

Syrian Scenarios and the Levant's Insecure Future

The waves of Arab popular protests have been edging ever further towards the Middle East conflict. With Syria in turmoil there seem to be no limits of imagination to where fundamental changes may lead in the region. The illegal but peaceful trespassing of Israeli borders by Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon on Naqba Memorial Day in May 14, 2011, shows a new quality of agitation that is taking place not only within Arab countries but also spilling over their borders. These were the first troubles on the Israeli-Syrian border since ex-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated the line of separation on the Golan Heights in 1974. Who would have thought that the first 'incident' at the quietest UN observed border was to be of a purely non-military nature, although hardly less dangerous?

The upheavals in Syria will have more repercussions for the Middle East conflict than other popular revolutions in Tunisia or even in Egypt. Unlike Egypt, Syria has not signed a peace treaty with Israel. Any new political leadership will not be bound to formal agreements. And an old leadership struggling for survival is likely to cross formerly respected lines, too. The suspicion that the Syrian-Palestinian intrusion into Israeli occupied Druze villages in the Golan was at least supported by the Asad regime in order to divert attention from its domestic struggle is not too far-fetched.

Moreover, in the past years, in particular following the Iraq war from which Iran emerged as a net winner, Syria and Lebanon have been integrated into the interface of the Saudi-Sunni and Persian-Shiite spheres of interest. The tectonic plates of this growing power struggle lead right through the Levant. In the long-term perspective, Syria has to worry about its influence in Lebanon. Time will show after Syria's rising domestic challengers how much leverage Damascus will still have over Hezbollah and to what extent Hezbollah has gained in power to such an extent that it can dictate terms of its own. Moreover, Iran's direct influence in Lebanon is rising and a Syrian nightmare is that one day Syria will be reduced to a logistical interface between Iran and Hezbollah.

The overwhelming welcome of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Lebanon in mid-October 2010 is the more visible aspect of this development. During Ahmadinejad's visit the British daily

Telegraph published an article prophetically titled: "A landlord visiting his domain."¹ On the radical Sunni side, Syria could turn into an interesting playground for al-Qaida activists because of its proximity to Israel. A country that for many years has been fighting Islamic extremism and terrorism – although it was often left alone in its efforts by the West because of US and Israeli pressures – may lose the capacity to fight on this domestic front. Already now Syrian inhabitants report an increasingly aggressive tone by Sunni extremists who mingle into the protesters or lead the protests in certain areas fostering the worst fears of Christians and Alawis.

Sadiq al-Azm, Syrian philosopher and leading member of the Civil Society Movement, said weeks before the Syrian uprising:

"If the revolts reach Syria, it will become far bloodier than in Tunisia or Egypt because of the sectarian nature of Syrian politics."²

Instability in Syria is also a worst case scenario for Israeli security strategists. Syria has always been a stable and reliable enemy. If it was politically opportune, Syria was able to restrain Hezbollah's shelling of northern Israel. It was Asad who dissuaded Ahmedinejad from throwing stones toward the Israeli border during his visit to southern Lebanon. The occupied Golan Heights served both Syria and Israel as a welcome status quo, too. During the upheavals Syrian opposition figures commented with contumeliousness on the lifting of Syria's Emergency Laws from 1963. They reminded of the fact that the state of emergency has always been justified by the Syrian regime with the official state of war with Israel. Suddenly, it was lifted – at least rhetorically – due to street pressure (and thus lost any political effect of showing the will to reform). Adding fuel to the fire, the fourth branch of the presidential guard that is commanded by Bashar al-Asad's brother Maher is militarily responsible for the Golan dossier – and it was Maher who commanded the bloody clampdown on the people's protest in Der'a. Some of the protesters shouted: "Maher you coward. Send your troops to liberate the Golan."³ Almost everything that is happening inside Syria has a visible foreign policy aspect to it. Therefore, the future of Syria is crucial for the whole region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well. Here are a few scenarios how

¹ "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Lebanon: 'a landlord visiting his domain'", in: *Telegraph*, October 14, 2010.

² Interview with the author in February 2011.

³ "Bashar al-Assad's inner circle", in: *BBC news* (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13216195), April 27, 2011.

