More 'Hama Rules' or a Democratic Opening from the Tragedy of Syria?

Civil war has not just broken out in Syria. It has been developing incrementally over the last year between Syria's ruling Alawite minority community and their Sunni opponents, with the other religious and ethnic communities caught in the middle and hedging their bets. Nor is this a new conflict or the first challenge of this nature that the Assad regime has faced. In 1981 Iraqi President Saddam Hussein boasted to Western officials that he was arming, training and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. He predicted that the regime's demise was imminent. The following year Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria with considerable guile and resourcefulness for almost three decades, foiled Hussein's plans by ruthlessly erasing the Muslim Brotherhood revolt taking place in Hama – conservative estimates put the death toll at around 10,000. Assad Senior viewed this conflict in zero-sum terms. His son Bashar today faces a similar existential threat from an insurgency that is again led by Sunni rebels. The rules of the game are 'Hama Rules'; the regime views the contest in terms of 'us or them'.

In framing potential solutions to the crisis, the Syrian's themselves do not like their country to be compared with Iraq or Lebanon, two fractured states that have endured lengthy periods of consumptive civil war with wide ranging regional and international dimensions. Much like Lebanon, the new Iraq is a weak state that lacks sovereignty, its conflicts are regulated by a complex power-sharing system, and its different communities are backed by competing external patrons. Executive power in these two deeply divided societies is shared by the most significant religious and ethnic groups. No winner can take all in Lebanon, Sunni majority rule is a thing of the past in Iraq, and both states are constituted on the basis of ethnic pluralism and communal autonomy. This new order sits in stark contrast to the nationalistic strong state authoritarianism that has been the *modus operandi* of government in the Arab world since the end of the colonial mandate system.

The conflict in Syria appears to have gone beyond the point of no return. A lengthy civil war seems likely. This much is clear. Which side will prevail and what victory for one side or the other (or stalemate) will mean for Syria, and for the Assad regime's international backers and detractors, is far from clear. There are a number of different scenarios for Syria, none of which are particularly attractive to Western policy makers. As things stand, the regime appears confident enough in its belief that it can prevail by crushing the revolt in the most strategically important cities above Damascus, that is Hama, Homs and Allepo. These provide access to Lebanon, the costal strip above it, and to the Alawite stronghold of Latakia. For the regime these are the important parts of the Syrian state. Economically, it has managed the crisis relatively well and it maintains the support of Iran and Russia. In military terms, the two sides remain unevenly matched and the four most loyal divisions of the Syrian Army, aided by the 200,000 strong security services and *shabiha* militias, appear to be capable of containing the insurgency.

A 'Kosovo' scenario for Syria is highly unlikely. In 1998-1999 Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic misread Western intentions. He assumed that NATO would not act to prevent the reassertion of Serbian hegemony in Kosovo. Saddam Hussein made a similar miscalculation in 2002-2003. In contrast, Assad has read the international relations at play over Syria rather well. Western powers have no appetite for military intervention in Syria and Assad enjoys the backing of powerful allies in China, Iran, and Russia. The West will face increasing pressure to intervene if the conflict escalates and the massacres currently taking place morph into the sort of ethnic cleansing that Milosevic employed in Kosovo in response to an Albanian uprising. However, the West would be foolish to intervene in the

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absence of an internationally agreed political solution to the crisis that would provide political cover for such action.

The main opposition group, the Syrian National Council, wants to see the regime toppled and replaced by some form of majority led democratic government, but there is little agreement between opposition groups as to what form this might take or how it might be achieved. In the short to medium term, a democratic transition is the most unlikely scenario for Syria. A prolonged civil war, which destabilises Lebanon and draws its Sunni, Shi'a, Maronite and Alawite factions into the conflict is much more likely. During the course of such a conflict, the Assad regime would probably come to the view that the partition of Syria was the least unattractive means of maintaining and prolonging its rule. Presently it is attempting to defeat, control and consolidate while the world argues over what should be done. And it is not unrealistic to suppose that the outcome of this would be ethnic and religious conflict spanning the Levant and Mesopotamia from Israel's northern border with Lebanon all the way to the Gulf. This worst case scenario is not the least likely scenario, and it is one that would have detrimental repercussions for all those who have an interest in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Whether Syrians like the comparison or not, their country is in the same neighbourhood as Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and their society shares similar ethnic, religious and class divisions. Much like Lebanon and Iraq, any future Syrian party system will be shaped along ethnic and religious lines, with the majority Sunni community split. The Christian, Shi'a, Druze, Alawite and Kurdish communities fear a Sunni dominated state. The regime has played on these fears since the crisis began. Another obvious characteristic that Syria shares with its neighbours is the external linkage politics between each of its communities and external patrons. The Alawite faction is supported by Iran and Russia, the Sunni rebels by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the West. The conflict is not simply over domestic Syrian politics. International and regional conflicts are being played out over Syria. Thus the outcome to the conflict will be determined to a large extent by these exogenous variables, and it will have considerable knock-on effects for Lebanon and Iraq.

Some commentators suggest that there may be an internal *coup* against Assad, that economic sanctions might bring about the collapse of his regime, that Russia may be persuaded to abandon Assad, or even that an amnesty might entice him to retire to a friendly country. Yet none of these developments would halt the civil war that has intensified in recent weeks as the regime seeks to take back key strategic towns and cities. So is there a third way that might prevent Syria from descending into the sort of chaos that rendered Lebanon ungovernable in the late 1970s and 1980s, or that led to the inter- and intra-sectarian carnage that ripped Iraq apart after 2003?

There is one such possibility and it might not be too late for it to be employed as a means of preventing the collapse and partition of Syria, with all the negative repercussions that this would spell for the Middle East. It would be prudent for Western policy makers to consider some form of power-sharing between elements of the ruling Alawite regime and Syria's different factions as the least unattractive development that could realistically be expected to occur in Syria over the next five years. This idea is fraught with difficulties and it will be dismissed as irrelevant by many Syrian and international commentators. They will oppose it because it will not deliver their first policy preferences, it will provide a means for the ruling elite to stay in power, and because it will institutionalise the ethnic and religious divisions that exist in Syria in much the same way as power-sharing does in Lebanon and Iraq. Of course power-sharing was seen as irrelevant for all these reasons in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, and Northern Ireland too. That is until it came to be viewed as the least unattractive means of regulating political violence and ending civil war in those deeply divided societies.

Two things would need to happen for this idea to become a realistic policy option. The first is that the US and its European allies would need to make a concerted diplomatic effort to convince China, Russia and Iran that prolonged civil war and partition in Syria will damage their interests in the Middle East. This would entail a considerable degree of compromise on the part of the US. Iran has significant interests in Syria, as does Russia. And the pursuit of a Western foreign policy towards Syria which is premised on simply ending or reducing Iran's influence there, and in Lebanon through Hizballah, will only prolong the crisis. The chances of this policy succeeding are slim, as proved to be the case in Lebanon when the West backed factions opposed to the Iran-Syria-Hizballah 'resistance' axis in 2006, through a war between Israel and Hizballah.

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A power-sharing agreement could be negotiated, implemented and consolidated in Syria if international agreement was first brokered between the US, China, Russia, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. There needs to be agreement between these states, agreement that this is the best means of regulating the crisis and avoiding a lengthy civil war. Should one or more of these parties view civil war in Syria as best serving their interests, then the others parties would have to use whatever diplomatic levers they have at their disposal to convince them otherwise.

The second thing that would need to happen for this idea to have any chance of success would be for the West to lead an international diplomatic effort to establish a political process in Syria; a process that sought to bring about a new constitutional dispensation which included elements of the old order, namely the Ba'ath Party and the ruling Alawite elite. A starting point for this would be for the international community to make it absolutely clear to the Assad regime that any attempt to partition the state would be immediately resisted militarily by the international community. At the same time, it would leave open the possibility that the Assad regime had a future role to play in the government of Syria.

It would be far more favourable to further such an idea before Syria descends into widespread civil war than attempt to impose power-sharing on its warring factions after the state has collapsed. If this idea was pursued, then some form of military intervention in Syria would be necessary. This would be an international peace keeping force that had the backing of Russia and China on the UN Security Council. The Annan Plan is clearly not designed to deliver any such outcome, but it could be used as a foundation upon which the West sought to build international consensus along these lines. This would involve considerable compromises by all parties concerned, but it could potentially alter the zero-sum nature of a civil war that is currently being played out to the sickening tune of 'Hama Rules'.

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