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Revolt in Syria: An Alternative View from Iran

Maysam Behraveshteh, 29 September 2011

The Syrian situation has been wrapped in a shroud of ambiguity and complexity, which is largely due to the blanket ban imposed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad upon the presence of foreign media in the country. There are conflicting accounts of uprisings unfolding on an almost daily basis, with some pointing to the outbreak of a popular revolution aimed at establishing democracy, and others crying foul and claiming that a massive foreign conspiracy against the Ba'athist government is under way. The first narrative is advocated by Assad's regional and Western opponents, such as the US and Saudi Arabia, and the second portrayal is vehemently sponsored by his staunch proponents, particularly Iran and Hizbullah.

The Internal Security-Political Dynamics

As a Tehran-based observer who is extensively exposed to the second account of events in Syria, I think the Syrian predicament goes both ways. Damascus's official narrative that Sunni Salafists, foreign terrorist groups, and armed gangs are to blame for the violence is largely, but not entirely, spurious. It mostly appears a matter of projecting the domestic discontent with the regime and its violent clampdown on dissent upon foreigners, which might be partly articulated in terms of the diversionary theory of conflict. No impartial student of international politics can simply buy the story that thousands of civilian deaths in Syrian cities and towns so far – at least 2700

according to the UN – have been caused solely by armed extremists targeting people and security forces alike. If this is really the case and all the government is doing, as it claims, is to safeguard the people against terrorists, why has it then proscribed foreign journalists from getting in and reporting the developments? This does not mean, however, that foreign-supported Sunni extremists have no role in the turmoil and Syria's is a purely democratic revolt against tyranny, much in tune with the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Libya. On the contrary, most of the Sunni autocracies of the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and Jordan, have every interest in the ouster of Assad and his replacement by a favourable Sunni-dominated establishment.

As the chief regional incubator of extremism, Riyadh is home to Salafist and Wahhabist ideologues, who with the support of the central government, are not averse to provoking sectarian sentiments in the largely Sunni population of impoverished Syrian towns where the bulk of the unrest takes place. One only needs to briefly follow the Saudi-funded Al Arabiya news network and work out how King Abdullah and Co. view and would like to represent the crisis. They have made no secret of deploying military forces in Bahrain and most probably in Yemen, which is indicative of the fact that Riyadh is proactively seeking to preserve the status quo wherever it is in its interests and change it wherever it does not serve it well. The question that jumps to mind here is, why have large Syrian cities such as Aleppo and Damascus remained relatively calm; why haven't they experienced massive unrest as we witness in smaller cities like Homs and Dar'a?

The fact is that Bashar al-Assad has both proponents and opponents among the Syrian population. Failure to take both sides of the issue into account – likely foreign sources of provocation and insurrection in this case – is perhaps a principal reason why the representations offered in the Western media of the turmoil appear partly biased and one-sided. Is the Syrian uprising a popular democratic one in pursuit of greater political freedoms, civil liberties, better conditions of living, and self-determination? Yes, it is, but not in absolute terms. It is not purely a case of Al-Sha'b Yurid Isghat al-Nizam (The nation wants the collapse of the regime) as it was in Tunisia and Egypt, but more

complex than that. Rather, it might be safer to argue that the Syrian people are generally discontented with the regime and seek fundamental reforms, as is the case with almost all Middle East nations, but in the face its firm resistance to change on the one hand and the possibility of Syria being engulfed in chaos and civil war on the other, considerable portions of them, mostly middle class, prefer to tolerate the status quo until real reforms take place in the long term. Thus, the argument of some regional and Western analysts that all Syrians have staged a revolution to get rid of the regime is more like wishful thinking. The corrupt, autocratic, but also pragmatic regime of Assad is tolerated, if not supported, by parts of the Syrian society as it is also opposed by a great number of people there.

The External Implications of Syrian Turmoil

The potential fall of Assad and the probable ensuing power vacuum would make a great deal of difference for the Middle East geopolitics as it involves a number of significant actors in the region and beyond. An unstable, insecure, and lawless Syria will likely degenerate into a hotbed of terrorist activity with regional but also trans-regional implications. It will also turn into a sphere of influence or, as a US Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) analyst describes, a “proxy battleground”¹ for the regional and international powers – partly similar to Lebanon – seeking to advance their conflicting national interests in such a strategically significant locus. Geopolitically speaking, there is a lot at stake indeed, which is perhaps why the BRICS group of emerging powers have opposed the US and EU intervention in the crisis and prefer a peaceful negotiated solution to it, that will help preserve the status quo.

Along the way, Turkey is deeply averse to seeing an unstable Syria with an ambitious Kurdish minority that seeks autonomy and that may find itself capable of advancing their separatist aspirations once civil war and instability prevails in the country.² Ankara naturally desires a stable and secure neighbourhood, but as an emerging power poised to lead the Muslim world, it cannot remain silent in the face of growing violence

exercised by the Syrian regime against civilians, which is why the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vigorously protested the way Assad is handling the crisis. Turkey's concerns vis-à-vis the situation in Syria largely apply to Iraq too, which is bracing itself for the drawdown, if not full withdrawal, of American military forces and most probably fears the potential overflow of insecurity and extremism from its western neighbor.

Saudi Arabia's opposition to Assad and her attempts to provoke grass roots confrontations with his regime is largely prompted by Riyadh's strong aspiration to contain its powerful regional rival, Iran, and corner it into a position of geopolitical stasis. Along parallel lines, it aspires to undercut the Shiite crescent in the region, composed in one way or another of the Islamic Republic, Iraq to some extent, Syria, and Hizbullah. What geopolitical advantages may this offer Riyadh? Greater regional influence, increased domestic control, more self-confidence in dealings with the West, and an upper hand in the Muslim world. The Saudi regime can take the strategic initiative abroad while assured of greater stability and security at home. It is a matter of national identity as well as regional balance of power.

As for Israel, contrary to many pro-Assad analysts based in the Middle East, who argue that the turmoil in Syria has been instigated and staged by "Zionists" to derail the resistance movement in the region, one may contend that Tel Aviv has grave reservations as to the fall of Assad regime – who has often proved to be a conservative, cautious, and self-restraining opponent of Israel – and his replacement with a new government as it is absolutely uncertain what type of establishment with what political leanings will gain power in Syria once Assad loses it.³ Tel Aviv would like to see a Damascus meeker and milder than before, and furthermore, favours a Saudi-like or Saudi-inclined regime in the restive country, which should be more sympathetic to and tolerant of Israeli policies in the region, but what if it proves to be a bolder and more assertive revolutionary government like that of post-Mubarak establishment, which seems more likely to emerge in case the current Ba'athist regime collapses. Notably, the rise to power of a democratic, independence-seeking, more resistant, more self-

confident, anti-Israeli, and pro-Palestinian leadership in Damascus will leave Israel more vulnerable than ever; it will jeopardize its national security. The new Syrian government might not stand the continued Israeli occupation of Golan Heights so liberally as Assad tolerates now.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, Syria is Iran's sole strategic Arab partner in the region and appears even closer than Iraq to it, which is why the potential loss of Assad holds enormous consequences for the regional, but also international, standing of the Islamic Republic. First, Iran will be more isolated in a relatively hostile environment where such key actors as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan and United Arab Emirates – all allies, in one way or another, of the United States – play an influential role. For Tehran, this means greater strategic loneliness, lesser room for manoeuvre, and higher susceptibility to compromise on its national ambitions. Second, the potential collapse of Assad regime will deny Iran a safe and reliable communication channel with its anti-Israeli proxies like Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. This might affect Tehran's influence and control over them in the long-run and in consequence undermine their support for its plans to recover its pre-eminent position of power in the Middle East. It might also push them into revising their policies and adopting more independent stances on regional issues of great significance. Third, what is usually overlooked by many commentators is that for Iran, Syria serves as a buffer state which has so far managed to keep its bitter nemeses, including Israel, at bay. Surrounded by a strong US military presence on its eastern and western borders, a rival Turkey intent upon hosting a NATO radar system on its soil, an unreliable Pakistan on its southeastern side, and adverse Sunni Arab states across the Persian Gulf, the fall of Damascus will likely entangle Tehran in a state of strategic paralysis, making it feel more threatened than ever from outside.

The recent statements made by Iranian political leaders and Majlis (parliament) lawmakers who subtly criticize the Ba'athist regime and demand it to show more restraint towards protesters demonstrate the growing concerns of Tehran over the Syrian situation and its heightened awareness of the increasing moral price it pays for

backing Assad. In the words of Mohammad Ali Sobhani, the former Iranian ambassador to Lebanon and Jordan, "we should change our position on the Syrian developments. Definitely, the unilateral support for a country killing its people can have negative consequences for Iran, as it affects Iran's position vis-à-vis the popular movements in the ME [Middle East]."⁴ A key component of Tehran's regional public diplomacy, which gained momentum after the outbreak of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has been its extensive efforts to project itself as a revolutionary proponent of the downtrodden, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, or the dispossessed of the region. Iran's unwavering support for Damascus in the face of the latter's growing brutalization of protesters and civilians undermines this very strategy and dilutes the Iranian government's costly campaign to win the "hearts and minds" of regional nations. The shift of attitude among some of senior Iranian officials towards the Assad regime also indicates their mounting reservations and doubts as to its survival. Notably, in these uncertain circumstances straightforwardness and impartiality will serve Tehran's interests best.

Assad and His Chances for Survival

It is greatly difficult to anticipate the future prospects of Syria's Ba'athist regime. Whether Bashar Al-Assad will survive the uprising or the uprising will survive him, depends on the extent to which his government shows resilience and adaptability and accommodates change and power-sharing. But one thing is for sure, that the more the regime uses violence against civilian dissidents, the greater it exposes itself to instability and vulnerability. Brutality, particularly in such a highly emotionally charged and religiously oriented society where retaliation and radicalization are strong possibilities, imprints its scar on the souls and minds of people, driving them towards radical options. This is what we witnessed most evidently in Libya and see to a similar extent in Yemen now. Systematic violence in the face of non-violent dissent can take its practitioner, which is usually the state, to a tipping point from which return might not be possible.

Will the Assad regime survive? It is a big moot point; it might be too late to restore peace or the status quo, but the government must take action as swiftly as possible to implement structural reforms in the country, allowing for more political participation, civil liberties, economic progress, social equality etc. Yet, this is not enough. Assad should also brace himself to compromise, to share power with the legitimate opposition of the country – not with those Saudi-backed Salafists for whom democracy is a swear word and who should be contained. This said, the current situation in Syria does not allow for much optimism; it is quite unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Even if the dust settles and order is restored by force of gun, Syria will not be the same Syria as it was before the uprising, but fire under the ashes. It is not that people should suppress their demand for change; it is that the regime should change itself for the better, if it does not want to be changed totally. After all, one cannot confiscate a whole country, establish a crony dictatorship, and get away with it.

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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. Maysam Behraves

h & Mohammad Reza Kiani, "The Syrian Crisis: What is at Stake for Regional Players?" *openDemocracy*, September 10, 2011, Saturday, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/mohammad-reza-kiani-maysam-behraves/h/syrian-crisis-what-is-at-stake-for-regional-players> (accessed September 11, 2011).

³. Thanks are due to Dr Mohammad Reza Kiani, a Tehran-based Middle East affairs analyst, for his contribution to this argument.

⁴. Interview with Mohammad Ali Sobhani, "Iran's Unilateral Support of Assad to Harm Iran," IR Diplomacy, September 25, 2011, Sunday,
<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/71/bodyView/16520/Iran%E2%80%99s.Unilateral.Support.of.Assad.to.Harm.Iran.html> (accessed September 28, 2011).