Opinion – Dictatorships Are Unstable, Yet the International System Continues to Support Them

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It has been almost three months since Syria's former president, Bashar Assad, was forced to flee the capital, Damascus. Reportedly, asylum for him and his family in Moscow was personally approved by President Putin , his longtime ally. As rebels advanced from Syria's north and captured Aleppo, one of its largest cities, within a matter of days before taking Damascus, there has been much speculation on why the Assad regime collapsed so quickly. Up until the last minute, Assad was asking longtime allies like Russia and Iran for the help they had provided before that had stopped rebel advances and kept him in power. This included a meeting in early December 2024 with Ali Larijani, a senior adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khameini. As one outlet put it, Assad was "desperately reaching out to his friends and foes to secure his grip on authority," going so far as trying "indirect diplomatic overtures to the US and President-elect Donald Trump." It was to no avail.

As I mention in *Defending Dictatorship*, a regime's legitimacy can be utilitarian as opposed to democratic. In addition, there is a difference between domestic legitimacy versus international legitimacy. A regime's international legitimacy can be tied to that regime's recognition by other states. International legitimacy can be state-based, as states effectively lead the international system. States "will cooperate in an international system that prioritizes the stability of sovereign states over the rights of citizens of individual states", which further feeds into the notion that "sovereignty is an artificial construct that requires the legitimation of an international system" (Due-Gundersen 2022 123).

In other words, the Assad regime gained a degree of international legitimacy through support from Russia and Iran under an international system that is not regarded as universally democratic. As explained by Brazil's Ambassador to the UK, "[this] issue has gained renewed relevance since the invasion of Ukraine. A Russian veto at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) effectively prevented the body responsible for maintaining international peace and security from performing its role, which illustrates the difficulty in dealing with situations in which one of the five permanent members violates international law. And this is not the first time it has happened. The 21st century has witnessed other unilateral military interventions incompatible with the United Nations (UN) Charter, as was the case in Iraq. This time, the organization was challenged by the President of Ukraine to demand compliance with international law by all or confront the risk of its decreasing significance."

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that the states that supported Assad like Russia "have legitimacy issues of their own" but that did not stop them from exerting recognition for Assad under the international system, with Russia previously arguing that Assad was "the chief of a state represented in the United Nations." With such an endorsement, perhaps it is understandable that Assad would over-rely on such international legitimacy and ignore domestic unrest until Moscow stopped strategically striking rebel activities in his favour.

So why did Russia and Iran abandon Assad in his hour of need? For Putin, the invasion of Ukraine has expanded precious military and related resources. For Moscow and Tehran, Russian airstrikes and Iran's limited militias allowed for low-cost intervention and minimal commitment. "When [Assad's] regime comes under any sort of sustained pressure – and this was pressure on three sides in three different places-suddenly, that limited commitment that Russia and Iran were making wasn't enough," explains Sky News defence analyst, Professor

Michael Clarke. “Either they were going to commit much more, or they were going to have to pull out. Both of them decided they would throw [Assad] under the bus and pull out.”

The sudden abandonment of key allies and unceremonious de facto withdrawal of Assad’s recognition by them is no surprise when considered from a pragmatic perspective, reflecting how so-called allies will consider recognition through a cost-benefit analysis. In addition, it brings us back to the notion that international legitimacy is a sham: regime sovereignty is an artificial construct that requires the recognition of influential actors in the international system, be they global or regional (Due-Gundersen 2022 123). In Assad’s case, it also required increasing military intervention by the same actors who claimed Assad had legitimacy until they decided that, bluntly put, such recognition and intervention was no longer cost-effective, with Russia’s Putin sharing a phone call with Syria’s interim President Sharaa in February 2025 and flying in Russia-printed Syrian currency amid Moscow’s hope that Russia can maintain military bases in the country.

With Assad’s downfall and a renewed interest in the Arab Spring, there is now focus on whether Egypt’s Sisi will eventually fall. Sisi hails from a key actor important in Egypt’s ruling structure: the military. In 2013, he led an overthrow of democratically elected Islamist President Morsi as economic frustrations grew under Morsi’s tenure. The legitimacy of Sisi’s coup was recognised by significant regional states, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel, like Egypt, all allies of Washington. Indeed, the US response to Sisi’s coup and later 2014 election win was a reminder that international legitimacy is pragmatic.

Cato Institute research fellow, John Hoffman, outlines how the United States “refused to officially label the overthrow a military coup in order to circumvent Section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibits military and other financial aid to any country ‘whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree.’ Upon el-Sisi’s victory in the 2014 election, the Obama administration issued a statement congratulating the new ruler, saying the U.S. ‘looks forward to working with Abdelfattah al-Sisi, the winner of Egypt’s presidential election, to advance our strategic partnership and the many interests shared by the United States and Egypt.’”

Under Sisi, Egypt’s public debt has tripled. However, as with Assad, Sisi maintains regional allies. In his case, these are the oil-rich Gulf States of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which seem to have allowed for more generous support. When Russia’s war with Ukraine threatened a currency crisis for Egypt in 2022, these allies pledged USD 22 billion in aid. In addition, Egypt receives billions of dollars in aid and loans from the EU and the United States, including for military purposes despite human rights concerns by Amnesty International.

Of course, a key difference between Sisi and Assad is that Sisi is not facing popular armed resistance. However, he is “keenly aware that he has become the most authoritarian ruler in the Arab region, with over 65,000 political prisoners languishing in his jails, thousands documented to be forcibly disappeared and torture becoming systematic state policy amounting to a crime against humanity.”

When the Arab Spring first broke, Assad seemed blissfully unconcerned. According to Robert Ford, the American Ambassador to Damascus during the Arab Spring, in a meeting between the two “[Assad] did not seem at all concerned about what was happening in Egypt [in 2011]. He appeared very relaxed and was very talkative. He dismissed Ben Ali and Mubarak as being tools of the West, and insisted no one could say the same about Syria, which was at the forefront of Arab resistance to Israel. The message he sought to convey was: ‘The Syrian people are behind me’” (Coughlin 2023 135).

Sisi, however, is painfully aware of Assad’s fate and, according to journalist Osama Gaweesh, “has opted for a strategy reliant on fear – specifically, fear of Syria’s fate – to deter dissent.” The parallels between Syria’s economic hardship under Assad and Egypt’s economic hardship under Sisi are stark. One key difference, however, is that Sisi has granted authority and significant economic privilege to the military, while Assad allowed his military to fester. Such neglect was a key factor in mass desertion when Assad needed help from the armed forces. In addition, heretofore Sisi has managed to contain protests, which have not progressed into armed resistance.

However, Assad’s downfall sparked concern for Sisi amid calls for reform in Cairo. Within days of Assad’s relocation

to Moscow, Israel's head of internal security was on a plane to Egypt "to discuss with Egyptian officials the repercussions of Assad's ousting and the need to take preventive measures." This is another key difference between Assad and Sisi – when under threat, Assad was rebuffed by his allies while Sisi's allies are mobilising to pre-empt the risk of unrest. With his allies all connected to Washington and support from the United States, it is clear international legitimacy is not equal and not democratic. Nonetheless, with the re-elected President Trump pressuring Sisi to take in Palestinian refugees from Gaza, perhaps this support is about to change.

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