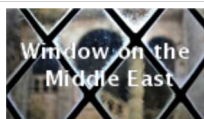




“There are two ways to lose oneself: by a walled segregation in the particular or by a dilution in the 'universal' ” [Aimé Césaire \(1913-2008\)](#)

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Syria, a decade of lost chances

CARSTEN WIELAND , 29 August 2012

The brutal response of Syria's authorities to an eruption of protest in early 2011 propelled the country into conflict. It was the latest and most catastrophic of a series of misjudgments by Bashar al-Assad's regime over the decade of his rule, says Carsten Wieland.

Syria today presents a bleak prospect. Large parts of the country are in ruins, the rural population is impoverished, Syrians are traumatised by torture and angst, sectarianism is on the rise, and there are signs of movement towards segregation. An increasingly complex array of *de facto* authorities exists in place of the central state's former monopoly of power; indeed, the regime in Damascus will probably never control the entire [country](#) again. Moreover, the regime is internationally isolated.

This is the outcome of a dozen years of rule by Bashar al-Assad and his family clan. No matter how the bloody [revolt](#) in his country that began in March 2011 plays out, Assad's political capital will end up spent. How could this have happened, considering that the start of his rule in June 2000 was hopeful and auspicious? The answer lies in the story of his political career: a series of missed chances and practical failures.

In February-March 2011, experts and observers were still citing more or less plausible reasons why Syria was unlikely to be the next [Arab spring](#) "domino". Indeed, Syria differed from other Arab countries in having long been in the anti-western camp, whereas Tunisia's Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak were western allies in the old constellation of Arab-world power; guarantors of the then dominant notion of "stability". Yemen's Abdallah Saleh was a also western ally, though more in the fight against al-Qaida.

Assad was as a state [leader](#) alone in the pan-Arab tradition, playing - together with Hizbollah and Hamas - the anti-Israel tune of "resistance". Major elements of Syria's domestic opposition shared these ideological assumptions. Ba'athist Syria, as the last pan-Arab mouthpiece and the frontline Arab state against Israel, seemed to have sufficient ideological resources and more political leverage than pro-western Arab authoritarian regimes to weather domestic crises.

In the event, as soon as Assad decided to turn his weapons inwards instead of towards liberation of the Golan heights, the fragility of this ideological denominator of pan-Arabism and resistance rhetoric was exposed. The Golan dossier had been the responsibility of the 4th Brigade of the notorious elite troops, commanded by Bashar's brother Maher al-Assad. Maher himself turned into a figure resembling Radko Mladic in the Bosnian war: the slaughterer of thousands of civilians. The resistance rhetoric has collapsed, and with it the popularity of all its previous champions, including and in particular Hizbollah. Assad and Hizbollah have turned from heroes of the Arab street - even transcending religious cleavages - to brutal symbols of those who are clamping down on the people's demand for dignity, better living chances and political participation.

The spring and the *intifada*

Syria is taking a particular turn: [towards](#) fragmentation, militarisation, primordialisation (in religious and ethnic discourses) and internationalisation. But it also remains part of the broader [scenario](#) of the Arab spring.

It is very important to keep in mind the chronology of the conflict. A concentration only on military strategies, analysis of armed groups, on a *Sunni-Shi'a* divide and power-struggle in the region misses the origins of the *intifada* and fails to do justice to the initial substance and methods of the popular upheaval. It was only after about half a year of extreme torture as a means of warfare and intimidation that defectors and civilians organised themselves in an armed self-defence force named the Free Syrian Army (leaving aside the question of what is left of the FSA's original intentions and ethics today). The first demonstrators in the southern town of Dera'a did not

even call for the fall of the president himself, only for an end to cronyism and the arbitrary cruelty of local authorities.

Even after the *intifada* started, Bashar al-Assad lost a series of opportunities to de-escalate the conflict and avoid the political dead-end that he was to reach. As soon as the protests started to damage the economy, technical "win-win" alliances - for example between the regime and the *Sunni* merchant class - broke apart, while predominantly primordial ones remained. The pillars of Syrian power were ever more reduced to the Alawite clan's coherence.

As the protests escalated, the regime first tried appeasement. Military service was cut to eighteen months and the price for exemption reduced. In April 2011, Assad finally responded to a long-standing demand by granting citizenship to some 150,000 of Syria's Kurds. The measures were so overdue that Assad got little credit for it. Nevertheless, the Kurds did not participate in the protest movement as vehemently as their deprived status might suggest.

Assad apparently sensed where the problem lay, and even employed some revolutionary discourse from the Tunisian and Egyptian events when he declared in April 2011:

"The loss of dignity doesn't necessarily mean that an individual is directly humiliated or insulted by another individual in or outside the state. It rather means neglecting citizens. It means not dealing with a certain transaction that he has in a government department. It might mean asking for a bribe. All these are insults and forms of humiliation that we need to get rid of once and for all."

By Syrian standards, the political concessions were very far-reaching - more than what many years of civil activism had been able to achieve. In the context of the times, however, the moves turned out to be inadequate. Assad was also unable to convince the various opposition groups to engage in a government-sponsored dialogue.

In the end, it did not really matter whether he was personally responsible for each shot fired, for each child tortured and mutilated, for every armed attack by the *shabbiha* Alawite gangs attempting to incite sectarian hatred, for the burning of cattle and fields to starve dissenting villagers. It did not make any difference either in moral, political, or legal terms. Assad was the president during this dark chapter of his country's history and he was responsible for the "security solution". Since 2000 he had reshuffled almost all important positions in the *mukhabarat*, the military and government bureaucracy. He was in charge.

In 2011-12, Bashar al-Assad has matched the level of atrocity his father Hafez demonstrated in the Hama massacre of 1982. When the bloodshed is over, if it comes to be investigated in a similar way as were the violations of the Soviet-era secret services, an already fragmented Syrian society will fall into yet another trauma in the effort to come to terms with its past. Yet if this history is not settled, the barbarism of Syria's Arab spring will join the many cruel mysteries of Syria's history locked in the dungeons of the nation's collective memory.

The abortive start

Bashar al-Assad wasted many options to move the country in a positive direction since taking power in June 2000, a pattern continued in the many opportunities he lost even after the beginning of the Arab spring. Yet his blind choice of the "security solution" in 2011 was particularly disappointing, because the country had indeed made some progress during the decade of his rule - at least in areas that did not touch upon matters like democracy or human rights.

Clearly, the development of the country under Assad was asymmetric. Some reforms became evident in the macro-economic realm; but political, administrative, and socio-economic progress came to a halt or was reversed. "Modernisation" under Assad meant new cars, cellphones, posh restaurants and hotels for the urban new rich - not infrastructure, schools and social services for the rural poor (as happened under his father). It was no coincidence that the Syrian *intifada* remained a provincial phenomenon for a long time.

The chain of possible openings for a better development for Assad and his country starts right at the beginning of the president's rule. He could have tried to widen his legitimacy by "institutionalising" himself as a transitional president who would call for a popular vote. Since there was no other candidate around,

much less any organised opposition party, he would have won by a landslide.

Assad chose [instead](#) to stick to the Ba'ath path. In reality, the Ba'ath discourse camouflaged the ideological erosion of the system. There was not much left of socialism, nor of pan-Arabism. Assad weakened the influence of the Ba'ath party further during his rule, but he never questioned the foundations of the system as such.

The phantom of reform

A key opportunity for Assad to pursue sweeping changes was to come a few months after his assumption of power. In an atmosphere of cautious encouragement, intellectuals were inspired to begin to discuss freely. The dynamics that emerged from this process in September 2000 became known as the "Damascus spring". But the spring turned cold in only few months as key representatives of the Civil Society Movement were arrested.

The clampdown of 2001 represented the first wave of suppression against the [moderate](#) Syrian opposition. Assad decided to prioritise regime stability before democratic experiments. 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. Instead of reaching out to his moderate [opponents](#), the president came to treat these intellectuals like a gang of criminals. This callous turning away from a constructive opposition was one of the gravest errors of Assad's tenure.

At the time, external shocks were on their way to hit the regime, creating unusually harsh and unpredictable international conditions as a backdrop of Syria's development. The chronology of events is again important. The Damascus spring was strangled before the attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001 and its aftermath. At the time, Syria was willing to cooperate in the fight against Islamist terrorism, but it did not succeed in trading in this commitment for substantially better relations with the United States or Europe.

If that had happened, the westward-looking and pragmatic technocratic and political elite in Damascus would have benefitted. In this occasion it was the west that missed a great opportunity: to focus on common secular values and the tolerance of religious minorities, and on a shared fight against militant Islamism. Instead, secularist Syria began to drift more and more into the Iranian orbit and into alliances with Islamist groups.

In 2003, Assad used the invasion of Iraq to galvanise Syrian public support and to rally the entire "Arab street" behind him. It was Syria who again raised the anti-imperialist, pan-Arab flag. The resistance discourse was welcomed, and Assad enjoyed a period of almost unanimous domestic support (see [Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism and 'Pax Americana'](#), C Hurst, 2005).

At the same time, international pressure on Syria began to mount over its interference in Lebanon, especially from Saudi Arabia, France and the United States. Assad lost his nerve and pursued an abrasive policy in its neighbour, which culminated in the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. This increased Syria's isolation and entailed the forced [withdrawal](#) of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

The cost of delay

Assad often cited these external shocks and the problems in Lebanon to justify delaying domestic reforms. There were reference to the "old guard" of functionaries from Hafez al-Assad's times, which served as an argument not to embark on political change beyond administrative adjustments and insulated economic reforms. However, the picture was more complex, for Assad by 2005 had gradually placed his people in the key political and security positions. And despite pressures exerted from the outside, many of the regime's mistakes were homemade (see "[Syria's quagmire, al-Assad's tunnel](#)", 9 November 2006).

After the foreign-policy disaster in early 2005 following the [events](#) in Lebanon, a valuable opportunity soon presented itself for Assad to reposition himself domestically. In June 2005, Assad convened the tenth regional Ba'ath congress, the first to take place under his leadership. Expectations were high, including among opposition forces and foreign observers. In the event they were disappointed: instead of sweeping political reform, there was only a series of announcements - none of them implemented until the regime faced a

struggle for survival in 2011.

Instead of working toward the fulfilment of the reform promises, a second clampdown on Syria's Civil Society Movement was soon to [follow](#). The secular opposition had acquired a new momentum when Assad's regime encountered turbulence in the wake of the Hariri assassination. It made a historic step toward a more unified stance, via the "[Damascus declaration](#)" of 16 October 2005. A wave of suppression followed in the first half of 2006, with those who had been spared in 2001 being arrested.

A few months later, in July 2006, the war between Israel and Hizbollah [erupted](#). The month-long conflict offered Assad yet another chance to turn popular enthusiasm into long-term political support. Syrian public opinion stood behind him, while [Hizbollah](#) and to some extent Assad became the heroes of the Arab street far beyond the Levant.

Against this background Assad was able to orchestrate presidential and parliamentary "elections" in 2007 with a comfortable cushion of popularity. Syrians were proud of their president for resisting international sanctions, the American intervention in Iraq, and international pressures connected with the Hariri [tribunal](#). In their view, Assad 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 popular sentiment behind him, this would have been another apt moment to convert his support into reformed political structures. Instead, Assad chose to be acclaimed again in a manipulated referendum for another seven-year tenure.

The foreign and the domestic

A period of international détente after 2008 gave the regime in Damascus a chance to regain the initiative in foreign-policy matters. European governments and even Washington 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. After his election as US president, Barack Obama chose a strategy of engagement in his effort to reverse the Syrian drift towards Iran and sent an ambassador to Damascus in January 2011, just as the Arab spring was starting. This represents the last foreign-policy success for Assad before the popular protests began (see [A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring](#), Cune Press, 2012).

The domestic secular opposition did not profit from the opening in Syria's foreign policy. Even the more benevolent dissenters and cautious voices who were not necessarily linked to the opposition became increasingly frustrated. An experienced 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."

The last failure

After all this, it was at a crucial point in early 2011 - at precisely the moment when nobody in the international community, including Israel, had an interest in Assad's overthrow, and when many states were trying to engage Syria as an actor in a regional peace scenario - that the president committed his most grievous mistakes and [missed](#) the last chance of his political career.

The response to the incidents in Dara'a, and the many other technical and strategic errors made during the revolt, typify the numerous chances wasted over the previous decade. The authorities, in 2011 as before, lacked the tools and the judgment to cope with the situation facing them. In addition, by playing the sectarian card more nakedly than ever before during his rule, Assad destroyed his secular legacy, that had also been a Ba'athist trademark. The targeted violence that sought to instigate sectarianism tainted the Syrian spirit of tolerance that has deep roots in the country's social history. This has become one of the greatest challenges to the Syrian people.

Many Syrians would have preferred to embark on a [transition](#) in a framework of stability. Assad himself, to accomplish this [purpose](#), would have had to overcome his personality and be prepared to encounter resistance from within his family. In the end, Assad lacked the audacity and vision of his personal friend King Juan Carlos of Spain. He was no political hero, capable of becoming

a champion of reform. Instead, he repeatedly resisted it, and remained trapped within an obsolete and ideologically eroded system. Syrians are now grappling with the consequences of that failure.



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