

Between Democratic Hope and Centrifugal Fears. Syria's Unexpected Open-ended Intifada

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The Arab Spring has plunged some of the most notorious police states into turmoil. The secret services (*mukhabarat*) of Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Mubarak, and Libya's Ghaddafi have long been regarded as invincible and sometimes even as stabilizing factors by Western strategists. Furthermore, these are the more secularist states in the Arab world. The same is obviously true of Syria where one of the toughest regimes (with a secularist ideology) is struggling for survival.

President Bashar al-Assad's grip on the Syrian people was seen as particularly effective because there seemed to be enough soft power to keep rulers and ruled on some sort of common ground. Perceived stabilizing factors included the personality of the 45-year-old president himself, a notorious security apparatus, calm and stability inside the country, peaceful coexistence of minorities, a – albeit diminishingly so – tolerable gap between rich and poor, and, above all, shared ideological assumptions between the regime and the population, including major parts of the domestic opposition. Baathist Syria, as the last pan-Arab mouthpiece and frontline state against Israel, seemed to have enough ideological resources and more political leverage during times of crisis than pro-Western Arab authoritarian regimes.

This is why President Bashar al-Assad felt relaxed for far too long, although Syria's socio-economic frustrations, extremely poor governance and high levels of repression are comparable to the Arab states in which revolutions have succeeded in toppling the autocrats. In a notorious interview with the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of January, Assad assured the interviewer: »Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence ... you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances.«¹ Opposition figures have attributed to Assad an increasing

1. Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in: *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011; <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014240527487038332045761147124411228>

distance from reality. This interview was the final proof and his public appearances since then have consolidated this impression. Meanwhile, at peak times, the masses in the streets numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Nevertheless, it took longer than in Egypt or Tunisia for a critical mass to be reached. The notorious security apparatus and some key pillars of Assad's legitimacy² have crumbled only slowly. A peaceful coexistence of religious groups and a positive discrimination of religious minorities are among them. Assad has always needed the minorities as a power base because he himself stems from the Alawi sect, a liberal Shia offspring that makes up about 12 percent of the Syrian population. Many Syrians fear instability, chaos and sectarian war in a worst-case scenario similar to that of Syria's neighbors Iraq or Lebanon. So it is the fear of the unknown and the ghost of the civil war of the radical Sunni Muslim Brothers in the 1970s and 80s that make many Syrians hesitate to join the protests. It is far less the ideological Pan-Arab and anti-Israeli discourse that holds Syrians together nowadays.

A member of the oppositional Civil Society Movement reported several years ago that some have complained about Assad's »weak character.« »He holds the opinion of the person he last spoke to.« He was described as very nervous, especially after the turbulent events in Lebanon in early 2005. »People who know him very well from the time before he became president speak of him as a liberal, unideological person. He only became an opportunist after entering the machinery of power,« said the journalist.³

However, attempts to find the key to Syria's developments in a personalized discourse about the president have their limits. The current situation needs a broader approach than discussing whether Assad is a reformer or not, although this is undoubtedly an interesting question.

Contraction despite Easing International Pressure

It is important to remember that the Syrian regime launched another wave of arrests and intimidation against political dissenters at the end

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2. »Los pilares de la legitimidad del régimen,« in: *Culturas*, edición especial: Siria – 10 años de Bashar al-Asad, 8-2010
3. Quoted from: Carsten Wieland: *Syria—Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2006).

of 2009, well before the crisis. The arrest of 80-year-old human rights activist Haitham Maleh was the symbolic start and many other less known opposition figures followed (Maleh was set free by the regime during the present protests). Fear had returned to the streets of the kind familiar under Hafez al-Assad. On another level, economic reforms stopped short of infringing the vested interests of Assad's cronies. The Baath regime has remained a predatory state. Its referral to »social market economy« was not much more than a slogan to please a Western discourse and now the term was dropped altogether in the new five-year plan. The concept was never pursued as a comprehensive program, despite sporadic progress in liberating the economy from its *étatist* and socialist heritage. In addition, public policies have been a disaster in practice.⁴

Social shocks arising from selective economic reforms have aggravated the precarious situation. This added to the frustration due to corruption and the ineffectiveness of the government apparatus that has failed to cater to the needs of the many young and unemployed Syrians, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Not surprisingly, one of the first measures of the Assad regime in response to the protests in North Africa was to increase salaries, subsidies, and social benefits. In this sense, the regime reacted quickly. But the measures turned out to be of little use and they are detrimental to the government's long-term reform agenda. Political survival has become the first priority.

Nevertheless, it remains a crucial question whether the Assad government will be able to meet people's economic expectations, especially those of the traditional Sunni merchant class that had been won over by Hafez al-Assad.⁵ But reports suggest that this pillar is crumbling, too. While publicly sticking to Assad, parts of the Sunni merchant class are said to have started secretly to finance the protesters. As soon as the protests ruin the economy, win-win alliances will break apart and only primordial ones will remain.

Reform has also stalled with regard to civil society. »Non-governmental organizations« are allowed to work only within the limits of the Syria Trust, an umbrella organization founded in 2007 and headed by

4. For example, according to the oppositional figure Louay Hussein, the government issued »18 contradictory laws to regulate fuel and diesel prices.« Interview with the author in Damascus, October 31, 2010.

5. For more on the fragile alliance between the regime and the Sunni merchant class, see: Salwa Ismail: Changing Social Structure, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria, in: Fred H. Lawson (ed.): *Demystifying Syria* (London 2009).

Assad's wife Asma. Promoting so-called NGO activity served to plug into the discourse of Western countries and their donor organizations. This effort was also intended to re-appropriate the term »civil society« which was a stigmatized word, associated with Syria's oppositional Civil Society Movement.

Since 2005, a new NGO law has been in the government's drawers but it is uncertain when it will be enacted.⁶ Other reform laws such as a party law that would end the constitutional predominance of the Baath Party and permit parties apart from the National Progressive Front synchronized under the Baath umbrella have been shelved for many years, too. Now these reforms are again being discussed. But since this is only being done under extreme pressure in a context of escalating violence and regime survival the talk about reforms has lost any credibility.⁷

To sum up, despite successes in Syria's regional and international foreign policy and despite the fact that Syria was emerging from the international isolation that it has been in since the Iraq War of 2003, domestic politics did not benefit from the easing of political pressure on the regime. In other words, Assad was by no means on a serious reform track when the upheavals broke out, even though some Western politicians preferred to see it that way. Some of it was wishful thinking in pursuit of a policy of dragging Syria away from its ally Iran and keeping Israel's northern flank stable. This made geopolitical sense but the price was that some Western diplomats sidelined their human rights agenda in talks with Syrian representatives.

In late March 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: »There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress from both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer.«⁸ This tone was dramatically different not only from the condemnations of the Libyan regime, but also from rhetoric once employed by President George W. Bush. In January 2011, US President Obama had sent the first US ambassador to Syria – against the will of Congress – after a gap of more than five years in order to take up the dialogue at eye-level and to gain political leverage: just in time, as it turned out.

6. »Syrian Civil Society Empowerment 2010: New Directions for Syrian Society,« by Stephen Starr, in: *Forward Magazine*, March 3, 2010, Issue 37.

7. The new party law was passed at the end of July, 2011, but must still be voted by parliament.

8. Hillary Clinton on CBS programme »Face the Nation« on March 26, 2011.

In an unusual move, Ambassador Robert Ford supported the Hama demonstrations with his physical presence in mid-July 2011. This was a sign that the US administration no longer puts much value on long-term working relations with the Syrian regime. The oppositional Local Coordination Committee in Hama helped to guarantee Ford's security. Who would have thought that one day a US representative would be more welcome and more secure in a Syrian city than a representative of the Syrian regime?

Shortly afterwards, Clinton made clear that the USA had changed sides when she claimed that Assad had lost his legitimacy to rule. »President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power,« Clinton said.⁹ Within only three months Assad had lost yet another important opportunity to become part of the solution instead of remaining part of the problem in Syria and the troubled region.

Domestic and Foreign Policy Progress in Tatters

Assad's last remnants of credibility as well as his foreign policy successes of the past three years lie in tatters, including the often proclaimed »family bonds« with Turkey. Even if he survives the protests, it is improbable that he will ever recover politically and be able to rebuild the foreign policy environment that he had so arduously worked to achieve. He will have to rely ever more on his staunchest ally Iran and on Hezbollah, whereas during his father Hafez's times it was rather Hezbollah that relied on Damascus. If at all, Bashar al-Assad will rule a Syria that is crippled, domestically and internationally. This is dangerous since the tectonic plates of Iranian and Saudi Arabian interests pass through the Levant. Frictions will increase.

Domestically, Assad will be much more dependent on the hardliners of his clan, especially his brother Maher al-Assad who commands the fourth branch of the presidential guard and who is said to be responsible for the bloody crackdowns on the demonstrators from Dera'a to Jisr al-Shugur. Cracks within the Alawi ranks of civil and military power in the face of escalating atrocities against civilians are visible and likely to

9. See: www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-07-11/clinton-says-assad-lost-legitimacy-after-mob-attacks-embassy.html

widen. Even an internal coup d'état cannot be excluded or at least brutal infighting within the Assad clan. Already once before, in 2005, after the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and Syria's forced withdrawal from Lebanon, Assad had to fight against attacks that he was unable to defend the interests of his country. Rumours of a putsch in the presidential palace circulated at that time. Compared to the post-Hariri scenario, today's situation is much worse.

Until the »intifada« of 2011 – as Syrian oppositional figures call it in Arabic¹⁰ – it seemed that Assad had overcome his weakness as a political leader. In light of Iran's post-election Green Revolution in summer 2009 Assad's grip on power looked even stronger than that of his ally, Iranian President Ahmedinejad. Some have called Assad a tragic figure who never wanted to become a politician in the first place and who has missed so many chances during his eleven years in power.¹¹ Others see in the protests the logical fall of Assad since he never had the political vision and courage to embark on significant changes that could threaten the predominance of the Baath regime and the Assad dynasty.

Louay Hussein, secular editor and leading figure of Syria's domestic opposition, shed light on the differences between Bashar's and Hafez al-Assad's regimes in a conversation in October 2010. According to Hussein, the father could build his legitimacy on two pillars: social development and the liberation of occupied territories (or at least the attempt to do so). He had the power to control the Islamists and was ready to fight. »Bashar obtained power on a silver platter,« Louay said. He lacks the two pillars of his father. The younger generation have »no knowledge and vision of the state's identity. They are playing around. They don't know what losing means because they didn't fight for anything and didn't face any real challenges.«¹²

Now the moment to fight has come unexpectedly, and it turns out that the system is exclusively based on hard power in its pure form, that is, on the eradication of dissenters and threats.¹³ The circle of persons that

10. A term used, for example, by Sadiq al-Azm to describe the Syrian revolt.

11. Carsten Wieland: »Assad's Lost Chances,« in: *Middle East Research and Information Project*, April 13, 2011.

12. Interview with the author in Damascus on October 31, 2010.

13. A good analysis of the Assad regime's handling of resistance is the short piece by Salwa Ismail: »Silencing the Voice of Freedom in Syria,« in: *Index on Censorship*, July 8, 2011 (www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/07/silencing-the-voice-of-freedom-in-syria)

the Assad clan can trust is contracting more and more, to the point that it may be difficult in the future to recruit enough staunch and qualified loyalists to effectively run the country. The circle of trust has been narrowing for a number of years.

The regime has developed increasingly primordial features; it has become more Alawi compared to Hafez's times when Syria happened to be ruled by an Alawi but was not an »Alawi state«.¹⁴ However, with rising stakes in the conflict and increasing brutality it is above all Alawis (and to a lesser extent Christians, Druze and Ismailis) who are exposed to existential fears, although some Alawis figures count among important representatives of the opposition.

Interestingly, the second layer of regime functionaries after the Alawi elite comprises personalities from the Houran (especially from the south-western town of Dera'a), including Vice President and long-time foreign minister Farouq al-Shar'a, who is a Sunni. Given the cruel events in Dera'a, this second layer of functionaries in the regime apparatus may prove less reliable in the future. Shar'a is still a man of the regime without any doubt but he is rumoured to have had differences of opinion with Bashar and especially with Maher al-Assad on the crackdown in Dera'a. The communiqué by the foreign Syrian opposition after their conference in the Turkish city of Antalya in June 2011 called for power to be handed over to the Vice President.

The System Is Failing

As already mentioned, it is necessary to go beyond Assad's personality to explain the current events. On closer inspection, it is no surprise that these events have hit the most oppressive states in the Arab world. Structurally, they have no room to maneuver with regard to absorbing societal and political shocks and the mindset of the authorities at all levels precludes deescalating strategies. Remember that the crisis in Syria began with a few children who painted anti-government slogans on a wall in Dera'a. Instead of handling this incident with kid gloves in light of the revolutionary environment in the neighborhood, the secret police

14. A good account of the political and sectarian discourses during the rise of the Baath Party can be found in: Nikolaos van Dam: *The Struggle For Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'th Party*, New York 2011 (4th edition).

arrested the children and put them in prison. This triggered the first demonstrations for their liberation, which was answered by shots that caused the first deaths, which triggered funeral demonstrations, which in turn caused more clashes, deaths, and funerals.

This sheds a more systematic light on the course of events and deflects the debate on whether Assad is personally responsible for each and every shot that was fired; for each child that was tortured and mutilated; for every armed attack of the *shabbiba* Alawite gangs to incite sectarian hatred; and for cattle and fields that were burned to starve dissenting villagers. Since 2000, Assad has reshuffled almost all important positions in the *mukhabarat*, the military and government bureaucracy. Whether he is still in full control during this crisis does not really matter; he is responsible for the »security solution.« The protests have triggered typical responses on the part of a thoroughly authoritarian culture with a cruel history of civil wars and crackdowns. Survival is a zero-sum game. The system is a complex web of control and counter-control, suspicion, jealousies and overlapping competences. This is a mix conducive to violence and chaos.

The political level – in other words, Assad and his government in their discourse – has started from the beginning to criminalize and primordialize¹⁵ the opposition's motives. A number of armed gangs have popped up to fulfil this prophecy, whether with sectarian slogans or simply with criminal violence. This also happened in Tunisia and, especially, Egypt but to no avail. The peaceful character of the demonstrators and their cross-sectarian solidarity prevailed in the minds of the revolutionaries and in the international media. This may be harder to recognize in Syria where for a long time activities have been decentralized, with little organization and few political slogans. In the country, sectarian cleavages can be easily instrumentalized due to a more complex mix of minorities and a governing minority regime, although in good times the Syrian polity proved more inclusive than that of other Arab states. It is a bitter irony that the same regime has now chosen sectarian strife as its emergency plan for survival, as leaked documents and the regime's counter-insurgency practice have shown.

Secular Syrians, and especially Alawites, complain about the rising influence of radical Sunni groups, of Saudi influence, and of ever more audacious preachers who use their exposure in the only legal civil public

15. In this context the primordialization of the conflict means to reduce it to sectarian thinking and incitement.

spaces – the mosques – to incite an open religious antagonism that has been absent from Syrian streets since the Assads have been in power. Witnesses report that Sunni groups have allegedly entered Christian villages and threatened them to make them join the protests. In Homs and probably other places as well the *takbir* (the call »Allahu akbar« – »God is most great«) called from balcony to balcony at night has turned into a battle slogan for some protesters. In the early stages of the protests, the regime made concessions to conservative Sunnis by releasing Islamists from prison, lifting the ban on the *niqab* (full veil) for school teachers, and launching a new religious program on state TV.

All this frightens religious minorities and secular Sunnis who fear religious radicalism more than a superficial secularist ideology and Baathist authoritarianism, regardless of the fact that they despise the regime's violence as much as anyone else. Several key Christian clerics have declared their support for the regime, although some Christians have joined the protests¹⁶ and some key oppositional figures are Christians.

Having hinted at Islamic zeal as a frightening prospect for many Syrians, it must be mentioned, too, that, on the other side, even Christians and secular people meet in mosques for the purpose of assembling after Friday prayers, Muslims in Hama invited Christians to join their demonstrations, and Muslims and Christians went out to demonstrate harmony, as has been reported from Damascus, to mention only a few examples.

Despite the fact that the conflict has nothing to do with religion – as little as in Tunisia or Egypt – a certain religionization is taking place through the violent strategies applied by regime forces. Amateur videos of battered minarets or aged imams beaten up inside their mosques contribute to this impression. These images mirror the worst fears of the Sunni population as much as the other incidents mentioned above scare the minorities.

Opposition between Rivalry and Reflection

So far, the Syrian regime has been much more effective than those in Tunisia or Egypt in maintaining a coherent environment of propaganda

16. »Still bubbling: In Syria's third-biggest city people fear for the future,« in: *The Economist*, June 16, 2011.

in the exclusive state media. This is due to Syria's late and highly selective opening up towards modern media and to its consequent ban of foreign journalists in the country.

Nevertheless, the Syrian scenario provides ample ammunition for propaganda from all sides. There is some truth in the fact that Syria's protests are probably more influenced from abroad than those in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Yemen, simply because there are more international interests at stake. Apart from regional powers, such as antagonists Iran and Saudi Arabia, Syrian players are also meddling from a distance. Many oppositional figures have been forced into exile over the years and are now turning up the heat. The external opposition has traditionally been more emphatic in its demands for regime change. The protagonists are diverse. They include serious intellectuals and scholars in exile in Washington, London, Paris and elsewhere, as well as figures with a highly controversial record, such as Syria's long-time vice president and hardliner Abdul Halim Khaddam, who defected to Paris shortly after the Hariri assassination in 2005. Another person who has a score to settle with Bashar al-Assad is his uncle Rifat who is said to have supporters in the coastal town of Baniyas, one of the hotbeds of the early protests. An ugly dynastic power struggle is part of a post-conflict scenario. Rifts within the Assad clan will deepen, also between Bashar and his brother Maher or his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat.

Syria's opposition abroad showed remarkable maturity at its conference attended by 300 participants in Antalya. The participation of three tainted protagonists – Abdulhalim Khaddam, Rifat al-Assad and Farid al-Radry, a self-proclaimed oppositional leader who used to be supported by George W. Bush's neoconservatives – was rejected. Thus, the opposition abroad avoided the mistakes of 2006 when they granted Khaddam ample scope and put their credibility inside Syria at stake.

Interestingly, the conference was financed partly by the Sanqer family that had regained the representation of Mercedes Benz in Syria after a fight with Assad's cousin and tycoon Rami Makhlouf. Ihsan Sanqer is an old Damascene Sunni merchant and member of parliament in the 1990s. He favours a social market economy and a moderate form of Islam. In an interview in 2004 he stated: »In Syria, conservative Islam is only a reaction to socialism, a reaction to the regime. It doesn't belong to our culture.« Looking at the AKP government, he said: »Turkey is a very good example for the whole of the Middle East.« Already at that time Sanqer was playing with the idea of founding an opposition to the ruling Baath

Party. »I'm just waiting for the chance; I don't want to burn myself out too early.«¹⁷ Now his time may have come.

Another indication of maturity and moderation of the oppositional conference in Antalya was the fact that different ideological streams found a common voice, similar to the time when the Damascus Declaration was drafted in 2005 when secular and leftist forces (temporarily) united with the exiled Muslim Brotherhood in London. Once again in Antalya the Muslim Brothers accepted the notion of a secular state. This is less surprising with reference to Syrian society and history. The country has a long tradition of religious moderation and tolerance that goes far beyond the takeover of power by the Baath regime in 1963. The country also enjoyed intermezzis of civilian rule during its turbulent phase after independence in the 1940s and 1950s. One of the most respected prime ministers, Fariz al-Khoury, was a Christian.¹⁸ Although most civilian cabinets were short-lived, Syria has indeed some tradition of democratic thinking and articulation.

If the opposition manages to link up with this heritage, the alternative for Syria would be more hopeful than the regime is trying to portray it (a hotbed of Islamism, chaos and crime). The problem is that Syria's opposition inside the country is not homogeneous either and not necessarily linked to the opposition abroad. The conference of Syria's domestic opposition in the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus on June 27, 2011, in which Louay Hussein and Michel Kilo played key roles, was a step forward in this regard. Critics said the regime surprisingly allowed the conference in order to split the opposition. But in their final declarations the conference of the domestic opposition formulated goals very similar to those of the opposition abroad, although they stopped short of demanding Assad's immediate resignation. The call for free elections under these circumstances, however, is likely to have the same effect. Both external and domestic oppositional wings have increased efforts to coordinate themselves and connect their meetings via teleconferences, although the Damascus meetings have been disrupted by the secret services after the extraordinary Semiramis experiment. The secular intellectual branch of Syria's opposition that drafted such important documents as the Manifesto of the 99 and the Manifesto of the 1,000 (both in 2000)

17. From: Carsten Wieland: *Syria—Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant*, Seattle: Cune Press, 2006, pp. 133–134.

18. For more on Khoury's biography see: Moubayed, Sami: *Steel and Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900–2000*, Seattle: Cune Press, 2006, pp. 277 ff.

or the Damascus Declaration (2005) grew out of Syria's Civil Society Movement. Born in the Damascus Spring of 2000/2001 personalities such as the Christian journalist Kilo or the Syrian philosopher Sadiq al-Azm have cultivated the intellectual *überbau* of the opposition but have been surprised by the actual events themselves that are determined by »the street« and not by discussions in tea houses.

Nevertheless, al-Azm draws a parallel between the Arab Spring of 2011 and the Damascus Spring ten years ago: »Charter 99 contained all the slogans, demands and aspirations expressed wherever there is an intifada now. The Damascus Spring created the first documents that emphasized freedom, democracy, human rights, civil society and so on, and avoided the typical attacks on Israel. The Damascus Spring was a dress rehearsal of the Arab Spring.« The philosopher, who lives now in Beirut, has observed a maturation of Arab society during the upheavals: »It was the regimes that represented themselves as representatives of enlightenment and state rationalism, and suddenly they themselves clung to conspiracy theories and kept repeating them mindlessly, not the simple masses who had always been blamed for falling prey to conspiracies.«

The »people in the street« have also learned to avoid the »Arab reflex« of infighting and rivalries, as al-Azm terms it. He calls on the opposition in Syria to unite: »The blood of Syrians is boiling. We should not exclude one another. Who can claim to have a superior understanding of how history will go?«¹⁹

Logistical challenges, but above all personal and ideological ruptures prevailed in the heterogeneous Syrian opposition inside and outside the country. Innumerable committees and councils were formed, a dozen conferences have taken place, mostly in Turkey, and old rifts have reappeared: not only Islamism versus secularism but also the Arab-Kurdish antagonism emerged again. When the »National Transition Council« (later called the »Syrian National Council«) was announced at the end of August 2011, most of its members were surprised when they found their names on the list. It is a rocky path while communication within Syria has become almost impossible if not perilous. Nevertheless, a common denominator within the different opposition groups has been gradually growing. Three No's have materialized: No to Bashar al-Assad, no to sectarianism, no to foreign intervention except for the protection of civilians.

19. Interview with the author in Berlin on July 8, 2011.

At the beginning of October, at another opposition conference in Istanbul, an important breakthrough was obviously achieved to unite the different opposition fronts and branches. The head of the recently founded Syrian National Council (SNC), the Paris based intellectual Bourhan Ghalioun, announced that more key opposition groups have joined the common platform, such as the Damascus Declaration (without Michel Kilo so far), the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, several Kurdish and Assyrian groups, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, Local Coordination Committees, the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution, and other grassroot movements. The extremely difficult effort to unite the opposition on a common platform was less necessary for the revolution on the ground than for the purpose of assuring international support.

When the upheavals broke out in Syria, from the old guard of the Damascus Spring it was Riad Seif who most visibly took part in the anti-government demonstrations in the streets of Damascus. The ailing entrepreneur and former member of parliament has spent most of the past ten years in prison. He had withdrawn from the executive leadership of the Damascus Declaration and originally planned to lead a quieter life, as he said in November 2010.²⁰ But as the events unfolded, he could not remain quiet. Now he is listed as a deputy of Bourhan Ghalioun within the SNC. If Seif had been included in a reform government at an earlier stage this would have silenced half of the opposition, says al-Azm.²¹ But Assad missed another of many chances.

The thousands of demonstrators who are taking to the streets have had little to do with the Civil Society Movement, nor with the opposition abroad. Though efforts are being undertaken to narrow the gaps. The demonstrators in the street are driven by heterogeneous motivations, ranging from social and economic frustration to the demand of civil liberties. To a much lesser extent some Sunni Islamist currents are likely to make use of the situation. Their protagonists believe that the moment has come to put an end to the »heretical« Alawite regime and to avenge the massacre of Hama in 1982. At that time Hafez al-Assad was clamping down on the militant Muslim Brotherhood in a bloody civil war that cost many thousands of lives. During the present protests anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah slogans have also been heard. This indicates simmering

20. Interview with the author in Damascus on October 23, 2010.

21. Interview with the author in Berlin on July 8, 2011.

Shia–Sunni frictions familiar to Iraqi and Lebanese scenarios. Reports that Hezbollah is relocating arms from former safe heaven Syria to Lebanon show what a radical change has taken place in the region. It will be hard work for Syria's moderate opposition to set aside old rivalries – especially between exiled and domestic groups – and to develop a counterweight to radical and sectarian tendencies. Syria's intellectual opposition has always been fairly constructive and offered Assad several opportunities to jump on the reform wagon and become part of the solution instead of remaining part of Syria's problem. Even in times of polarization and cruelty, the Semiramis conference had not shut the door to dialogue.²² But Hussein and Kilo have made it clear that they would not accept any offer of the regime to embark on talks (under the auspices of Vice President al-Shara) unless the violence stops and all political prisoners are released. The participants in the Semiramis conference, many of whom share the regime's secularism and foreign policy principles, were the last domestic window of opportunity for Assad, whose political options have been shrinking day by day. Meanwhile, with escalating regime violence against civilians even moderate opposition figures are hardly ready anymore to embark on any dialogue.

However, no charismatic central figure has emerged so far who could lead a transition with determination. Nor is there any institution that could take over the task, like the military in Egypt or Tunisia. If Assad survives in a wounded and crippled country, Syria's ruined economic and foreign policy options will be a heavy burden for him. The Assads have

22. Kilo's arguments for a peaceful and gradual transition, which brought heavy criticism from more radical opposition forces, can be read in: Michel Kilo: »Yes, there must be a political solution,« in: *As-Safir*; April 16, 2011 (according to Mideast Wire). »This civil/consensual Syrian possibility implies two things,« Kilo wrote in the leftist independent newspaper, »the regime's abstinence from relying on the security related solution in confronting the current situation; and the abstinence of the current movement from calling for an end to the regime. There must be a solution entirely based on a global national dialogue that would push away these two situations in order to prevent the country from turning into a war zone ... No matter who emerges victorious, the cost of the confrontation will be deadly for the regime ... In addition, [there will also be a hefty price to pay] for the other side, which must realize that erroneous calculations will not lead to the desired freedom but rather to the collapse of Syrian society's unity in addition to the destruction and dismantling of the state. The only side that could benefit from a security solution ... will be Israel.«

their backs against the wall. A radical perestroika at this point will destroy the regime. Syria's future holds three major alternatives: A contraction of the regime as an oppressive police state in international isolation, a state in chaos and sectarian conflict, or a state of cautious transition towards pluralism. The old Syria is gone in which the regime could play around with half-hearted reforms while counting on the patience of its people, having lulled them into stability, using hopelessly diluted and contradictory pan-Arab and anti-Israel rhetoric.

Assad is a president who has ruled his country under international sanctions most of his tenure. He will not fear international pressure, even less when it remains verbal. He is used to the fact that UN Resolutions do not necessarily matter. However, additional sanctions like the oil embargo or the freezing of international assets will start hurting the regime and its population in times of rising security costs. Other factors are likely to aggravate international sanctions: The Syrian regime has lost valuable allies such as Turkey, has fallen out with a more democratically minded Arab League, and has been straining its relationship with staunch supporters such as Iran or Russia. The latter two have publicly uttered criticism and called for Asad to put his reform pledges into practice. However, Russia – interested in widening its presence at the Syrian Mediterranean coast – has so far stopped short of supporting UN Security Council Resolutions that could open the way for a Libyan-style intervention to protect the Syrian civilian population. The Iranian government for its part is weighing its bets and is wondering how much more money and personnel it makes sense to send to Syria as assistance in oppressing the upheavals while the Assad government looks incapable of solving the conflict.

In earlier times, on the international stage the Assads had understood very well to play out one camp against another and extract resources from a clever choice of foreign policy alliances. More recently, Western countries had been increasingly ready to swallow Syria's poor human rights record while searching for the key of regional peace and stability in Damascus. Until 2011 nobody was really interested in seeing the Baath regime fall, not even the Israeli establishment. This represented a radical improvement of Syria's policy environment compared to 2003 and during the aftermath of the Iraq war. It is the almost tragic part of Assad's failure that despite such positive preconditions, at present, Damascus' options have shrunk to a minimum leeway for manoeuvre. If Assad survives politically at all, he will face mounting rivalries from inside the power structure. And in the longer run the crisis will strangulate the

economy, which will erode the remnants of Assad's legitimacy also within his last bastions, the minority groups.

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