

CURRENT HISTORY

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*“Many in the opposition are now saying
the regime is stronger than they had imagined.”*

Letter from Damascus: Will Syria Descend into Civil War?

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When the Tunisian revolt started last December, Syrians watched with tremendous interest. Many young Syrians immediately changed their Facebook profile pictures, replacing them with the Tunisian flag. Others typed in the status “Viva Tunis” or “All of Us Are Mohamed Bouazizi,” in reference to the fruit vendor who had set himself ablaze weeks earlier, sparking the Tunisian rebellion.

The revolt created a generation of overnight Tunisia fans across the Arab world. The young people knew little or nothing about that country or its leader, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Many Arabs, however, were inspired that perhaps someday, somehow, they could rid their own nations of aged and unpopular leaders in similar fashion—through the street, and not through US assistance or invasion, as happened in Iraq in 2003.

But “Syria is different,” many ordinary Syrians told themselves. Unlike Ben Ali or Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, President Bashar al-Assad was viewed by many Syrians as part of the solution to his country’s problems, rather than as part of the problem. He was young (45), whereas Mubarak was 83 and Ben Ali 75. Mubarak had ruled for three decades and Ben Ali had been in power since 1987, while Assad had held his job for only 11 years. Most analysts believed that Syria would be last on the list of countries to experience the Arab Spring, and that Damascus would be last on the list of Syrian cities to witness disturbances.

The Syrian youth were different, many of us believed, thanks to 48 years of military rule, during which the slightest expression of dissent was not allowed. The only brief exception was in 2001–2002, during the early months of Bashar al-Assad’s tenure. The police state began in Syria on Day One of the Baathist revolt—March 8, 1963—and continued nonstop until emergency laws were ostensibly lifted early in the current crisis, in April 2011.

Assad, moreover, unlike the presidents of Egypt or Tunisia, did not have hands stained with his countrymen’s blood. With the exception of putting down ethnic disturbances in 2004, Assad during his presidency had not killed Syrians. Young people admired him and his wife, First Lady Asma al-Assad, a British-trained banker and formidable civil society activist, and hoped they would introduce sweeping political and economic reforms to Syria.

Assad had reform credentials on his record, having ushered in private media, private universities, and private banks to the country, and having appointed to several key posts Syrians not associated with the ruling Baath Party.

Political freedoms remained nonexistent, however. There was a great imbalance of wealth. And nepotism, corruption, embezzlement, and gross misuse of public office often characterized the ruling elite. The presidential couple had to carry out reforms “slowly but surely,” due to rising objections from Syria’s old guard—senior Baathists who had come to power in 1963 and survived into Bashar al-Assad’s tenure.

On January 31, 2011, Assad gave an interview to *The Wall Street Journal*. The first question, unsurprisingly, was about the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The president’s answer was: “If you

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want to talk about Tunisia and Egypt, we are outside of this; at the end we are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians.” He then said, “If you did not see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and in Tunisia, it is too late to do any reform. Second, if you do it just because of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, then it is going to be a reaction, not an action; and as long as what you are doing is a reaction you are going to fail.”

Assad, many Syrians believed, was different from the Baathist regime he headed, as well as from Ben Ali or Mubarak. Bashar al-Assad would never shoot at his own people, no matter how widespread or critical the disturbances—if they ever happened. He would take preemptive measures and shelter Syria and his government from the unrest of the Arab Spring.

The lessons from the North African uprisings thus went unlearned in Damascus. Tunisia was an autocracy characterized by corruption, family rule, and limited economic freedoms. The regime collapsed in January. Egypt was a country run by one family, it relied heavily on the West, and it suffered limited political freedoms and dire economic conditions. The government there collapsed rather swiftly as well, in February. Libya was a sheer police state—with plenty of oil—also ruled by one family. Its regime collapsed after a six-month civil war. In some respects, Syria was “none of the above.” But in some ways it was “all of the above”—a little bit Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan.

RAGE AND REFORM

Small demonstrations in late February and early March 2011 were written off as isolated events that did not express the mood on the Syrian street. Then on March 15, medium-scale demonstrations broke out in Dara’a, a small, sleepy city on the Syrian-Jordanian border where locals were struggling to get rid of the governor, Faisal Kalthoum, a member of the Baath Party Central Committee, as well as the local director of intelligence, Atef Najib, a cousin of Assad’s. The two men had ordered the arrest of schoolchildren in the southern city on March 6, accusing them of writing anti-regime graffiti on school walls.

The tribal society of Dara’a was furious with the arrests. Yet the government foolishly refused to release the children or fire or arrest Kalthoum or

Najib, believing this would show weakness. March 15 was a Tuesday, and the protests began building momentum until they erupted all over Syria after Friday prayers on March 18. For three consecutive days, the demonstrations continued, with crowds asking for the schoolchildren’s release.

When the regime still refused to comply, the chants became bolder, demanding the lifting of martial law, the release of political prisoners, and an end to one-party rule. The next day, hundreds protested in towns and villages near Dara’a, notably in Jassem, where the first chants were heard in favor of bringing down the government. Similar protests began to mushroom in Baniyas in the northeast, Homs in the west, and Hama in the country’s interior.

The first conciliatory gesture came with the sacking of Dara’a’s governor, six days after the angry protests began. But by then it was too little, too late. Najib was also fired, but not arrested or brought to trial. On March 24, Assad’s political adviser Bouthaina Shaaban insisted at a Damascus press conference that “presidential orders have been given not to fire at the demonstrators.” An inquiry committee had been established, she added, to investigate the Dara’a events and to bring any wrongdoers to justice.

Additionally, Shaaban declared, a new constitution would be drafted for Syria, one that does not include Article 8, which designates the Baath Party as “leader of state and society.” The cabinet of Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Otari would be sacked, she said. And a long-awaited political party law, ending the Baathist monopoly among parties, would go into effect very soon.

HARD REALITY

Today, more than eight months down the road, hard realities have begun to sink in, both for the Syrian street and for the regime. One is that violence and a security clampdown will not silence the unrest. The government has tried this, sending the army to various cities since March, but the use of force has failed to stop the demonstrations. A second reality is that the Baath Party retains its hold on the state and society—its officials are not acting as if they are preparing to let go.

In April, after all, a Baathist, Adel Safar, was appointed prime minister despite speculation that

Syrian authorities remain convinced that the nation is still very much under their control.

this time the premier would be an independent. Safar was nominated for the post by none other than Assad's deputy in the Baath Party. In August yet another Baathist heavyweight, Mahmoud al-Abrash, was reappointed speaker of the Syrian parliament—another indicator that the Baathists were not getting the message.

Now, instead of preparing to leave office peacefully once Article 8 is dropped from the constitution, the leadership is planning to hold a major Baath Party Congress in preparation for parliamentary elections set for February. No thought is given to leaving power any time soon.

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the opposition in Syria is weak and divided. In its present form, beset by petty rivalries, it could not operate a transition government anyway. Its leaders, way beyond retirement age, include excellent writers, ideologists, and university professors, but they are not politicians. The opposition is divided along lines of young versus old, secular versus Islamic, and resident versus diaspora. And all of the leaders combined do not control or even influence the Syrian street.

The opposition leaders have been quarrelling among themselves since mid-March. The younger generation, aged 30 to 40, is more internet-savvy and cosmopolitan, and speaks a language that is attractive to Syrian youth at home. These leaders rely heavily on Facebook and Twitter, and are mostly based in the United States and Europe. They are more radical than opposition elders, and are clearly under the spell of their co-revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia.

The secular opposition is composed of communists, Marxists, ex-Baathists—mostly aging ideologists who belong to a bygone era. The secular opposition does include some attractive figures, such as Burhan Ghalioun, a professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris; the communist veteran Riad al-Turk; and Riad Seif, a Damascene industrialist and former member of parliament who has served prison time for his views.

The Islamists are mainly associated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed for waging a violent campaign against the Syrian government in 1979–1982. Affiliation with the Brotherhood, under national law, is a capital offense. Its leaders are strongly represented in the newly formed Syrian National Council, which is headed by Ghalioun. Indeed, Islamist politicians, along with political Islam itself, are becoming more popular in Syria. A clear example is Adnan al-Arouf,

an exiled Syrian living in Saudi Arabia, who appears weekly on a religious channel called Wisal, spreading anti-regime propaganda that is received very well in his native city of Hama.

After a few failed attempts to create a Libya-like rebel council abroad, the Syrian National Council has received the implicit backing of Turkey, which hosted its launch in Istanbul in October. The Libyan Transition Council immediately recognized the Syrian body as well, as did a large coalition of Egyptian parties competing in that country for parliamentary elections. The opposition to date has refused to sit down for face-to-face talks with the regime, insisting on an end to state violence as its prime condition.

In July opposition leaders boycotted a “national dialogue” conference hosted by Vice President Farouk al-Shara. In their absence, the Baathists got the upper hand, aggressively defending the constitution's Article 8 while arguing that Syria without the Baath would spill into chaos and sectarianism.

Many in the opposition are now saying the regime is stronger than they had imagined. Probably because of the swiftness of the Egyptian revolt, they initially hoped a similarly speedy collapse might

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occur in Syria. “Regimes don’t fall in 18 days,” they are now saying to themselves. “Mubarak was an exception!” Although the unifying theme has been “We want to bring down the regime,” many voices today are calling for changing the behavior of the government, rather than bringing it down altogether.

WAYS FORWARD

Early in the Syrian crisis, one could ask any opposition leaders and they would say that foreign intervention was something they would never accept. The NATO-aided war in Libya was dragging on, with no sign that Muammar el-Qaddafi’s regime was about to fall. When Qaddafi finally and suddenly fell in August, many in the Syrian opposition, most abroad, began asking: “If it worked in Libya, why couldn’t it work here?”

Certain voices began calling for the Syrian revolt to turn violent, claiming that this would drag the regime into a street war, or war of attrition, which eventually would encourage NATO to strike in Syria. According to foreign diplomatic sources in Damascus, however, this idea is off the table, for a variety of reasons. One is that Syrians at home, both ordinary citizens and members of the opposition, would never accept it. Second is that Europe has no appetite for another Middle East adventure. Third is that no resources are available for such a military operation—nothing like Libya’s oil revenues for reimbursing the costs of the war. A NATO attack to help bring down the regime is an option that simply does not exist in Syria.

For his part, Assad since the disturbances began in March has given three speeches and one television interview stressing that reforms go hand in hand with security. Syria was facing a foreign-based “conspiracy,” he said, because of the country’s positions vis-à-vis Iraq, Lebanon, and the resistance in Palestine. Reforms will be made, he insisted, but at a pace that suits Syria rather than the dictates of the world powers. Assad was in no rush and did not seem concerned, not the slightest bit, that regime change might be around the corner in Syria.

The president began his reform program by granting citizenship to 300,000 Syrian Kurds, who had lacked national identity since a controversial census omitted them from Syria’s population in 1962. The Baath government has long refused to give IDs to Kurds, worried they might be inspired to demand autonomy, as they have in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Assad’s move failed to appease the Kurds, however, and demonstrations have been widespread in the Kurdish districts of eastern Syria, where in early October a prominent activist and opposition leader was assassinated. The regime said terrorists killed him; the opposition attributed his death to thugs on the government payroll.

Assad then enacted the political party law that, for the first time in 48 years, allows opposition parties to be established. The only parties that will remain prohibited are ethnic ones (Kurdish parties, for example) or Islamic ones, like the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Baathists came to power in 1963, they banned all political parties. After 1970, President Hafez al-Assad permitted certain parties to operate, rather symbolically, within the framework of the National Progressive Front (NPF), a parliamentary umbrella of socialist parties headed by the Baath. But these parties could not stage their own rallies, recruit new members, issue publications, or criticize anything related to government policies.

Now this has changed with the law that allows for “rotation and sharing of power” and permits new political parties to set up their own media, be it a newspaper, website, or television channel. Yet all parties, including the Baathists and those already established within the framework of the NPF, have to apply for a license from scratch. As of October, eleven parties had applied, but only one had been authorized, “The Syrian Democratic Party.” Based in Aleppo in northern Syria, its founder, Ahmad Koussa, a retired police officer, aims at democratizing the regime through evolution rather than revolution.

Whatever real effect the new party law will have cannot be measured until Syrians go to the polls. Parliamentary elections scheduled for this summer did not take place because of security constraints, and although February 2012 has been set as a preliminary date, it is not final. It would be difficult for any party to create itself, attract a wide power base, obtain necessary funding, and create an organization that would qualify it to run for office and win a majority in the 250-seat parliament. To date the only party with this kind of membership, funding, and structure is the Baath Party.

In mid-October, the president created a 29-member committee charged with laying out a new constitution. The current charter, penned in 1973, includes the controversial Article 8 and also 12 clauses dealing with socialism (mandating a socialist economy, socialist army, and socialist

education). All of these reportedly will be dropped in the new constitution. In addition, according to early drafts and demands from the opposition, the tenure of the president will be reduced from seven to five years and confined to two terms. Currently the president serves seven-year terms and can stay in power indefinitely.

The opposition is also demanding that the parliament, rather than the president, appoint prime ministers. The premier would be named by whichever party wins a majority of seats, and only a parliamentary vote of no confidence could dismiss an incumbent prime minister. The constitutional committee includes respected technocrats and legal minds but not a single member of the opposition. It has been charged with finishing its job by February 2012.

BLOOD IN THE STREETS

So much has happened since March. In late April, the Army was sent into Dara'a and since then has carried out operations in hotbeds of the uprising such as Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zour, and Jisr al-Shughour. The European Union and United States have imposed sanctions on Syria, including a ban on imports of Syrian oil, which will hit the economy badly since 95 percent of Syria's oil exports go to the EU. Banking sanctions have followed, along with sanctions on leading businessmen linked to the regime and top officials in the government, headed of course by President Assad himself.

Even ordinary Syrians were affected when major credit card companies stopped working in the country, and when international banks told their Syrian clients that they could no longer make transfers in US dollars, and could not transfer any funds for business purposes, because of the banking sanctions. Frustration is growing nationwide, even in cities like Damascus and Aleppo, which have been slow to join the uprising because of political, business, and family interests tied to the regime—ties carefully crafted over 48 years of interaction between the political class and the cities' business elites and merchants, who are now suffering because of the sanctions.

Still, the regime does not feel threatened enough to cede power, or to offer far-reaching reforms that might assure its peaceful sustainability. Officials are not looking for an honorable exit by the time

the president's term ends in 2014. Instead, they express confidence that military operations will have succeeded in pacifying the protests. They even insist now, thanks to the will and might of the Syrian army, that "the crisis is over." Given the situation on the ground, such assurances sound not just optimistic but delusional.

Early in the crisis, arms began to appear in various Syrian cities, especially those located on borders like Tal Kalakh, near the Lebanese border; Dara'a, near Jordan; and Abu Kamal, near Iraq. Arms are continuing to pour into the country, perhaps faster now because of the Libyans' success in bringing down the Qaddafi regime in August.

Syrian media warned from the start that "armed groups" had infiltrated the demonstrations. Many people took those reports with a grain of salt because they were marketed through the state-run media, famous for the inaccuracy of their news. Even if Syrian television had reported nothing but the truth, people did not want to believe it because the state-run network for decades had broadcasted news in whatever manner was pleasing to Baath Party officials.

The truth is that armed groups have begun to emerge in some Syrian cities, especially in Homs, striking at soldiers and security personnel. In some cases they are sniping down prominent Alawite figures.

Alawites, an offshoot of Islamic Shiism, represent about 10 percent of the Syrian population, which is majority Sunni Muslim. As revenge killings and targeted assassinations spread in Homs and elsewhere, there is a growing possibility that the crisis will descend into sectarian civil war.

STORMS AHEAD?

Syrian authorities remain convinced that the nation is still very much under their control. Schools and universities opened on schedule in September, infrastructure projects are still under way, employees are still showing up at ministries, state salaries are still being paid, and no critical mass of protests has been recorded in Damascus, the capital.

Although doors to Washington, London, and Paris have been shut, an entire world is still out there, the authorities say, that remains willing to do business with Syria and does not take its orders from the United States. Prime on this list are Russia and China, which recently vetoed a UN Security Council resolution against Syria. Other countries

*The lessons from the
North African uprisings went
unlearned in Damascus.*

that maintain strong relations with Syria, both economically and politically, include Malaysia, Indonesia, Cuba, Venezuela, and of course Iran. Even within the Arab League, though a strong anti-Syrian mood prevails among Saudi Arabia and Egypt, countries like Yemen, Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq have opposed the League's taking any measures against Damascus, such as "freezing" Syria's membership. Meanwhile, authorities believe the demonstrators are growing weary because of fear, death, and so many arrests in recent months.

Can Syria avoid the sort of bloody civil war that Libya experienced? Real reforms might not silence the Syrian street, but they would create new dynamics and a new social contract between the street and the regime. If an irreversible deci-

sion were made to withdraw the army from the streets, end single-party rule, arrest all wrongdoers, combat corruption no matter at what level, set political prisoners free, write a new constitution that heralds a parliamentary republic, and call for early and internationally supervised presidential and parliamentary elections, then the North African storms might still be avoided in Syria.

Such reforms would certainly secure a "soft landing" for the nation and an honorable exit from power for the Baathists. Otherwise, tension and violence will drag on until the economy collapses and a coup or foreign invasion takes place. Syria can still be spared such a fate, but it will take a giant step forward from the government—a step that so far has not been taken. ■