were responsible for any violence, while most protestors remained peaceful and inclusive. Tragically, as regime violence continued and protests spread, with over 9,000 deaths in the first year, that narrative became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not only have some taken up arms against Assad, but sectarianism is increasing, with the Alawi community as a whole blamed for Assad's excesses.

Yet the regime still appears far from collapse. The opposition, both within Syria and exiles abroad, has proved unable to win over key segments of Syrian society. The international community remains divided on what action to take, with western and Arab economic sanctions only frustrating rather than disabling the regime, while Russia, China and Iran continue to explicitly or implicitly back Assad. After a year of violence Syria looks headed for a civil war between the regime and the poorly armed but determined opposition, with the potential to transform one of the Middle East's most stable states into a sectarian bloodbath.

THE CAUSES OF THE UPRISING

The uprising can be partly explained by examining who has and hasn't been willing to rebel against Assad. Opposition activity has been concentrated in certain areas, suggesting that certain ethnic, economic, demographic and geographical groups harbour more anti-regime feeling than others. For decades, the security state established by Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, encouraged certain social and economic inequalities as a means of divide and rule. Hafez won the support of Syria's working class and peasantry, largely from Syria's Sunni Arabs who make up 60 percent of the population, by building a large socialist state that provided employment and subsidies. He won the backing of Syria's non Sunni Arab minorities – the Christians (10 percent of the population), Druze (3 percent) and his own Alawi sect (10 percent). These groups welcomed Hafez's secular Arab nationalist identity discourse as a means to integration, an identity that he promoted through expanded state institutions, notably the army and the ruling Ba'ath party. While this coalition of support was sufficient to build a popular base, Hafez deliberately excluded some groups: Syria's Kurds (15 percent of the population) and the former Sunni Arab ruling elite, as well as landowners and larger merchants that opposed his socialist policies.

When Bashar inherited power on his father's death in 2000, he inherited a system that was stable but had fostered divisions. Although he enjoyed personal popularity, his reforms exacerbated and increased resentment towards the regime as a whole. Economic reforms alienated the Sunni Arab workers and peasantry, as Bashar moved to open up the economy more rapidly. Syria's GDP grew, but subsidies to Syria's poorest were cut and public sector employment decreased. Rather than genuine liberalisation, those close to power amassed huge fortunes through government contracts and monopolies. This new generation of crony capitalists were visibly excessive, and a disproportionately high number of this elite were Alawis, with Bashar making far less effort than Hafez had to balance the sect's privileged position by promoting prominent Sunni Arab families, fuelling resentment among the formerly supportive Sunni Arab poor.

Some trends, of course, were beyond the regime's control. Rural Syria was hit by a major drought from 2007-10, hitting the peasantry hard, with Assad's inept government exacerbating matters through mismanagement of agricultural resources and corruption. This prompted a wave of migration from the countryside to the over-crowded cities. Syria, like many Arab states, had witnessed a demographic boom in the 1980s that brought a glut of youth to the labour market that the economy could not accommodate. Just when more jobs were needed, Assad's reforms actually shrank the labour market further. Alongside the shrinking of the state in the economy, its role in society decreased, with the influence and funding of the army and Ba'ath party heavily cut, meaning young Syrians received less government indoctrination. On top of this, Bashar encouraged a more conservative form of Islam to be preached among Sunni communities, hoping to restrict the growing regional trend of Islamic conservatism to society rather than politics. However, while he successfully co-opted some, notably Aleppo's *ulema* (clergy) from whom he appointed Syria's new Grand Mufti in 2004, in other areas this revived a sense of Sunni superiority and activism. It is not surprising that mosques and Friday prayers became the focal point for demonstrations, while the quiet of Aleppo's mosques helps explain

that city's relative disengagement from the uprising. In general, the most persistent sources of opposition activity since 2011 have been in poorer religious Sunni Arab areas such as Deraa, Jisr al-Shughour, Homs, Idleb, Douma and Hama, and frustrated youth have taken the lead. In contrast, the areas that have remained relatively quiet are those benefitting from economic changes or co-opted, such as central Damascus and Aleppo, or areas dominated by traditionally supportive ethnic groups, notably the Alawi-dominated cities of Tartous and Latakia.

Despite these long-term structural resentments, the outbreak of the uprising was not inevitable, and several short-term factors played a key role. The most obvious trigger was the toppling of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Prior to 2011, unauthorised public demonstrations of any sort in Syria were extremely rare. With the exception of the short-lived Kurdish *Serhildan* (uprising) in eastern Syria in 2004, opponents of Assad's rule had largely restricted themselves to timid declarations. The empowering effect of the Arab Spring on Syria's protestors was seen in their mimicking of techniques and slogans from elsewhere. The use of Facebook (only formally legalised by Assad in January 2011), YouTube and Twitter to organise demonstrations, as well as slogans such as 'the people demand the end of the regime' and preparing a different name for each Friday of protest were all borrowed from other Arab revolts. The success of Libya's rebels in defeating Colonel Gaddafi militarily further inspired some of Syria's protestors, this time to take up arms and to revert to a pre-Ba'athist national flag, mimicking Libya's reversion to a pre-Gaddafi banner. Having spent decades telling Syrians to be proud Arabs, the regime was taken aback when its people suddenly demanded the same *karama* (dignity) won by their 'cousins' elsewhere.

The other key trigger was the regime's violent reaction. Arguably, even after the first protests, Bashar enjoyed enough personal support that he could have rescued the situation. Soon after the Deraa killings, Bashar gave a much anticipated speech before Parliament on March 30, 2011, yet he neither apologised nor offered any reforms. Subsequent speeches on April 16 and June 20 were equally uninspiring.

In the meantime, the regime's forces, supported by the mysterious *Shabiha* militia, cracked down violently on the growing number protests across the country. The funerals of murdered demonstrators became a focal point for further protests and, when people were killed on those demonstrations, a snowball effect took place. While the inner workings of the regime remain opaque, Bashar's inner circle apparently clashed over the best response to the crisis. Hardliners led by Bashar's younger brother Maher, commander of the elite 4th Armoured Division that has been at the vanguard of the suppression, reportedly triumphed over those in favour of a negotiated solution. The violent response that was settled upon clearly sought to repeat the 'success' that Hafez had in brutally crushing a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and 80s, that eventually led to the massacre of over 10,000 fighters and civilians in Hama in 1982. Although regime hardliners viewed the challenge as a repeat of the 1980s - fighting 'terrorists' - this approach finally shattered any hopes from the opposition that Bashar would be different from his father. While past resentments placed some distance between the president as an individual and his corrupt, tortuous security officials and cronies, his willingness to repeatedly use violence prompted the radicalisation of the opposition, from peacefully wanting reform to demanding regime change.

WHY THE REGIME HAS SURVIVED SO FAR

Parts of Syria have been in open rebellion for over a year and yet, unlike the dictators of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, Assad remains in place. The reasons for his survival thus far are multi-fold. Firstly, key pillars of the regime remain in place. Multiple coups following independence in 1946 led Hafez to design his regime to be 'coup-proof', with four over-lapping intelligence agencies to spy on the population, the army and one another. This has thus far prevented the kind of internal moves by the military that toppled the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents. On the contrary, Syria's military and security forces, packed at the higher echelons with arch loyalists, many from the Alawi sect, have proven fiercely loyal to the regime: willing to slaughter their countrymen in a manner that Egypt's army refused.

Another key pillar has been the continued support the regime enjoys from parts of society. While Assad's economic reforms shrank his social base he retained the support of some groups: minorities that were sceptical of majoritarian Sunni Arab rule - the Alawis, Christians and Druze - and some members of the Sunni Middle classes, particularly in commercially-successful Aleppo. In the early days of the uprising huge regime-orchestrated pro-Assad displays attracted hundreds of thousands. Some loyalists genuinely support the regime, buying the narrative of 'armed groups' backed by foreign powers, or believing in Assad's hollow reforms. More likely is that many fear for their fate if the regime collapses. Christians are wary of the experiences of their Iraqi brethren after Saddam Hussein's demise, with over a quarter fleeing targeted sectarian killings. The Alawis, many of whom contrary to popular belief did not benefit greatly from the Assad regime, also fear for their future, concerned that they will be blamed for Assad's violence. Fear of the security forces may still cow people, with middle class Sunni Arabs aware that they have much more to lose by opposing the regime than the poor of Deraa and Homs. Some businessmen are reportedly playing a double game, declaring their support for Assad, while secretly funding the opposition to avoid any post-regime recrimination. Though this may help individuals in the future, it does little to persuade the 'undecided middle' or the arch-loyalists to switch sides, and the relative neutrality of these key groups has kept protests out of the two major city centres and denied the opposition the visible support of the majority of the population.

The opposition's weakness has also aided the regime. Assad's opponents initially organised Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) to arrange demonstrations in centres of rebellion. These proved effective as they were largely leaderless, meaning that the regime had no ringleaders to arrest or kill. Despite thousands of arrests, these committees continue to be the leading organisers of peaceful protest on the ground even after a year. However, the desire for international backing prompted the formation of an opposition in exile, the Syrian National Council (SNC), in Istanbul in August 2011. Yet the SNC has not won enough internal support. Syria's leading Kurdish

grouping for example, the newly formed Kurdish National Council (KNC), has declined to join the SNC because of the dominant position given to the exiled Muslim Brotherhood, largely opposed by secular Kurds, and the council's base in Turkey, a long-time opponent of Kurdish rights. The SNC is seen as out of touch with events on the ground compared to the LCCs, while older opponents of the regime that have remained in Syria rather than spent decades in exile, such as Louay Hussein or Michel Kilo, have complained of the bullish stance taken by the SNC abroad. Even within the SNC there have been clear divisions, with key activists such as former judge, Haitham al-Maleh, walking out of the council complaining of poor leadership. The issue of whether to seek western military intervention has been particularly divisive. Given the decades of systematic repression meted out by the Baath regime on all opposition, this inability to organise and unite is perhaps not surprising, but it has meant that, despite much goodwill and support from the western powers and several Arab states, the SNC has been unable to secure the kind of armed backing afforded the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Libya.

Also seemingly inspired by events in Libya was the formation of the Free Syria Army (FSA), in July 2011 by defecting Syrian army officers that had fled to Turkey. Its leader, Colonel Riad al-Asaad, stated that the security forces willingness to kill civilians made them a legitimate target and called on soldiers to defect, eventually swelling their ranks to approximately 20-25,000 largely low-ranking officers and soldiers, mostly Sunni Arabs. The bulk of the 400,000-strong regime military has remained intact however, and no whole units or heavy weaponry has switched sides. The West steadfastly refuses to arm the rebels and, despite Saudi Arabia and Qatar's enthusiasm, their supplies are limited. Attempts to take and hold territory that could form the base for opposition military operations have failed, leading the regime to brutally crush rebel strongholds such as the Baba Amr district of Homs. It remains unclear how much control Colonel al-Asaad actually has over the various militia nominally under his banner. US fears that Al-Qaeda may be operating within the FSA are probably embellished, but some fighters are certainly inspired by political Islam, as seen by the naming of some militias after Sunni historical figures. While journalists such as Al-Jazeera's Nir Rosen that have been embedded with the FSA highlight that

most fighters are pious rather than overtly Islamist, there remains the possibility of increased radicalisation as the conflict becomes more violent.

The potential for sectarian conflict has been another tool used by the regime to cling onto power. For decades the regime promoted itself as a bastion of stability for Syria's heterogeneous population compared to the sectarian chaos in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon. At the same time it subtly ensured that sectarian differences between Syria's different communities were not forgotten. It privileged the Alawis, discriminated against the Kurds, and maintained legal barriers between Muslims and Christians. Although Baathist rhetoric spoke of a united Arab Syrian identity, the reality was a more complex manipulation of different identities at different times. The regime tapped into these identities by raising the spectre of a sectarian civil war as soon as the uprising began, accusing the opposition of fostering sectarianism. Yet it was the regime's Shabiha that were deliberately stirring up ethnic violence to scare the minorities and those that feared civil war into backing the regime, for example by delivering sandbags to Alawi areas and warning of Sunni attacks. The protestors emphasised their inclusiveness early on, shouting slogans such as 'all the Syrians are one', but as regime violence continued and non-Sunnis largely backed the regime, sectarian attacks increased, especially in war-torn Homs, and sectarian chants emerged such as, 'we didn't used to hate the Alawis, now we do', or 'Sunni blood is one'. While the majority of the opposition still insist that they are not motivated by sectarianism, the potential for an ethnic civil war increases as violence continues, apparently the regime's cynical survival strategy in the first place.

Further aiding the regime have been the divisions within the international community. Unlike in Libya, military options don't appeal to western powers, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have rallied most of the Arab League against Assad. Airstrikes and a no-fly zone, or even just establishing protective 'humanitarian corridors' around border areas, could be launched from Turkey or Cyprus, but Assad has far better air defences than Gaddafi making foreign casualties likely. Moreover, the FSA are not in a position to make significant gains on the ground as did the

rebels in Libya, and any military strikes could increase instability and catalyse the descent into chaos. Arming the FSA directly, without the major military defections thus far not seen, is unlikely to allow them to pose a genuine threat anytime soon. Moreover, after Libya most of the anti-Assad camp, especially Turkey, which would likely take a leading role in any military action, recognise the need for UN approval of any moves, and that is unlikely to happen.

Russia and China have blocked far more modest moves against Syria in the UN Security Council. Both generally oppose international interference in states' internal matters, and Russia in particular has a long-standing strategic relationship with Syria, which hosts Moscow's only Mediterranean naval base. Additionally, Russia felt that NATO overstepped its UN-mandated remit in Libya and is determined that the same will not happen in Syria. Putin also may also have a personal loyalty to Bashar, who was one of the few heads of state to publically support the Russian leader's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Although Russia and China both endorsed the ceasefire plan of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Spring 2012, which importantly dropped the demand that Assad step down, few expect the regime to permanently halt its violence and it is questionable whether Russia would abandon the regime even if it did not. Despite opposition from the west and the Arab League, who have initiated economic sanctions on Syria, Assad retains important friends that allow him to avoid total isolation. As well as Chinese and Russian diplomatic cover at the UN, with Moscow still supplying Damascus weaponry, long-term ally Iran is offering advice on sanctions-busting and defeating the opposition, as well as purchasing Syrian oil to replace European demand and ensuring its other Arab allies, Iraq and Lebanon, defy the Arab League's trade embargo on Syria. Syria's importance on the fault lines of so many conflicts in the region – the Arab-Israeli conflict, Lebanon, Iraq, Kurdish issues and Saudi Arabia and the West's battle with Iran – has ensured interest and interference from many regional and international powers, but also a degree of caution to avoid pushing the country into chaos.

SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE

Syria is therefore in stalemate. The regime is far from finished but the opposition seems unlikely to give up. The violence looks set only to increase as each side radicalises: the regime believing that the international community's punishments can be withstood, while parts of the opposition slide towards Islamism and sectarianism. With direct external intervention seemingly ruled out, all scenarios for the future appear grim. Most unlikely is that the opposition will break through and topple the regime through popular protest or military success. The FSA is too weak and, even with Western or Gulf arms, will take years to reach parity with the military. Similarly, the opposition seems unable to win enough support to prompt the mass demonstrations in Damascus and Aleppo that worked in Tunisia. The decline of the economy under sanctions might prompt a coalition of merchants and the military to mount a coup against Assad to preserve their status, but the military is constructed to be loyal and have remained so, and they now have blood on their own hands after the crackdown. Similarly, the merchant class have stayed quiet and sanctions elsewhere suggest that the middle classes are more likely to emigrate than turn on the regime – a trend that has already begun in Syria.

What looks more likely is that, to the chagrin of Western and Gulf leaders, Assad holds on, as did Saddam Hussein after 1991. Assad clearly believes he can contain the threat of the FSA and cow his population back into submission. However, it is doubtful that the FSA would ever surrender, and so the conflict could evolve into a long-running guerrilla insurgency. Moreover, Assad's ability to rule as an army of occupation indefinitely is unsustainable both militarily and economically. Thus the final scenario is some form of civil war, which already appears to be breaking out. The regime would probably prefer a repetition of the Algerian civil war when the radicalisation and violence of the opposition eventually won the military government more support than it initially had, enabling it to re-impose control.

Alternatively, incremental opposition gains might erode the authority of the state, leading to a weak central state in Damascus and Aleppo, but militia rule in the countryside, as happened in parts of Lebanon during its civil war. Moreover, with the FSA already looking like it could fragment into different militia, there is a prospect of Syria becoming a failed state. While there remains a slither of hope that an internationally brokered negotiated solution could be found, nothing the regime has done so far suggests it is willing to compromise. With the Assad regime seemingly willing to destroy Syria rather than give up power, the future looks bleak. ■