

Syria's quagmire, al-Assad's tunnel

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Syria, Iran and North Korea seem to be taking turns in attracting the bulk of international attention by acting as the "bad guy". On the surface, it has become relatively quiet around Syria again. Bashar al-Assad [1] is busy finding out what he really wants and how he can secure the last pieces of the political heritage of his father, Hafez al-Assad [2]. He has kept a low profile and cancelled several commitments abroad, including the opening of the United Nations general assembly in September 2006. Despite many challenges abroad - above all in public diplomacy - his main battlefields lie at home.

For the time being, Assad can fall back on broad popular support among Syrians, especially after the war [3] between Israel and Hizbollah [4] in July-August 2006. Rulers and ruled in Syria share a strong feeling of anti-Americanism, nurtured by the Iraq war, as well as disgust about Israel's warfare in Lebanon and the west's double standards in its middle-east policy. Assad has become the champion of the Arab street far beyond Syria. But this pillar of regime legitimacy is very emotional and not very sustainable. In the long run, Assad will face headwind from two directions: from ideological hardliners and beneficiaries of the present regime, and also from increasingly impatient reformers within the regime, the more or less organised opposition and parts of the Syrian public.

Hardliners and regime profiteers are losing confidence in Assad's capability to safeguard the "national interest" and their privileges; among this group are key representatives of the oligarchic bourgeoisie and members of Assad's extended family clan. In their eyes, Assad has gambled away too many political battles, the most severe blow being the humiliating withdrawal [5] of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 after the 14 February assassination [6] of Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri [7].

On the other side, reformers doubt whether Assad is still able *and* willing to pursue the economic and political reforms [8] that he announced and pursued [9] shortly after he had come to power in summer 2000. Meanwhile, the president has replaced almost all of the old functionaries in government, administration and army and has to take full responsibility for the sluggish process [10] himself. There are not many people left to blame, at least not in official positions. Despite surprising recent economic growth [11] rates, the living standard of many Syrians has not matched raised expectations.

Sure, it is hard to overcome the structures of a decades-old closed and socialist economy. But many problems lie less in the technocratic realm than in political failures and rampant corruption [12] that Assad has repeatedly promised to tackle. In addition, Syrian oil resources [13], which contribute to almost half of the national budget, will not last longer than the next decade.

This scenario is interrelated with foreign policy: The less Syria's economy [14] can catch up with the region, the more Syria has to fear normal relations with Israel [15] and an open regional market.

A regional predicament

There are many reasons why Assad has drifted away from his reformist course, some of which have their roots beyond his influence. Soon after he took office, the second intifada [16] swept across the Palestinian territories. It included a new dimension of confrontation: suicide-attacks [17]. The regional and international setting was becoming more and more unpleasant for the young and inexperienced president before he had been able to settle down and establish a policy agenda of his own. Most of his foreign policy has remained reactive instead of proactive.

The second blow for him was the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. At the time, these looked like a chance for Syria to finally play out its strength as a champion in the fight against Islamist extremists. But Assad was unable to transform the fruitful United States-Syrian cooperation on the security level [18] into better political relations. Partly, the US was not interested in giving too much credit to Syrian efforts to catch al-Qaida members and prevent new attacks on US citizens because Washington's political priority is clearly with Israel. And Syria has a standing territorial and political conflict with Israel, mainly about the occupied Golan Heights [19].

A major problem [20] between Washington and Damascus [21] is the definition of terrorism. As recently as 1990, the US government was on the same page with Syria, which held that violence in the Israeli-occupied territories was resistance, not terrorism. But after 9/11 the Bush administration adopted Israel's definition, which makes no such distinction. Since Damascus refuses to expel [22] Palestinian organisations from Syria, it has been disqualified by Washington and has essentially become part of the post-9/11 "terrorist camp". Syria has been more committed to excluding Islamic fanatics from political and social life than many other Arab countries, has encouraged moderate Islamists and provided the US with important intelligence. Yet, it has merely ended up being added to an expanded "axis of evil [23]".

Partly driven by US policy, partly by ideologists from the Ba'ath party [24], Assad has taken up his role as the "defender of Arab interests" when he opposed the Anglo-American invasion [25] in Iraq as strongly as no other Arab leader, although for many years Saddam Hussein counted as one of the staunchest enemies of Hafez al-Assad. Whereas his father never really depended on domestic public opinion, Bashar started to ride on this wave of support; he even took along Islamists, as well as parts of the moderate opposition who share the common denominator of anti-Americanism. In lack of other successes that he could present to the Syrian public - such as economic progress, including the long overdue association agreement [26] with the European Union, or political glasnost [27] - Assad has become one-dimensionally dependent on this form of populism.

The drawbacks became obvious during his first public speech after the ceasefire [28] between Hizbollah and Israel on 14 August 2006. It was expected that he congratulated Hizbollah for its "victory [29]" against the Israeli army (although Assad seemed to be more triumphant than Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah [30] himself). But Assad went overboard when he declared that peace with Israel was impossible and resistance was the only answer. While he spoke to a domestic audience, neglecting the international ramifications of his remarks shows a lack of political instinct. With the speech, Assad contradicted his own foreign policy. It was he who had offered peace negotiations [31] to Israel several times since 2003. He never got a constructive response from Tel Aviv, even though he abandoned his demand that Israel deliver on a promise that the murdered former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin once made: to return almost the entire Golan Heights to Syria. Israel has no reason to take Assad seriously as long as Syria is being softened up by the US. Time is on Israel's side [32], since Syria's position has become weaker.

A nervous president

The regime in Damascus has its back to the wall. A feeling of injustice and spite prevails. Injustice because the west does not seem to appreciate Syria's constructive contributions to the region: its secularism; its domestic fight against Islamism; its tolerance and remarkably peaceful coexistence of different religions (which could serve as a model for the middle east); its sound middle class and absence of slums and visible poverty; its domestic security; and its relatively educated social strata. Moreover, Syria has absorbed about one million Iraqi refugees [33], many of whom are Christians, without any social uproar. In addition, it has hosted some 200,000 Lebanese refugees [34], most of them *Shi'a*, with extraordinary helpfulness.

The regime's spiteful attitude stems from a perceived lack of alternatives, given the US agenda in the middle east, and the grudging confession of its own mistakes. One of the biggest disasters was Assad's personal falling-out with Lebanon's Hariri, and Hariri's murder a few months later. Whoever will be proven culpable by the UN investigation [35], this incident changed the political game-board and atmosphere in Damascus. Assad miscalculated the tough international reaction - which included not only the US, but also France and Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.

Apart from the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon after twenty-nine years, Assad has more hard decisions ahead of him. He may soon face the choice between covering up for close family members against allegations of murder - and thus isolating Syria even further - or handing people over to the international community, as either real culprits or scapegoats. Either alternative will put his political survival at stake. In opposition circles in Damascus, Assad is being described as nervous, and as a president who hardly leaves his office any more.

Further consequences of this back-to-the-wall dilemma include heated war rhetoric from Damascus regarding forceful liberation of the Golan Heights, and the forging of dangerous alliances. Paradoxically, Syrian secularists have allied with Islamist forces abroad, while trying to keep a lid on rising Islamism at home. This is playing with fire. In lack of political partners and alternatives, the Ba'ath regime finds itself in a shared destiny with radical *Shi'a* in Lebanon (Hizbollah) and Iran, and with radical *Sunnis* (Hamas [36]) in Palestine.

A spirit of opposition

At the same time, leading figures of the secular and moderate civil society are behind bars, some of whom, like Michel Kilo [37], are internationally known intellectuals and writers. In an act of self-defence, the regime has chosen to put security first. This means that a political opening is unlikely at the moment. The opposition has suffered from harsher oppression, although most of them have worked towards a peaceful transition into a more pluralistic system, rather than regime change. Syria has an intelligent, moderate and non-belligerent opposition. The regime has not been able to make use of this resource. Instead, it has estranged potential partners who share a common dislike of US influence in the region.

On the other side, more radical Syrian opposition figures have formed alliances abroad and work against the regime in Damascus from Paris, London and Washington. Among them are such unlikely alliances as the Salvation Front [38] - led by the leader of the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood [39], Sheikh Bayanouni [40] - and former vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam [41]. Others like the Washington-backed Farid al-Ghadry [42] have no sympathy within Syria and have hardly lived there. They or some of their followers may become dangerous for the Ba'athists, but none of them would be a solution for Syria and a promising actor for democratic change.

No charismatic figure has crystallised within Syria either. But far too little attention has been paid by the west - and particularly the US - to either Syria's secular opposition (who are embedded in Syrian society and history of thought) or its moderate Muslim activists (who are members of parliament, entrepreneurs or scholars). The latter take Turkey as their model, and some of them wish to found a political party that would resemble the moderate Islamist AKP [43].

Secularists, moderate Islamists and even the chastened Muslim Brothers in London have taken steps toward "national reconciliation" by signing common documents such as the Damascus Declaration [44] in October 2005. However, ideological and personal rivalries have increased in recent months. The domestic opposition strongly opposes any collaboration with Al-Ghadry in Washington and with Khaddam in Paris, who had been largely responsible for blocking many of Assad's reform endeavours and for oppressing the reform movement during the "Damascus spring" of 2001.

Syria's opposition would benefit from reduced pressure on the country. If the regime gets air to breathe and is accepted again as an equal partner in the middle-east peace efforts, Assad may feel comfortable enough to pick up the loose ends and embark on more sweeping reforms. It will be his last chance to deliver and to re-establish his credibility both domestically and abroad. Damascus, unlike Tehran, is not a place filled with ideological hardliners, and certainly not with religious fanatics.

A pragmatic course?

Syrian pragmatism was not necessarily buried with Hafez Assad. For example, there are potential openings that could be used to entice Syria to abandon the Hizbollah-Tehran axis:

Firstly, when push comes to shove, the Syrians - even the elder Assad - have always been willing to place their interests ahead of the Palestinian cause. This suggests that Syria might even be prepared to sign a peace treaty with Israel at some point, even if the Israeli-Palestinian question were not yet satisfactorily resolved.

Secondly, Syria's Ba'athists are no supporters of *Sunni* extremists and, in fact, actively combat them. Indeed, the Syrians would not permit Hamas to open an office in Damascus until a few years ago. The war in Iraq and the US's emergence as a common enemy have given secularists and Islamists a common denominator - but one that is not necessarily permanent.

Thirdly, the Syrian regime's ties to dogmatically radical *Shi'a*, such as Hizbollah and the regime in Tehran, are just as tenuous. Its current alliances are dictated by foreign-policy constraints. If these constraints are set aside and Syria manages to find other allies, even its partnership with Iran and support of Hizbollah could crumble.

Finally, as already mentioned, the Syrian people are highly intolerant of religious fanaticism. Peaceful coexistence of religious groups has a longer tradition in Syria than does the Ba'ath party, and the ruling Alawites [45] see religious diversity as an important aspect of their legitimacy.

Despite Assad's ill-considered remarks after the Hizbollah-Israeli ceasefire this summer, western states have been pursuing lower-level talks with Damascus again. It makes sense to explore common ground instead of isolating Syria. In order to free himself from the quagmire, Assad needs foreign-policy successes like the association agreement with the European Union, negotiations about the Golan heights or a serious role in regional negotiations. Although Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert [46], rejected initial ideas of defence minister Amir Peretz [47] and

foreign minister Tzipi Livni [48] which included talks with Syria, there will be no overall solution to the middle-east crisis without Damascus.

As long as Syria is denied equal eye level and its national interests are not respected, every step (such as UN Resolution 1701 [49]) remains nothing but patchwork efforts which treat symptoms instead of root causes. On the other side, it is up to Bashar al-Assad to seize the next window of opportunity to free himself from the strings of frustration and isolation. His time is running out.

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