



SYRIA IN DEPTH: A Candid Discussion with Carsten Wieland

by Reza Akhlaghi | on November 18th, 2012 | 0 comments

MIDDLE EAST



Initially sprung as a pro-reform movement with demands for government accountability and transparency, today the Syrian conflict has morphed into a multi-player geopolitical chess game that so far has proved to have no limits in inflicting pain on the players involved. With Iran fearing the loss of a key ally, Turkey aspiring to dominate a post-Arab Spring Middle East, the Saudi-Qatari axis spending billions to unseat Iran as a key strategic player, and Russia clinging tightly to one of its last remaining spheres of post-Soviet influence, the Syrian conflict still awaits a meaningful outcome.

In a recently published book on the Syrian conflict, Dr. Carsten Wieland brings into light many different aspects of Syria's socio-political life and what the future could hold for this conflict-stricken country. Dr. Wieland sat down with **Reza Akhlaghi** of Foreign Policy Association to discuss the Syrian situation in depth and his book 'Syria- A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring', published by Cune Press at Smashwords

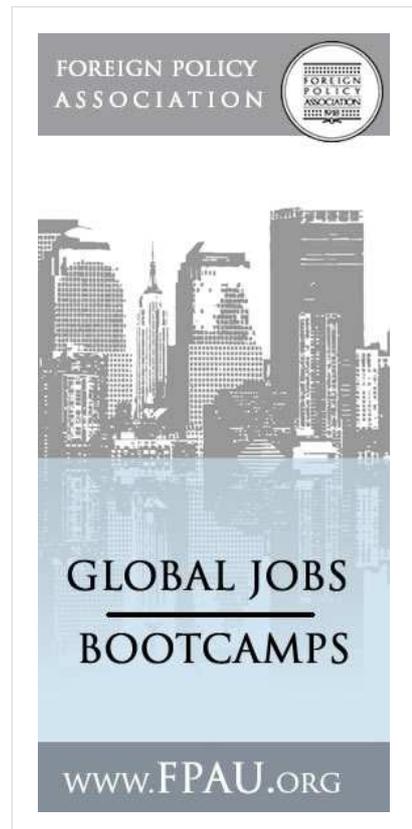
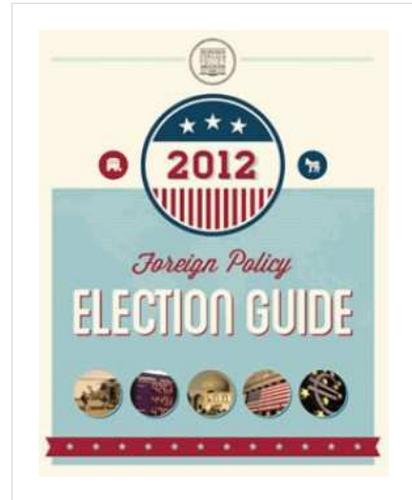
Dr. Carsten Wieland is a senior political consultant who has spent years in the Middle East with the focus of his work on Syria. He is also a political consultant in Europe and the United States. Dr. Wieland is fluent in Arabic.

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Since the start of the revolt in the Arab world there have been competing discourses about what these revolts have meant to these societies. Some have argued they are part of a liberal quest for social freedoms. Others claim they are a harsh reaction to the decades-old indignity and humiliation faced by one-man rule regimes, and to others they represent resurgence in religious-based politics. What do you believe the revolt in the Arab world represents today?

The Arab revolts have their source in social, economic and political frustration, in the experience of stagnation and everyday humiliation by the regimes' authorities. You can find important reasons in the Arab Human Development Report. More than half of the Arab countries' population is below 25 years old and they had very little to hope for.

The Arab Spring has also reconciled the Arab world with the concept of democracy. Whereas democracy was a discredited Western or even neo-imperialist phenomenon still only a few years ago in the era of US President George W. Bush and his missionary way of exporting democracy to the Middle East, democracy has suddenly become something very inherently Arab. The demand for personal freedoms



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and pluralism and even democracy has come from within the Arab population and was directed against nobody else but their domestic rulers. The upheavals were not predominantly ideological; nor were they religious. Arab nationalists had always been anti 'something', but these popular movements were neither anti-Israel, anti-Western, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist whatsoever. They were simply anti-status quo in their own state of affairs.

The revolts did not originate in a resurgent Islam, but they may have resulted in a resurgence of Islam in some aspects. A suppressed Islamic opposition is turning into political Islam and thus facing the need for pragmatism and compromise. Of course, a more religiously marked discourse might emerge for a while. But Islamism has always visited the Arab world in waves. The real test of democracy will come to the Arab Spring states when the first government composed of Islamists -moderate or less moderate ones – loses election and steps down voluntarily. But one has to give this development a chance. The old notion of stability in suppression and stagnation has not been a viable alternative as we have seen.

Since the start of the conflict in Syria, one of the overarching questions asked by many observers and analysts alike is the extent of Assad's influence in making key decisions. How influential do you think Assad has been in making key decisions in this conflict? Is he told what to do by people in his inner circle, or has he had the power to make things happen on the ground?

Bashar al-Asad has been misjudged several times since he took power in 2000. He is no political visionary, nor a courageous person nor a good politician. Nevertheless, he was highly underestimated. Assad's almost insane, lack of emotion, his remoteness from reality, and the excellent preparation of his regime to defend itself has let him endure longer than many have thought. Also, Syria's particular societal mosaic has prevented the regime to draw clear lines in the conflict.

According to reports, Assad is completely in charge in this conflict and supervises the most important developments in the country. Of course, the "security solution" is not his invention only but is based on a clear consensus of the Assad clan that considers Syria as its property to which they will hold on as uncompromisingly as possible. Also, the propaganda war has been much more sophisticated than in other Arab Spring states. The regime has played the sectarian card from the very beginning, which has resulted in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The message from the regime is "it's either us and stability or chaos and Islamism". This mantra that was also a theme of Mubarak has been working for some time. But now Assad will no longer be able to secure his most important asset with which he was measured by domestic and international players: stability. He has lost this asset and he will never recover it again. He is politically dead, but there is no one to follow him. His brother Maher has a real military force backing him, whereas Bashar has nothing but his family clan. But Maher would lack any credibility with the small rest of the population that still believes in a future Syria without Bashar would look even worse than today.

With the U.S. presidential elections behind us and President Obama in charge, what are your key policy expectations as they pertain to Syria over the next few weeks?

It is becoming obvious that the regime will not be able to recover control over its entire territory. At the same time, efforts of the Syrian opposition to find a common political platform seem to bear fruits. These are harsh realities for the regime. But we may still face the prolongation of an ugly war of attrition unless something unexpected happens.

What sets Syria apart from the rest of the countries affected by the Arab Spring?

Although the Syrian scenario looks quite different from other countries, Syria is clearly part of the Arab Spring. The motivations, frustrations, slogans and demands were quite similar to those in Tunisia or Egypt. But later each country takes a different path according to its historical, political and social parameters. One has to bear this chronology in mind to do justice to Syria's opposition and its original aspirations. The militarization of the upheaval started only after months of witnessing the unscrupulous killing of peaceful protesters in the streets. And now we are witnessing the unscrupulous bombing of urban areas on the one side and increasing military fragmentation and – in some parts – radicalization of splinter groups on the ground.

What distinguished Syria from other Arab Spring states was the strength of its minorities and the resistance discourse of the regime that reached far into segments of the Syrian population including parts of the opposition. Many in the traditional Syrian opposition, the Civil Society Movement, were as pan-Arab and anti-Western as the regime. This also partly explains the fragmentation and ideologization of the Syrian opposition today. But because of this resistance discourse Assad felt very safe when the turmoil commenced in other countries. In a famous interview in the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2011 he still claimed to be in tune with his people's aspirations and recommended himself as a model president and reformer to his other authoritarian Arab colleagues. However, the resistance discourse quickly crumbled as soon as Assad turned his weapons inside and – instead of liberating the Golan – shot his own people. The discourses shifted to such an extent that it is now the Syrian population that is calling for a Western intervention out of despair and fear for their lives. Also, other groups that formed part of the resistance discourse in the region, like Hezbollah, lost the sympathy of the Arab street. The heroes of yesterday became enemies of their own populations that they have always claimed to protect

page and individual Middle Eastern country pages.

Reza produces FPA's 'Candid Discussion Series'; interviews with influential policy makers, writers, and media personalities in the field of foreign policy.

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from neighboring quarters. Only a small fraction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) is still supporting the Assad. Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal fell out with Assad in the early months of the protests because he criticized the regime's strategy based on violence. Now he has left his residence after having lived in Damascus for several years.

Pan-Arabism has become a hollow shell. The Baath-Party is defunct. Syria lost the seat of Arab League Parliament as part of the sanctions of the League against Syria in 2011. Pan-Arabism was a vehicle of resistance against colonial powers and real or perceived imperialism. It thus had a freedom component that had been lost decades ago. Instead, Pan-Arabism has been associated with authoritarianism. The resistance discourse collapsed, as described above, when the regime turned its weapons on Syrian civilians instead of directing them against Israel.

The component of socialism crumbled under Hafez al-Assad's rule and collapsed almost entirely under Bashar's. Neo-liberal islands were created in a through and through corrupt system of vested clan interests. The rising urban middle class was favored by these developments, whereas a process of impoverishment was taking place with the cities' proletariat and the rural poor. This opening breach between the rich and the poor contributed to the Syrian revolt as it was strongest in the poor suburbs and provinces. The social balance was about to tilt. That's why the regime, after the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, enacted as first measures a package of social benefits for the poor. So the analysis of the problem was correct but the measures did not help anymore. They came too late and could not counteract the many other grievances of the population.

Secularism in a certain sense was something that had always been upheld in the Syrian polity and society. But the regime played on the mantra of "us and stability or chaos and Islamism". Thus it let Islamist currents simmer as a deterrent. The real enemies, it seemed, were not the religious radicals that increasingly gained a foothold under the Assad rule (as anywhere else in the region), but the real secular alternative to the regime like the Civil Society Movement that was suppressed much more ruthlessly than some Islamist group.

When it comes to the religious mosaic of the country, the regime has played the sectarian card from the beginning of the conflict. It is ironic that precisely the regime that has always used a secular rhetoric was preparing the way towards a sectarian conflict. We are not there yet because in Syria religious groups are not fighting against each other, rather a ruthless regime against large parts of its population. But the longer the conflict drags on, the more likely a sectarian scenario as a self-fulfilling prophecy becomes.

Given Ayatollah Khomeini's disdain for Baathism in the Arab world, how were the Syrian Baathism and Pan Arabism reconciled ideologically and religiously with Iran's strategic goals in the region?

The alliance between Syria and Iran has always been a marriage of convenience. Ideologically, and even religiously, they have very little in common. The only religious-dogmatic link is that an important Shiite Sheikh once recognized the Alawites as "Muslims"; what many Sunnis did not share. This was important for Hafez al-Assad because the Syrian constitution demands that the president be a Muslim.

For Iran Syria is an important hub of arms trade to Hezbollah in its ideological antagonism with Israel and part of the effort to extend political Shiism westwards. For Syria Iran has become the most important ally after many missed chances to diversify its foreign policy but also due to western politics that, for a long time after Iraq war, marginalized Syria despite the regime's willingness to cooperate in the fight against Islamist terrorism. Syria was pushed into the Iranian orbit as the pro-European elite in the regime apparatus increasingly lost out. Now Syria is stuck with Iran whereas great parts of the population have always preferred to look west or north to Turkey.

In your book you refer to a state visit to Moscow by Bashar Al-Assad in 2005 as a turning point in Russian-Syrian relations. What made this visit so important?

Russia has lost almost all support in the Arab world. Algeria and Syria are the only allies left. In 2005 the old cold-war alliance re-emerged in a phase of Syria's isolation after the Hariri assassination. Russia was interested in its military port in Tartous and gaining ground in the Middle East. Now after the Arab Spring and particularly the Syrian case, Russia has lost any kind of credibility in the Arab world, a high price whose effects will last for a long time.

What kind of a post-Assad Syria does Iran envision? Is Iran's internal stability subservient to how events unfold in a post-Assad Syria?

I think Iran does not envisage no post-Asad Syria, but will try to hold on to the regime as long as possible because it has hardly any strategic alternatives. Iran emerged as a net winner after the Iraq war. Now its rising influence in the region is in danger in case Syria becomes a Sunni and pro-Gulf state. This is a disaster for Hezbollah as much as for Iran.

But it would be too narrowly considered to reduce the conflict to a Sunni-Shia divide. The chronology is important here, too. A democratic movement tried to topple one of the best organized and ruthless authoritarian regimes in the region. Later external players and interests started to reshape the conflict

into something else that those people who took to the streets in Dera'a, Damascus, Homs and Hama, never had in mind.

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