

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 Mahmud Ahmedinejad in Lebanon in mid-October 2010 is the more visible aspect of this development. During Ahmedinejad'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.

events in Syria could unfold:

(1) Bloody Clampdown with Regime Survival, including al-Asad.

After a painful process of maybe months, the regime will be able to suppress and suffocate the upheavals through brute force, targeted arrests and sophisticated intelligence work. Bashar al-Asad will ever more grow into the traditional role of his father Hafez who successfully ruled with blood on his hands after the massacre of Hama in 1982.

In this scenario, the younger Asad will be able to continue his career in Syrian politics by playing the sectarian card more visibly. At the very least he will face a more sectarian scenario that is fuelled by Sunni extremists. Asad himself can rely on major parts of Christian and Alawite minorities (although they may be personally appalled by the regime's violence) and he may manage to forge new alliances in an alternating manner as his father did. Asad may also be able to maintain the bond with the pragmatic Sunni merchant class. This, however, requires an economic upswing in order to distribute wealth and privileges as in the past. At this point, this looks at the least very difficult to manage.

Asad will hardly have any soft power left and will depend ever more on his security apparatus and on the crueler members of his family clan like Maher al-Asad, Asef Shawkat, brother-in-law and deputy chief of staff of the armed forces, or the much hated tycoon and Asad's cousin Rami Makhloof. Asad will continue to play the tunes of false alternatives such as 'Islamism and chaos or Baath rule and law and order'. And he may need to get tougher with the external enemy Israel to compensate for his loss of credibility among Syrians.

Those who had hoped that the President would embark on reforms as soon as he can rid himself of hardliners and vested interests will finally turn away from him. After the clampdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001 Asad will become known for the clampdown on the Arab Spring in Syria.

Moreover, painstaking efforts to improve Syria's image abroad are lying in tatters. Not long before the wave of Arab protests reached Syria, the regime in Damascus had started to regain the initiative in foreign policy matters. European governments and even the US administration

seemed to have come to the conclusion that Syria was at least a stable, politically approachable, and important geo-strategic player in the Middle East whose president was on the path of piecemeal reforms. US President Barack Obama played soft on Syria 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 represented the last foreign policy success for Bashar al-Asad before the popular protests.

It was hard work for Asad to get to this point after years of isolation and stigmatization following the Iraq war. Two years of successful diplomacy, constructive engagements like in Lebanon, rapprochement with Europe and even with the US, and a clever diversification of foreign policy with Turkey as a partner were destroyed by the unsuccessful approach of the Syrian regime towards popular demands.

On the other hand, clinging to power with all means has created common grounds with other autocratic Arab states and can ease traditional tensions with Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States, for instance. Remember that Syria declared that the Saudi military invasion to crush the protests in Bahrain had been justified.⁴

By contrast, Syria's shift away from pragmatism will have its cost in another area. If Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan remains serious about his democracy agenda in the Middle East, he will not be able to do business as usual with Syria in the described scenario. The loss of Turkey as a partner will be hard for Syria to compensate. Moreover, Turkey was Syria's back door for mending relations with the West.

(2) Bloody Clampdown with Regime Survival, excluding al-Asad.

In this scenario many of the above mentioned consequences apply, too. There will be hardly any scope for a quick healing of Syria's estrangement from the West. Relations with Turkey will be strained. The alliance with Iran will remain the most important anchor for Syria's foreign policy. Syrian influence in Lebanon will be exerted more openly and bluntly again. An aggressive stance *vis-à-vis* Israel is probable.

Already during the first weeks of the mass protests, rifts within the Syrian power structure looked like a possible collateral effect. Some in-

⁴ "Syria Justifies Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain", in: *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, March 20, 2011.

congruencies also became visible. Contradicting statements were issued by the President's advisers concerning a lift of emergency law and other steps toward reform. Rumours spread about tough controversies within the Asad family and also between members of his cabinet and his surrounding clan. In an unprecedented step in modern Syria, hundreds of members of the Baath Party, especially from Der'a, resigned in protest against the use of violence against civilians.

An internal coup against Bashar al-Asad cannot be excluded. Already in 2005 after the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and Syria's forced military withdrawal from Lebanon, not many observers were betting on Asad's political future. He was criticized by hardliners of being unable to protect Syrian interests.

"Bashar is not the regime", a leading oppositional figure of the Civil Society Movement said a few months before the unrest.⁵ The regime has always been a complex web of direct or subtle influences, priorities, jealousies and power struggles. The oppositional figure claimed that Asad is left to act freely in foreign policy only, whereas domestically the secret services, the Baath Party, clan and big business representatives are in control of the sinecure.

After the death of Hafez al-Asad the Syrian regime has experienced a pluralisation of power centres. Red lines are difficult to anticipate since they shift every now and then. Contradictions occur within one and the same institution or on different levels of hierarchy. Translated into the events in Dar'a, Homs and beyond, this opens the question of who has been behind the orders to shoot and which groups did shoot in the end. Remember that after the bloody Easter Friday Asad declared (indirectly, via advisers and opposition figures) that there will be no more targeting of civilians. And still, the blood-shed continued.

The same question came up after the Hariri assassination, and played a crucial role in the investigation by the Special Tribunal: Was Asad personally involved in the murder, did he know about it but could not prevent it or was it done behind his back? None of the three possibilities casts the leader in a good light.

A putsch could be led by Asad's brother Maher who is now branded as the 'slaughterer of

Der'a' and would have much to lose from transition or regime collapse. The circle around Asad's sister Bushra and her husband, Asef Shawkat, has had its share of frictions with the president for a long time. In addition, a few key intelligence and military figures could also participate in a coup.

If Asad survives such a scenario he can paint himself as the weak but willing reformer who was unable to end his task because of vested interests. Although he had eleven years time to embark on serious reforms, Syrians who profited from the selective economic opening in particular may be inclined to adhere to this version.

(3) National Reconciliation Efforts and Gradual Transition with al-Asad

This possibility has been supported by an unexpected protagonist who has been in conflict with the regime and Asad personally for many years, was imprisoned twice, and played the leading role in Syria's moderate and intellectual Civil Society Movement and the Damascus Spring. In regular articles in the Lebanese press, the Christian journalist Michel Kilo called for a national dialogue in Syria with Bashar al-Asad on board in April 2011. Kilo feared the collapse of Syria's societal fabric. He wrote in the leftist independent newspaper *as-Safir*:

"This civil/consensual Syrian possibility implies two things: 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 ousting 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 fighting arena (...). No matter who will be on the victorious side, 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 the Syrian society's unity in addition to the destruction and dismantlement of the state. The only side that could benefit from a security solution (...) will be Israel."⁶

This stance against the polarizing currents in Syria has brought Kilo considerable criticism from oppositional figures who are being hunted

⁵ Interview with the author in Damascus, November 2010. The person asked to remain anonymous.

⁶ Kilo, Michel: "Yes, there must be a political solution", in: *As-Safir*, April 16, 2011. Quoted according to: *Mideast Wire*.

down, must fear for their lives, change their beds every night or see their friends being tortured. Others have applauded Kilo's far-sightedness in such a crucial moment of Syria's history. Kilo was invited for talks with Asad's adviser Buthaina Sha'ban, a thing that was unthinkable only a few months ago. The German-speaking opposition activist has a wide horizon and knows that he is walking a dangerous tightrope, especially in a situation in which it is not clear where the regime defines its limits of violence. While his method may be controversial, there is no doubt that Kilo's fundamental goals remain clear. He wants to work toward change "from the status quo to the revolution; from tyranny to freedom; from change driven by the authorities to societal change; and from the familial society to the civil society."⁷

People like Kilo may be the last window of opportunity for Asad who has missed innumerable chances during his rule.⁸ Domestic and secular opposition in Syria has always been a moderate actor that shunned a violent regime change and partly shared the regime's positioning in foreign policy. But after the events in 2011 ever more Syrians consider Asad not to be part of the solution but rather part of the problem. At the moment when this article was written it remained open if Kilo's initiative would survive the dynamic of events.

(4) Regime Change and Democratization

This scenario has been regarded as unlikely during the past months because of various factors: The high degree of violence involved in the process, the criminalization of protests by the regime and an induced sectarian spin, the arming of various criminal groups, the decentralized nature of the Syrian uprising, the low degree of political organization and articulation compared to Egypt and Tunisia, and the high political, societal and military costs that the toppling of the Asad regime would imply.

In spite of these dim projections a glance at Syria's history brings about more encouraging aspects. Firstly, Syrian society has for centuries been known for its moderate and tolerant approach to religious matters throughout the rule of foreign dynasties and empires. Most of Syria's Sunnis (roughly two thirds of the population) have traditionally been more interested in good trade relations than in religious dogma-

tism or fanaticism. The politics of the Baath regime has continued this tradition of a peaceful co-existence of religious groups. The Asad dynasty has promoted moderate religious leaders and has a strong record of fighting Islamist currents and of granting privileges to religious minorities (despite of a tendency to manipulate Islamist influence and playing sectarian cards).⁹ In the end, the predominantly Alawite regime has always relied on minority support, especially from the Druze and Christians.

Secondly, Syria can look back on past democratic experiences. The country enjoyed intermezzis of civilian rule during its turbulent phase after independence in the 1940s and 50s. One of the most respected prime ministers, Faris al-Khoury, was a Christian.¹⁰ Although most civilian cabinets were short-lived, Syria has a tradition of democratic thinking and articulation. This has led to Syrian self-confidence developing to the point that the Syrian intelligentsia sees the roots and key contents of today's Arab revolutions in the Syrian Civil Society Movement and its numerous declarations from the Damascus Spring to subsequent years.¹¹

What makes the picture more complicated is that the mainly grey-haired figures of the Civil Society Movement had originally not been in tune with the street protests in Syrian cities and villages. Some of them have later participated in the demonstrations like Riad Seif, an entrepreneur and ex-Member of Parliament who spent most of Asad's rule behind bars, and several other prominent figures. But the impetus of the upheavals – at least in their beginning – were popular grievances that go beyond the overall intellectual approach of Syria's traditional home-grown opposition.

It took almost three months until the opposition abroad tried to form a national council modeled on the Libyan experience. Figures outside Syria have often been mistrusted by representatives of the domestic opposition or the wider population. External opposition has traditionally been more radical in its demands of regime change. But the protagonists are very diverse. Among them are serious intellectuals and scholars in exile in Washington, London, Paris and elsewhere as well as figures with a highly controversial record like Syria's long time vice president and hardliner Abdul Halim Khaddam,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wieland, Carsten: Asad's Lost Chances, in: Middle East Research and Information Project, April 13, 2011.

⁹ More on the political history of inter-religious relations in Syria: van Dam, Nikolaos: *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, London 1981, and on secularism in Syria: Wieland, Carsten: *Syria – Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant*, Cune Press, Seattle 2006, esp. pp. 87ff.

¹⁰ More on Khoury's biography see: Moubayed, Sami: *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000*, Cune Press, Seattle 2006, pp. 277ff.

¹¹ Interview with Sadiq al-Azm in February 2011.

who surprisingly defected to Paris shortly after the Hariri assassination in 2005. Another person who has open bills to pay with Bashar al-Asad is his uncle Rifat who is said to hold supporters in the coastal town of Baniyas, one of the hotbeds of the early protests. The latter personalities are far from being democrats, and the democratic opposition is far from homogeneous. Domestically, Riad Seif and Michel Kilo are probably the most well-known figures although they have different approaches as described above. All in all, no charismatic figure is in sight who could lead a transition with determination. Neither an institution is visible that could take over the task like the military in Egypt or Tunisia.

(5) Chaos and Civil War

This scenario is the most deterring one for many Syrians. Only in 1982 the last civil war ended in Syria with the massacre at Hama. Since then Syrians have enjoyed a period of exceptional security and quietness whereas examples of civil strife, sectarian clashes, crime and terrorism ravaged around Syrian borders. The ruling Baath regime has often tapped into these fears – a well-known discourse for Tunisians and Egyptians as well. It was the autocrats who inferred chaos and intended to criminalize the opposition shortly before they finally stumbled. Also in Syria thousands of protesters that have dared to go out into the streets have been labeled as criminals, Islamists, and sectarian bandits by the regime. Having said this, radicals and bandits have indeed tainted the protests more than in Tunisia or Egypt. A factor that could lead to a Libyan scenario is the military. The elite troops such as the presidential guard are under

tight control by the Asad clan. Mostly composed of Alawites, they have a lot to lose. During the protests the regime has mainly fallen back on these troops for good reason.

The ordinary army of conscripts is in a dismal state of frustration, corruption, poverty and poor equipment. It is unlikely that ordinary soldiers would shoot their kin in Syria's villages in great numbers. Cases of intra-army strife have been reported, including the killing of soldiers by other soldiers for refusing to shoot civilians. This may only be the beginning of a Libyan scenario. The army may split into frustrated and appalled soldiers who join the rebels on the one side and Asad loyal elite troopers on the other side. This would lead to a prolonged conflict, most probably with international intervention or intents of mediation, most plausibly by Turkey.

Since any of these scenarios will affect the power fabric in the region and finally the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an intervention in Syria would be far more complex than in Libya. Innumerable interests are involved, among them the Saudi-Iranian dichotomy and repercussions for Lebanon. Syria, once a self-conscious and pragmatic middle power under Hafez al-Asad, could turn into the chessboard of conflicting interests in the region. No matter how the events in Syria will unfold and to which scenario they will turn, one thing looks certain: Syria has been shaken, domestic power structures are shifting, and the regime is stigmatized. Only a peaceful transition can avoid Syria losing weight in the region. Similarly, Egypt, whose pivotal regional role had faded away under the encrusted Mubarak regime, has a chance to regain the initiative with a new dynamic should domestic politics develop peacefully.

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