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The Syrian Crisis: What is at Stake for Regional Players

Mohammad Reza Kiani & Maysam Behnavesh, 10 September 2011

The pro-democracy developments in the Middle East and North Africa bear witness to the stark reality that people's long-subdued aspirations are resurging. President Bashar Al-Assad, who has often boasted of his country's immunity to movements for change, is experiencing unprecedented waves of anti-government protests that have grown increasingly violent in recent months. Although he has struggled to appease protesters by making promises of reform, his efforts to alleviate their wrath have not amounted to anything satisfactory. Instead, demonstrations have swirled around Syria, raising serious questions about the credibility and durability of his regime. As the crisis continues, different regional and international actors have sought to take a range of measures or offer various proposals to bring to a desirable end the potentially explosive situation in Syria, as the transformative developments will advance the (trans)national interests of some at the expense of others, once they spiral out of control or come to democratic fruition.

Whether the Assad regime will be dealt the coup de grace is still unknown. The protests in Aleppo and Damascus, Syria's largest cities, have subsided while no high-profile political or military figure has turned their back on the government and joined the opposition forces - as was the case in Libya and Yemen. This may imply that the beleaguered president remains relatively popular among the higher echelons of Syrian

society, including the military chiefs, influential clerics, business heavyweights, and perhaps portions of the middle class¹. Yet, with the almost daily news of escalating violence emerging from Syrian cities², the prospects for the government to appease the protesters and restore peace and order diminish. What implications, then, a destabilized or even a new Syria without Assad may have for its neighbors? What is at stake, in other words, for, say, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, the primary powerhouses in the Middle East?

Notably as a key regional actor, Iran is viewing the unfolding turmoil with significant alarm. Syria's Assad has been Tehran's closest Arab friend as both governments, more or less common in their political and religious leanings, have maintained close ties since the early years of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), which were further deepened in the face of a common enemy – Saddam Hussein - during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the United States and its Western allies, with which both Tehran and Damascus have often been at loggerheads, provided further cause for their partnership. They have also developed shared interests and attitudes vis-à-vis Israel, Palestine, and resistance groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Add to these the support Syrian leaders have consistently expressed for the Iranian nuclear program, and one may safely argue that the enduring love affair between the Islamic Republic and Syria has been one of a strategic alliance.

In this respect, the potential collapse of Assad regime will disturb the regional but also trans-regional balance of power at the expense of Iran, leaving it virtually alone among an array of explicitly bitter nemeses such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, and implicitly rival friends such as Turkey and (potentially) Egypt. IRI officials have made no secret of their strong desire that Syria under Assad should be backed and protected from what is usually presented as a foreign conspiracy against an Islamic "resistance" front. What underlies this curious stance is evidently the deep-seated fear that any substantial change in Syria that may loosen the grip of Assad at home will similarly loosen the already challenged grip of Iran abroad. Put otherwise, it is the Syrian situation that will in (important) part determine the regional geopolitical meaning of the Arab Spring for

Tehran; that is, as far as the power dynamics in the Middle East is concerned. Apart from this potential strategic loneliness, another sensitive part of the equation concerns, as indicated, Iran's 'resistance' proxies, which in the absence of a solid backer in Damascus and a reliable liaison with Tehran, may be cornered into a precarious position in the region, be forced to compromise on certain issues of regional interest, and pursue more independent policies in the Levant - again at the expense of the Islamic Republic.

The nationwide unrest in Syria has also affected Turkish national interests, confronting Ankara with an acute security dilemma. Though various geographic, political, and historical links tie the two adjacent states together, Syrian-Turkish relations have been strained as a consequence of the crisis of authority in Damascus. On the one hand, Turkey cannot remain silent over the Assad regime's violent treatment of demonstrations, mostly because of the growing popular expectations of its renewed role as a powerful player in the Middle East and Muslim world. Additionally, thousands of Syrian immigrants and refugees, forced to flee from growing insecurity in their home country, have flooded the border areas inside Turkey, posing another grave politico-economic challenge to the Ankara government. It is no wonder that the Erdogan administration has hardly hesitated to protest the massive repression of widespread dissent by Damascus.

On the other hand, however, Turks are deeply concerned about the political aspirations of Syria's Kurdish minority for autonomy, a minority which makes up about 10 per cent of the Syrian population and which has been consistently contained in one way or another by the Ba'athist government. Given this, the potential marginalization of Assad and the ensuing power vacuum in Syria will most probably empower the Kurds and raise the prospects of an Iraq-like autonomy for them. The issue gains more significance when considered against a backdrop where there is no real civil society in the restive country to lead a "peaceful transition" to a stable and democratic nation-state, meaning that Syria may degenerate into a "proxy battleground" for regional and trans-regional powers; what Ankara, but also Moscow and Beijing alike, are averse to

seeing³. Thus, Turkey's pressures on the Syrian regime to institute immediate and structural reforms in the country as well as its refusal to champion the US call for Assad to relinquish power, should be interpreted, above all, as an indication of its strong desire for the maintenance of stability in Syria. This does not mean, however, that Ankara sponsors the Syrian president, rather, that it does not want Syria to turn into another Iraq or Lebanon.

In a similar vein but rather different terms, Saudi Arabia has been faced with a delicate dilemma in the wake of momentous developments in its neighborhood. Keen to contain its entrenched Shiite rival, Iran, Riyadh wishes, in tune with its powerful Western partners, to see Assad off. In addition to wielding greater influence with Sunni communities in the region, the policy has another significant advantage for the Saudi establishment and may enable it to offset the public-diplomacy fallout from its repressive intervention in Bahrain and project itself as a pro-democracy force in the region, as it has been striving to do since the outbreak of turmoil in Syria.

In a recent statement, King Abdullah urged an end to the clampdown and proclaimed that the kingdom would summon its ambassador from Damascus. The King presented Syria with two options as follows: "Either it chooses wisdom willingly, or drifts into the depths of chaos and loss." He went on to call for "quick and comprehensive reforms ... reforms that are not entwined with promises, but actually achieved so that our brothers the citizens in Syria can feel them in their lives,"⁴ as if our brothers in Saudi Arabia had long been feeling them deeply in their lives. This very irony represents a fault zone where Riyadh fears to tread. Riyadh's pleas for reform and democracy are in marked contrast to the type of governance the Saudi family has practiced during its decades-long rule. Saudis are arguably the most stifled peoples in the whole Arab world, with their females still desperate for a much-longed permission from the King and his Wahhabi entourage to sit behind the wheel of an automobile.

Most curious of all is perhaps the Israeli position. The Netanyahu administration has for the most part remained silent on the massive protests in Syria, which may be

accounted for by its desire for a weakened Assad on the one hand and its fear of a more audacious government if the demonstrations succeed in ousting the current regime. In spite of numerous speculations blaming Tel Aviv and its Western allies for the crisis in Syria, Israel would definitely prefer the retention of Assad in power – as he has proved to be a cautious opponent willing to restrain himself in the face of Israeli aggressions – to the rise of a group in Damascus which might not tolerate the Jewish regime's assertiveness. What underlies this argument is the assumption that any potential change in Syria is unlikely to bring to power a Sunni pro-Israeli government like Saudi Arabia, rather, it is more likely to bring about a pro-Palestine one similar to post-Mubarak Egypt.

In such an environment, where competing interests and the national security of regional actors are relevant to how the situation unfolds in Syria, arriving at a coordinated response to restore order to the restive country and prevent the potential instability in the region is highly improbable. The uncertainty has been further complicated by the creation of two opposing trans-regional fronts over the Syrian crisis – the US and EU which have levied harsh sanctions against the Ba'athist regime and are eager to take its case to the UN Security Council versus the BRICS group of emerging powers (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) that are against a Libya-style campaign in the country. All told, perhaps the only viable option Damascus has been left with is to put an immediate halt to the systematic violence it has so far resorted to and make the necessary arrangements for a national dialogue, not only to introduce profound structural reforms but also to share power with the opposition. Assad must allow the Syrian people a greater say in their country's affairs, if he still thinks of having a stake in the Syrian polity.

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Notes

- ¹. Ed Husain, "Why Assad Need Not Fear Gaddafi's Fate," Financial Times, August 23, 2011, Tuesday, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/73d4c680-ccb7-11e0-b923-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz1Vzr6odqv> (accessed August 25, 2011).
- ². Agence France-Presse (AFP), "'At least 24 killed' as Syria cracks down on dissent," September 5, 2011, <http://en.news.maktoob.com/20090001027112/ At least 24 killed as Syria cracks down on dissent/Article.htm> (accessed September 5, 2011); Press TV, "Armed Gang Kills Nine in Syria," September 4, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/197367.html> (accessed September 4, 2011).
- ³. Ed Husain, "Why Assad Need Not Fear Gaddafi's Fate," Financial Times, August 23, 2011, Tuesday, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/73d4c680-ccb7-11e0-b923-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz1Vzr6odqv> (accessed August 25, 2011).
- ⁴. Cited in Brian Whitaker, "Saudi Arabia's message to Syria, decoded", The Gaurdian, August 8, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/08/saudi-arabia-message-to-syria> (accessed August 8, 2011).