Dr. Carsten Wieland

A Decade of Lost Chances – Syria under Bashar al-Asad

I. Introduction

The autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, who were toppled in the Arab Spring, ruled for some 30 or 40 years before their power bases collapsed. Syria's President Bashar al-Asad has only ruled for the last decade and is arriving at the end of his tether. His legacy is likely to be a country in ruins with its morale and social fabric destroyed, perhaps beyond repair. Born in 1965, he may well be the youngest amongst the deposed Arab autocrats.

No matter how the bloody revolt in his country plays out, his political capital will be spent. How could this have happened after such a hopeful and auspicious start to his rule in June 2000? The story of his political career is a series of missed chances and practical failures.

Throughout his rule Asad has emphasized his strong personal relationship with the "beloved people of Syria". Despite waves of significant popular support during the years of his rule, this rhetoric proved to be a self-delusion.

In his first inauguration speech on 17 July 2000, Asad characterized himself as, "the man who has become a president is the same man who was a doctor and an officer and first and foremost is a citizen."[1] Seven years later, during his second inauguration speech he reemphasized this theme:

> *"I have worked during those years to enhance constructive values in my relationship with the people by rejecting the feeling of the man of authority in favor of the feeling of the man of responsibility, and by enhancing the image of the citizen before the image of the president in order to realize the concept of the responsible citizen and the official who feels and behaves as a citizen."*

He continued:

> *"I have always respected the people by being clear and honest with them (…). Our success in that regard depends on consistently providing the citizens with correct information so that they are aware of what is going on (…).*[2]

After 2011, the president was never again able to tie himself to the image of a cultivated citizen. He began a new chapter of his rule with blood on his hands.

Asad's choice of the "security solution" in 2011 was particularly disappointing because the country had indeed made some progress during the ten years of his rule – at least in areas that did not touch upon matters like democracy or human rights. The Syrian people enjoyed greater access to a broader range of media and more plainspoken journalists than under Hafez al-Asad, Bashir's father, but there existed unwritten "red lines" related to politics, religion and sex which could not be crossed. Arts and letters benefited from greater freedom of expression. Cell phones and other modern communications equipment became accessible to a wider range of people. Women's organizations gained strength and were granted some freedom of action even if they were not legally registered and not explicitly supportive of the government.

Clearly, the development of the country under Asad was asymmetric. While some reforms became evident, especially in the macroeconomic realm, political, administrative, and socio-economic progress came to a halt or was reversed. His first attempts at political pluralisation soon appeared too risky. Therefore, the president reduced his aspirations to administrative reforms (anti-corruption, efficiency, etc.), and when this was met with resistance, he concentrated on economic reforms that had been moving along a bumpy road but were indispensable to the regime's survival.

II. Following the Baath Path

The chain of possible opportunities for better development for both himself and his country started right at the beginning of Asad's rule. The first opportunity to change his country from its course of oppression and concurrently, his image as a more accommodating leader, occurred when the young heir to the republican throne was still highly dependent on the apparatus of his father. Asad was de-

1 Inauguration speech of Bashar al-Asad, in: SANA, 17 July 2000, (http://www.sana.org/eng/21/2007/07/18/129596.htm).
2 Ibid.

pendent on key players of the old power structure. He needed the loyalists of his father's era who had changed Syria's constitution to the effect that Asad was able to become president at the age of 34 (Syria's constitution had required a minimum age of 40 years). Theoretically, however, Asad could have tried to put his legitimacy on a wider basis by instituting himself as a transitional president who would call for a popular vote. Since there was no other candidate around and much less any organized party, he would have won by a landslide.

But any direct election would have brought into question the whole Baath system that had served his father as a stable basis for three decades and enabled his smooth succession. Moreover, competition from within the family ranks loomed. His uncle Rifaat al-Asad, for example, never really thought that Bashar was the right man to do the job. He could have taken advantage of any mistake or volatility to snatch power himself. Similar ambitions could have emerged in the security apparatus or with other major political protagonists like long-serving Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam (who defected in 2005) or Syria's experienced Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara'.

Asad chose to stick to the Baath path. In reality, the Baath discourse camouflaged the ideological erosion of the system. There was not much left of socialism nor pan-Arabism. Asad weakened the influence of the Baath Party further during his rule but he never questioned the foundations of the system as such. Still, power relations were renegotiated, and Baathist functionaries were sidelined. In times of crisis the circle of people that the Asad clan could trust contracted up to the point that if the erosion escalated it could have become difficult to readily recruit staunch and qualified loyalists to effectively run the country.

III. Failure to Reach Out to the Opposition

A second opportunity for Asad to pursue sweeping changes was to come a few months after his taking over of power. In his inaugural speech on 18 July 2000 the president called for Syrians to actively contribute to the shaping of the country's future:

> *"(…) thus society will not develop, improve or prosper if it were to depend only on one sect or one party or one group; rather, it has to depend on the work of all citizens in the entire society. That is why I find it absolutely necessary to call upon every single citizen to participate in the process of development and modernization if we are truly honest and serious in attaining the desired results in the very near future."*

Intellectuals were inspired and began to discuss freely in new found debating clubs within the halls of private houses. The most renowned was the Jamal Atasi Forum of Suhair Atasi. The dynamics that emerged thereof in September 2000 became known as the Damascus Spring. But the spring turned to winter in only a few months after two key representatives of the Civil Society Movement, the economics professor Aref Dalila and the entrepreneur and ex-Member of Parliament Riad Seif, were arrested. The debating clubs in Damascus were forced to close down one after the other.

From the early years of his rule Asad plugged into the notorious discourse of other Arab autocrats in the region: Their people were not ready for democracy. Democracy was a "cultural phenomenon" of the west. In the Arab Spring of 2011 the people finally showed that, indeed, they were ready not only for practical changes but also for a new political discourse and culture. People demonstrated that it was their rulers who were responsible for keeping them in a constant state of poverty and intended political immaturity.

The clampdown during the Damascus Spring in 2001 represented the first wave of oppression against the moderate Syrian opposition. Asad decided to prioritize regime stability before democratic experiments. This was a conscious step to secure his power after he felt he could lose control. The then Vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam was instrumental in putting the brakes on the development, and the Civil Society Movement went underground – in the Syrian context more appropriately put: into the tea houses. The Café Rawda was the most popular meeting point situated right around the corner from the parliament building. For the next couple of years the regime and the leftist intellectual opposition were to coexist side by side in a peculiar and very Syrian manner with protagonists of the Civil Society Movement taking turns in prison.

There was a time when even parts of the regime seemed to appreciate the constructive and prudent nature of Syria's opposition. Bahjat Suleiman, the feared and powerful former head of Syrian intelligence, wrote in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* in 2003: "In Syria, the regime does not have enemies but 'opponents' whose demands do not go beyond certain political and economic reforms such as the end of the state of emergency and martial law; the adoption of a law on political parties; and the equitable redistribution of national wealth."[3] Forcible regime change, Suleiman knew, was only on the agenda of select exiles and US politicians.

But instead of reaching out to those opponents, who defined a gradual transition toward civil society and pluralism as a soft landing inherent to the system and who shared basic foreign-policy assumptions of the Baathists, the president treated these intellectuals like a gang of criminals in the subsequent years. Thus, he disillusioned many Syrians who had hoped for a common ground towards incremental change. Looking back at Asad's first big opportunity, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, philosopher and member of the Civil Society Movement, said:

> *"Asad should have brought Riad Seif into a reshuffled government in 2001. His original sin was not to offer national reconciliation. Many even said that he would be ready to reconcile with Israel but not with his own people."*[4]

Suleiman's distinction between opponents and enemies was to become highly topical again in the 2011 upheavals, however, in a much more polarized setting. It was part of the Syrian tragedy that even after the bloody escalation in 2011 some oppositional figures tried to maintain the doors open in the hope of dialogue for the sake of Syria's stability and in order to avoid a civil war, most notably the journalist and head of the Civil Society Movement, Michel Kilo. Ignoring the constructive opposition has been one of Asad's gravest errors during his tenure. An elderly tribal leader in the northern province of Idlib was quoted as saying:

> *"This revolution was led by the kids, the children. It's their revolution. This is the generation that didn't see the horrors of the 80s. If it was up to us we would have never started the revolution. We have been burned once. But they are brave. They led and we followed."*[5]

IV. External Shocks Add to Homegrown Mistakes

The clampdown on the Damascus Spring took place when the young Asad was still in a phase of political orientation. External forces would soon shock the Syrian regime. Looking at the chronology of events, it is important to keep in mind that the Damascus Spring was strangled *before* the attacks in Washington and New York 2001 and other adverse circumstances occurred.

Still, Syria's development took place in unusually harsh and unpredictable international conditions. The 9/11 attacks changed the whole board game in the Middle East and beyond, aggravated further by the military approach of the US administration under President George W. Bush. The ensuing "war against terrorism" provided Arab autocrats with a new pretext to get tough on opposition figures (many of whom were Islamists living outside Syria) and a new context in which to frame their policies.

The 9/11 attacks can be viewed as a double-edged sword for Damascus. On the one hand, the Syrian *mukhabarat* (security services) now had the opportunity to use their year-long experience to fight Islamists of all kinds. Futhermore, the attacks strengthened Syria's ties with Western interests and was a welcome opportunity to underline the secular credentials of the Baath regime. Syria was to become a valuable partner for the West in the fight against Islamist terrorists. It was no coincidence that the United States and Israeli security establishments tended to take more conciliatory positions *vis-à-vis* Damascus than the respective political establishments. For example, George Tenet, who resigned from his position as head of the CIA, was, with his organization, one of the few moderating voices with regard to the Syrian regime within the US administration of George W. Bush.

On the other hand, despite Syria's willing cooperation in the fight against Islamist terrorism, it did not succeed in trading this commitment for substantially better relations with the United States or Europe. Had this happened, the westward-looking and prag-

[3] *Al-Safir*, 15 March 2003.
[4] Interview with the author in Berlin on 15 July 2011.
[5] Abdul-Ahad, in: *The Guardian*, 11 December 2011.

matic technocratic and political elite in Damascus would have benefited. Some of these figures lobbied for a rapprochement with Europe and favored signing the long-postponed EU Association Agreement. One of the key representatives was Sami Khiamy, Asad's economic adviser, who later became the Syrian ambassador in London.

Syria's difficulty was that two different political pressures were simultaneously in play on the international stage. One was the discourse oscillating around the fight against Islamist terrorism, which included the debate over direct consequences from the 9/11 attacks. This discourse also posed fundamental questions about a readjustment and the value-orientation of Western foreign policy *vis-à-vis* so-called pro-Western regimes that have nurtured Islamist terrorism for years, above all Saudi Arabia.[6] If this discourse had been put into political practice in a consequent manner, Syria could have gained a strategic advantage. It would have been a respected partner on the security level in view of its contribution against militant Islamism (much less, obviously, on the level of democratic governance).

The second discourse had less to do with protecting the United States from terrorist threats and more with catering for Israel's security concerns in the region. The pro-Israel discourse did not always overlap with the anti-Islamist terrorism discourse. In this context, Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed a threat to Israel and thus became a target of the pro-Israel neo-conservative foreign policy of the Bush administration. Other western governments, especially France and Germany, were not convinced that Iraq had ties with al-Qaida (not to mention weapons of mass destruction) and consequently refused to support an attack against Iraq on the basis of these reasons.

What it meant for Syria was that the pro-Israel discourse proved stronger and in the end impaired efforts undertaken within the anti-Islamist terrorism discourse. Because of Syria's political, ideological and territorial issues with Israel, it could never be considered a part of a pro-Western coalition under the influence of the Bush administration and Israeli interests. Nevertheless, Syria continued to cooperate with western secret services even after the Anglo-American attacks on Iraq up to the fall of 2003. When the regime in Damascus did not harvest any rewards from its engagement but received threats of regime change instead, it was not interested in cooperation anymore.

This time, it was the West that missed a great opportunity to focus on common secular values and the tolerance of religious minorities,on the fight against militant Islamism. This would have strengthened the pro-western actors within the Syrian bureaucracy and political elite. It would have resonated among parts of the educated middle class as well. Around this time blue car stickers with yellow stars became popular in Damascus that served to imitate EU number plates. Instead, the Bush Administration placed Syria on the extended axis of evil pushing it closer to Iran, a country which many Syrians detested culturally, ideologically and religiously. Thus, secularist Syria began drifting more and more into the Iranian orbit and into alliances with Islamist groups.

The second and most serious external shock impacting the Asad government was the Iraq war of 2003. The Syrian regime was not ready to embark on democratic experiments at home while its eastern neighbor was in a state of war, and the Bush Administration was openly suggesting regime change in Damascus. In turn, the regional situation provided a comfortable excuse for the Asad regime to delay any political reforms and to further suppress its domestic opponents. It also presented a further opportunity for Asad to display the same political shrewdness as his father.

Asad used the Iraq war to galvanize Syrian public support and to rally the entire "Arab street" behind him. The Syrian president became the hero, the only Arab leader between Baghdad and Casablanca who confronted a belligerent Bush administration. He even enjoyed the company of European countries like Germany and France in the anti-war camp. But it was Syria alone who again raised the anti-imperialist, pan-Arabism flag. The resistance discourse went down well and Asad enjoyed a period of almost unanimous domestic support. He was sure to have had great parts

[6] This debate stirred emotions and hit taboos in the United States. In July 2002, Laurent Murawiec, a French neo-conservative who worked in the RAND think tank in Washington, heavily attacked the Saudi connection to international terrorism. In a presentation before the US Defence Policy Board Advisory Committee he called for an "ultimatum to the House of Saud" and described Saudi Arabia the "kernel of evil". When the briefing was leaked, Pentagon and State Department officials distanced themselves from his comments to avert a major diplomatic crisis between the United States and its longtime ally less than a year after the terrorist attacks of 2001. Murawiec was subsequently expelled from RAND (see: Laurent Murawiec; "Strategist Said Saudis Backed Terror", in: *Washington Post*, 14 October 2009).

of the Syrian opposition behind him, too. On another note, Syria became the portal for Arab resistance fighters entering Iraq. The regime in Damascus was glad to get rid of Syrian Islamists who crossed over to Iraq where the Americans did the job of killing them. Furthermore, the Islamist foreign fighters helped keep the Americans from leaving Iraq and choosing Damascus as their next target for regime change. An American attack on Syria was a realistic scenario in the first few months after the Iraq invasion.

Syria could have opposed the Anglo-American Iraq invasion. But the way in which Asad surfed on the wave of anti-Western, pan-Arab nationalism – that notably merged with staunchly Islamist discourses – did not leave much leeway for a future change of tactics. Moreover, this served as a catalytic to push Syria into the Iranian orbit (a process that had started with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982). But in the big political scenario the Syrian regime had always been aware of the necessity of US support for any major achievement in the region, if only for the famous last mile in a possible peace agreement with Israel. Many of Asad's foreign policy endeavors after the Iraq war were indeed directed towards finding some kind of acceptance in Washington.

International pressure mounted on Syria in subsequent years, especially from Saudi Arabia, France and the United States, to stop its meddling in Lebanon. Asad lost his nerve and pursued an abrasive policy towards Lebanon. This culminated in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, which increased Syria's isolation and entailed the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

Asad used to cite these external shocks and the problems in Lebanon to justify delaying domestic reforms. "We were affected by the situation in Iraq or in Lebanon. There are many things that we wanted to do in 2005 we are planning to do in the year 2012, seven years later! It is not realistic to have a timeframe because you are not living in situation where you can control the events", he said in a *Wall Street Journal* interview at the end of January 2011.[7] Asad was definitely right about the fact that the foreign policy environment and the approach of some western countries in the region were not at all conductive to the opening up of minds and policies in Syria. But despite pressures exerted from the outside, many mistakes were homemade.

Reference to the "old guard" of functionaries from Hafez al-Asad's times initially served as an argument not to embark on political change beyond administrative adjustments and insulated economic reforms. However, the picture was more complex. Old-aged functionaries were not necessarily part of the "old guard", and young ones not necessarily reformers and westward looking. In any case, by 2005 Asad had gradually placed his people in the key political and security positions. After 2011 Syria's foreign policy options narrowed down even further to only include alliances with, roughly speaking, Iran, Russia, China and Venezuela. Apparently, in times of crisis family members of higher regime loyalists did not see other options than fleeing to countries such as Malaysia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, China, Ghana, and Nigeria.[8] Syria's foreign minister Walid Mu'allem announced in anti-Western anger at the end of October 2011 in front of a group of Indian academics and journalists that Syria would look more towards Asia now.[9] President Asad underlined this when talking to a Russian TV station. Interestingly, in this interview Asad antedated the decision to look far east back to the year 2005, precisely at a moment when the economic reform program was announced in the Five Year Plan and the European model of Social Market Economy was declared, on paper.[10]

V. Failure of Arab-Kurdish Reconciliation

Throughout his decade of rule, Asad had amassed numerous unresolved problems that

---

7 Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011, (http://www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html)

8 According to reports from the oppositional Strategic Research and Communication Center (SRCC) in a briefing from 12 November 2011, "the family members of Assad regime officials have been fleeing the country as over a hundred security, army, and government cars are seen daily at the Aleppo International Airport, with mostly women and children accompanying massive loads of luggage. According to airport employees, most of the passports are Latakia issued [i.e. with Alawi background], and most of the flights are fully booked departing to Malaysia, Iran, UAE, China, Ghana, and Nigeria."

9 *SANA*, 20 October 2011.

10 "Syria, Russia, India and China are east," Asad said. "There are many countries that have good relations with Syria whether in the east, in Latin America or in Asia. (…) I don't recall any period in which there weren't [*sic*] under some sort of western blockade on Syria, but this blockade intensifies during crises, which is why we decided six years ago-in 2005-to head towards the east." President Asad to *Rossiya 1 TV* on 31 October 2011, quoted according to *SANA*.

combined to hit him in 2011. On the domestic chess board Asad missed another important chance to change the domestic discourse during and after the violent Kurdish protests in March 2004. Kurdish demonstrators rioted in several cities, including Aleppo and Damascus, setting fire to cars and fighting battles with the security police. Within a week Asad had the situation under control.

Two aspects are interesting here. First, the human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, a member of the moderate oppositional Civil Society Movement, tried to mediate and exert a moderating influence on Kurdish activists. The Syrian opposition considered it anti-patriotic to allow any form of Arab-Kurdish cleavage. Also Kurdish political leaders agreed to avoid a rift between them and the Arab oppositional counterparts. They conceded that they had lost control over parts of their constituency. This would have been yet another opportunity for the regime to reach out to the opposition on behalf of the common national interest in times of external turbulences such as in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Secondly, after the riots Asad travelled to the neglected Kurdish region in northwestern Syria and promised to look into the Kurdish grievances. But the years passed without him doing anything to address these grievances. Restrictions against Kurds were even tightened. It was only under the existential threat of the protests in 2011 that the president agreed to grant citizenship to the Kurdish population. Thus, he intended to prevent a strong Kurdish participation in the protest movements. The Kurdish issue was one of the easiest concessions to make. Asad lacked the political instinct to offer a solution to this problem at the apt moment.

VI. The Lebanon Disaster

By 2005 Asad had gradually placed his people in the key political and security positions. Precisely at the height of his rule, when Asad felt relatively secure, he committed a grievous error and missed another formidable chance to establish himself as a moderate ruler who would set a course of his own. The error was to press for an unconstitutional extension of the mandate of Lebanon's pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud at any cost. Asad's insistence in doing so bore heavy long-term costs for the Syrian regime. Among other repercussions Syria lost France as a European ally. France's President Jacques Chirac had been the only western statesman to attend Hafez al-Asad's funeral in June 2000. In subsequent years French consultants had pilgrimaged to Damascus to help Syria to reform its administrative and judicial system. Now it was the personal friendship between Lebanon's Prime Minister Hariri and Chirac that proved stronger than the Syrian-French connection. Syria was isolated. Not a single Arab state moved a finger in its support. Syria became even more isolated after the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Asad was forced to withdraw all Syrian troops from Lebanon. Subsequently, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, whose role was to investigate the Hariri assassination, became yet another political instrument for Syria's enemies to put pressure on Damascus.

During these months after February 2005 rumors spread of a *coup d'état* in the presidential palace in Damascus. Regime loyalists debated whether Asad was capable at all of defending Syria's national interests. Asad's power became challenged like never before. It was only in 2011 that a similar discussion was sparked again. This time the stakes were much higher. Asad piled up political debts from his family clan and the Alawite security establishment. The fact that he had missed earlier chances to strengthen his position began to take its toll. Without having risked a popular vote or at least reached out for national reconciliation with the moderate opposition Asad had nothing much but his clan and the security apparatus to fall back on. This made the president sink ever deeper into the self-interested power structure up to the point of no return. The political blunder of the Hariri assassination, whoever was behind it, marked the beginning of the decline of Asad. The trauma of complete isolation created certain paranoia that also had an influence in how he viewed oppositional challenges at home.

VII. Failed Reform Promises

Still, despite the foreign policy disaster at the beginning of the year 2005 resulting from the events in Lebanon the subsequent months yielded a valuable opportunity for Asad to reposition himself domestically. In June of that year Asad called the 10th Regional Baath Congress, the first one under his leadership. Ex-

pectations were high. But oppositional forces and foreign observers were disappointed because they had expected more sweeping political reforms. Instead, the results were merely announcements that never took effect until the regime began to struggle for its own survival in 2011.

Instead of working toward the fulfilment of the reform promises, a second clampdown on the Syrian Civil Society Movement was soon to follow. In face of the obvious turbulences of Asad's regime due to the Hariri assassination the secular opposition caught momentum and was encouraged by western diplomats and politicians. At that time, a historic step toward a more unified opposition had been achieved through the Damascus Declaration of 16 October 2005.

A wave of suppression followed quickly in the first half of 2006 when those who had been spared in 2001 were arrested like Kilo and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni. The hunt for signatories of the Damascus Declaration was based on the accusation against the opposition of pursuing an agenda of western interests. While the Syrian regime suffered from the "Lebanon trauma" of increased isolation and stigmatization, it became increasingly insecure. In this respect the suppression of civil society went hand in hand with external developments.

Not long after Kilo was arrested in May 2006 the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah broke out. Its result was a public diplomacy disaster for Israel, although the humanitarian and material damage on the Lebanese side was far higher. This war offered Asad yet another opportunity to turn popular enthusiasm into long-term political support. Instead, after Hezbollah declared "victory", Asad in a bigoted speech tried to cash in the triumph as part as his own policies of resistance against Israel. Syrian public opinion stood behind him, while Hezbollah and to some extent Asad became the heroes of the Arab street far beyond the Levant.

Against this background Asad was able to orchestrate the 2007 Syrian presidential and parliamentary elections with a comfortable cushion of popularity. Syrians were proud of their president for resisting international sanctions, the US intervention in Iraq, international pressures connected with the Hariri Tribunal. In their view, Asad was the only Arab leader left who dared to speak out against Israel. With the main protagonists of the Civil Society Movement behind bars and the street behind him, this could have been another apt moment to convert his popular support into reformed political structures. Instead, Asad chose to boost himself once again in a manipulated referendum calling for another seven-year-tenure of his rule. On the public policy level, the selective economic reforms started to hurt the poor and the lower middle classes, while corruption and mismanagement thrived. Kilo made the criticism that transition in Syria toward a post-Baath era was achieved by an alliance of the *mukhabarat* with the new rich.[11]

VIII. Foreign Policy Honeymoon and Domestic Frustration

Some three years before the wave of Arab protests reached Syria in 2011, the regime in Damascus had started to regain initiative in foreign policy matters. European governments and even the US administration had come to the conclusion that Syria was at least a stable, politically approachable, and important geostrategic player in the Middle East whose president was on the path of piecemeal reforms. US President Obama also chose a strategy of engagement in his effort to reverse the Syrian drift towards Iran and sent an ambassador to Damascus in January 2011 after nearly six years of diplomatic vacuum. This was to represent the last foreign policy success for Asad before the popular protests broke out

On the other hand, clinging to power by all possible means created a common ground with other autocratic Arab states. Syria was subsequently able to temporarily ease traditional tensions with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. The Syrian regime declared its sympathy for the Saudi military invasion to crush the protests in Bahrain.[12] However, this overlap of authoritarian interests between Syria and the Arab peninsula's monarchies was fragile and short-lived.

Despite the international détente, the domestic secular opposition had not profited from the new dawn in Syria's foreign policy. Benevolent dissenters and cautioning voices, that were not necessarily linked to the opposition, became increasingly frustrated. An experi-

[11] Interview with the author in Damascus on 23 October 2010.
[12] "Syria Justifies Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain", in: *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 March 2011.

enced Syrian analyst, who worked within the government arena, conceded in an interview in October 2010:

> *"I made the same mistake. I thought there was a correlation between foreign and domestic policy. (…) With or without external pressure we have no political change in Syria. Domestic pressure is a continuity, not a contradiction."*[13]

A sheikh who had held political positions and was known to be pro-regime for years (but who also preferred to remain anonymous) also made a remarkable comment in visible frustration at the end of 2010:

> *"Unfortunately, under the pressure of the US the situation here was better. Now they [the regime] think they have a strong message."*

He paused and added in a pensive tone:

> *"We are going through a sensitive phase, through difficult times."*[14]

These quotes show that general frustration had been growing within the wider sphere of regime supporters before the upheavals broke out. Moreover, criticism that was directed against Iran was interpreted as a pro-American stance and sanctioned. The room for even cautious dissent had shrunk to a new low, not seen since Hafez al-Asad's times. Five months later, the exuberant self-confidence of the Asad regime, and its arrogance of power, was seriously challenged.

IX. Last Chances and the System's Failure

At precisely the moment when nobody in the international community, including Israel, had an interest in Asad's ouster, when many states tried to engage Syria as an actor in a regional peace scenario, the president committed his most grievous mistakes and missed the last chance of his political career.

Authorities lacked the tools to cope with the situation. The political class was petrified when the protests spread to other towns and regions. In August, Asad "acknowledged that some mistakes had been made by the security forces in the initial stages of the unrest and that efforts were under way to prevent their recurrence."[15] By then the damage was unrepairable.

But several weeks into the protests it was not too late to preserve the famous red line in Syria: criticizing the president. Initially, the demonstrators' wrath did not, by and large, target Asad himself. After so many years of stalled reforms and broken promises the president missed his last minute opportunity to convince his people that he was different from the other Arab dictators; that he had the corrupt and violent authorities under control. Several times Asad announced that the army would stop the killing of civilians but nothing changed. The positive attributes of his character that had circulated among Syrians throughout the years, as well as his authority, faded away quickly. The former confidence that was once projected by the young leader would never be restored. Asad lost the most important component of his political capital.

In addition, by playing the sectarian card openly like never before, Asad destroyed his secular legacy that had been a Baathist trademark. He tainted the Syrian spirit of tolerance that has century-old roots in Syria's social history. The targeted violence in order to instigate sectarianism has become one of the greatest challenges the Syrian people.

Asad failed to deliver a political perspective. Instead, he promised overdue reforms too late and, in addition, never kept his word. Asad missed the chance to save his legacy by making a lastminute U-turn against internal resistance. After years of waiting he could have finally portrayed himself as part of the solution instead of a persistant part of a growing problem. Many Syrians would have preferred to embark on a transition in the framework of stability. To accomplish this purpose Asad would have had to overcome his personality and to counter family resistance. Asad did not have the audacity and vision of his personal friend King Juan Carlos of Spain; he was no political hero who would become a champion of reform instead he resisted it within an obsolete and ideologically eroded system.

Months into the brutal attempts at stamping out the opposition movement, the Syrian pres-

[13] Interview with the author in Damascus on 23 October 2010.
[14] Interview with the author in Damascus on 24 October 2010.
[15] "Asad Admits Mistakes", in: *The Daily Star*, 11 August 2011, (http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2011/Aug-11/Assad-admits-mistakes.ashx#axzz1uMao8QR3). Statement quoted from a release of India's UN mission after a meeting with a delegation from UN Security Council members Brazil, India and South Africa.

ident could still count on a few illustrious opposition figures who were ready to risk their reputation in order to build Asad a bridge over the spreading fire. People like Michel Kilo in tandem with the secular editor Louay Hussein as well as a few others provided one more window of opportunity for Asad. But the regime's continued and uncompromising "security solution" undermined all persisting efforts to search for middle ground.

X. Rebuff of International Initiatives

As long as the UN Security Council is at loggerheads with Russia and China holding on to Syria, the regime does not have to fear any foreign intervention like in the case of Libya. Nevertheless, several external initiatives have tried to build bridges for Asad to end the crisis. He has rebuked all of them. The first important opportunity came from Turkey. In the years since 2004 the relations between Syria and Turkey have radically improved. Both governments held common cabinet meetings and talked of "family bonds" when they referred to bilateral relations. Not long before the crisis Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spent a few days of holiday with the Asad family. The countries abolished each others' visas and established free trade across their borders. Good relations with Turkey represented Syria's greatest success in the past years. Thus Damascus aptly managed to diversify its foreign policy.

The uprising in Syria put Turkey's pro-democracy stance to a serious test. After some hesitation, as in the Libyan case, the Turkish government finally opted for the side of human rights and democracy. Criticism from Ankara rose along with the escalation of violence in Syria. Erdoğan followed through in his role as an advocate of change in the Arab world, invoking harsh criticism against Tunisia's and Egypt's autocrats.

Given the former harmony even at an emotional level and the practical improvements between both countries, the visit of Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu on 9 August 2011 in Damascus represented a shocking change of paradigm. Davutoğlu came to Damascus to deliver an "earnest" message from Erdoğan that called for an end to the violence and discussed the acceptance of a Turkish-sponsored peace plan. Asad reacted indignantly and said:

> *"If you came for a compromise, then we reject it. If you want to have war, then you can have it – in the entire region."*[16]

This was an affront to Erdoğan, not only personally, but also *vis-à-vis* Erdoğan's envisaged role of Turkey as a regional player and mediator.

The snoubbing of friends and political allies in rage or short-sightedness has deprived the Syrian regime of possible future options within the framework of steering itself out of the crisis. As mentioned above, the protests hit Syria at a time when Western governments had more or less accommodated themselves with the Syrian regime, or at least with its strategic importance in the region, despite Syria's tainted human rights record. European and US diplomats, high-ranking politicians, and academics went in and out of Damascus until the time when the revolt broke out.

As late as March 2011 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out:

> *"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."*[17]

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 against Syria. This change of attitude in Washington had been the Syrian political goal for many years. It was quickly destroyed.

By July 2011 Clinton made it clear that US Syrian policy had definitely changed, when she claimed that Asad had lost his credibility to rule. "President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power", Clinton said.[18] In only three months Asad lost yet another important chance to become part of the solution instead remaining part of the problem.

Asad's tone *vis-à-vis* former friends and the international community became harsher the

[16] "Unruhen in Syrien 'Wenn Sie Krieg wollen, können Sie ihn haben'", in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 09 August 2011, translated from German by the author. (http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/unruhen-in-syrien-mehrere-staaten-verschaerfen-druck-auf-assad-1.1129471).

[17] Hillary Clinton on CBS program "Face the Nation", 26 March 2011.

[18] "Assad Has 'Lost Legitimacy,' Clinton Says", in: *Bloomberg*, 11 July 2011, (www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-07-11/clinton-says-assad-lost-legitimacy-after-mob-attacks-embassy.html).

longer the conflict simmered. He burnt vital bridges and lost his soft-spoken and educated image that he had cultivated during various conversations with foreign heads of state and politicians. In bilateral conversations as well as in interviews, Asad used to impress his conversational partners with his friendly and reflective style. By the end of 2011, he had become nervous, confused, and sometimes aggressive.

Despite the rebuke of Turkey's peace offer, Erdoğan's hefty criticism against Asad's policies, and the hosting of Syrian opposition groups in Turkey, links between Ankara and Damascus were not severed. Economic cooperation continued for some time before being annulled. Davutoğlu returned to Damascus in October, but this meeting did not contribute to a settlement either and Damascus continued to issue threats. According to one Arab source, President Asad proclaimed, "If a crazy measure is taken against Damascus, I will need not more than six hours to transfer hundreds of rockets and missiles to the Golan Heights to fire them at Tel Aviv." The Arab source said that the Syrian president told the Turkish foreign minister that he would also call on Hezbollah to launch a rocket attack on the Jewish state.[19] Asad's warning came after Davutoğlu informed him that he would face a war similar to the one against the Libyan regime with NATO support if he continued to crack down on his people.

After alienating Turkey it was up to the Arabs to offer Asad a way out. The Arab League headed by the former transitional foreign minister of Egypt, Nabil al-Arabi, presented two peace initiatives in September and November of 2011. Reportedly, several Arab states as well as Russia offered asylum to Asad to defuse the situation. The mediation attempts included a call to halt all violence against civilians and to withdraw Syrian troops from the cities. The League urged to avoid sectarianism and – entirely in line with the Syrian government – strongly recommended not to create a pretext for any kind of foreign intervention. It further called for compensation for the families of the victims and for a release of all political prisoners. The initiative moreover called on Asad to commit to the political reforms he had announced, including a multiparty system.

Asad chose not to benefit from either of the initiatives, although he formally accepted the second one. But no improvement occurred with regard to human rights, similar to the situation in April when he had declared reforms and an end of the shooting in April. Instead, the killing continued through November, escalating in the cities of Homs and Hama. In the end, the Syrian regime managed to play for time and to downscale the League's second peace plan. After weeks of negotiations – in which hundreds and more people were killed – Syria agreed to let an Arab observer mission into the country. When Arab observers were finally on the ground, the killing continued. First, individual members of the mission left the enterprise in disgust, and as the beginning of 2012 the Arab League declared the observer mission a failure. Having exhausted its means, the League turned to the UN Security Council in February in a dramatic appeal, brought forward by Qatar. But, once again, Russia and China blocked any condemnation of regime violence and insisted on putting it on the same level as violence from the side of the opposition. Even if a UN resolution had been passed, the strategic and logistic scrupulosity of the western and Arab state community would have made swift compulsory measures unlikely. But the anti-Arab and anti-Western course of Russia and China was an important symbol for the Syrian regime that felt encouraged to continue with its "security solution". It also postponed a tipping-point at which those people within the regime, who were against the brutal strategy, would dare to defect.

A refreshed Arab League – composed of autocracies but also of post-revolutionary states in democratic transition – condemned the killing of civilians in unusually harsh terms. Anti-Syrian Qatar (yet another lost friend of Syria) held the presidency of the League, and Syria's adversary Saudi Arabia grew increasingly impatient, as well. After it became clear that the killing in Syria was continued unabatedly, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership in a surprising move at the end of 2011 and called on Arab states to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus. Only Lebanon, with a pro-Hezbollah government and Yemen, which was equally disrupted by the Arab Spring, voted against this measure while Iraq abstained. The economic sanctions

[19] "Syria: No Message Was Conveyed between Assad, Davutoğlu", in: *Naharnet Newsdesk*, 6 October 2011, (http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/16787-syria-no-message-was-conveyed-between-assad-Davutoğlu).

that followed, cut Syria off from basically all trade with the Arab world on which it depended for 50 percent of its exports. Syria's membership in the Greater Arab Free Trade Zone (GAFTA) was suspended. A travel ban was imposed on members of the Asad regime not only to Western countries but to the Arab world as well. Even observers who shared parts of the regime's ideology grew increasingly frustrated by the gambling away of political options. The historian Sami Moubayed, professor at Syria's prestigious private University of Kalamoon and editor-in-chief of *Forward Magazine*, reasoned after the failure of the first Arab League initiative:

> *"It could have been a lifejacket for the nation that would end the deadlock between the government and demonstrations which have continued non-stop, despite violence and the rising death toll, since mid-March. By snubbing it, the Syrians probably have lost a golden opportunity."*

Moubayed recommended:

> *"What they should have done is take it as it stands, then rebrand it as a Syrian initiative – regardless of the Arab League and Qatar – because it is a win-win formula both for the Syrian government and the Syrian street. To quote the Godfather, it was an offer they shouldn't have, rather than 'couldn't have refused'."*[20]

It was the Syrian regime that closed the door on an internal Arab solution and thus contributed to the internationalization of the conflict. In the preceding years Asad had managed to accommodate some of Syria's enemies, including Saudi Arabia, and he had made new friends in the region and on the international stage. Until the Intifada of 2011 – as some Syrian oppositional figures call it in Arabic – Asad's grip on power looked even stronger than that of his ally, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmedinejad, especially in light of Iran's post-election Green Revolution in summer 2009. But every year, every month that went by Asad gambled away remnant pieces of his credibility and political leeway. His painstakingly accumulated foreign policy successes lay in tatters. Moreover, Asad became isolated from his own people. After a decade of missed chances and numerous sacrifices, Syrians finally longed for the fruits of the Arab Spring: better governance and the end of fear.

[20] Moubayed, Sami: "An offer Syria shouldn't have refused", in: *Mideast Views*, 21 September 2011, (http://www.mideastviews.com/articleview.php?art=547).