

Syria: The Death of a Nation?

Written by Robert G. Rabil

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ROBERT G. RABIL, JUN 4 2012

Months after the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria, Damascus continues its slow, steady descent into sectarian strife. Ominously, atrocities, including massacres, suicide bombings and kidnappings, are becoming daily occurrences in Syria. The ramifications of sectarian strife in Syria have fueled simmering political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon, potentially causing a new sectarian conflagration with dire consequences for the region. Meanwhile, the international community remains woefully divided as to how to put a stop to violence in Syria, while at the same time being gripped by delusional notions about the nature of the Syrian regime and that a compromise between the Syrian regime and the opposition is still achievable. At the heart of this gloomy crisis are layers of complexity linking sectarian intuitions and concerns to regional and international geostrategic considerations. Damascus today is at the epicenter of a regional struggle that may well shape the new political contours of the Middle East.

What started as a rebellion against the repressive and oppressive Syrian Alawi-dominated regime, in tune with the popular uprisings in Egypt and Libya, has evolved into a struggle equating the survival of the regime with that of the minority Alawi community. Conversely, the rebellion has evolved into a struggle against Persian and Shi'ism assertion of regional predominance, tightly linking Syria to the evolving Arab politics, as influenced by the Arab popular uprisings, and to the ongoing shifts in the Saudi and Iranian-led regional axes of powers that have resulted from withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. All of this has rekindled revanchist impulses associated no less with sectarian than Islamist-nationalist considerations on the local and regional levels.

Pan-Arabism and the Syrian Regime

True, the Alawi-dominated regime of late Hafiz al-Asad and his son Bashar has adopted the Ba'thi strident nationalist discourse; nevertheless, it has pursued domestic and regional policies all in the interest of regime security and, by extension, Alawi hegemony over the state. Syrian troops initially entered Lebanon in 1976 on the side of the Christian camp, against the National Movement camp and its PLO foot soldiers. The Syrian regime supported Tehran in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, against a brotherly Arab and Ba'thist Baghdad. At the same time, the Alawi regime used pan-Arabism as an ideological tool not only to transcend tribal and sectarian differences in Syria, but also to wrap itself in the mantle of Arab nationalism's legitimacy to win over the majority Sunni community. The regime, thus, has defined itself as the defender of Arab rights, firstly against an aggressive Israel and then against an imperial United States.[1] As of late, the Syrian regime has supported an Islamist-nationalist discourse that coincided with its support of Hezbollah both as a resistance movement and as a central aspect of its relationship with Iran. Meanwhile, the regime institutionalized its levers of power on the basis of an Alawi preponderance in the state and an uneasy alliance between the Alawi military and the Sunni merchants of Damascus and Aleppo.

But after so many adjustments by the Asad regime to the realities of power, the recent of which its identification with Iran and Hezbollah following the murder of former Lebanese Sunni prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and the Summer 2006 War between Hezbollah and Israel, coupled with chronic corruption and oppressive rule at home, what remains of the ideological mantle of the Syrian regime except its fallacy and bankruptcy?

The regime recognizes that the veneer of its legitimate rule has worn out. This partly explains its unwillingness to substantively reform Syria's political structure, thereby relying more on the Alawi-led state apparatus to maintain its

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survival. Moreover, the regime understands no other language but violence to communicate with its polity. In fact, violence has marked the very history and development of the Ba'thist regime. No less significant, the rise of rural Alawi officers to power in Syria's urban centers has only reinforced the link between the regime and the Alawi community. Alawi perennial reservations about Sunni power in general and Sunni political Islam in particular, which can be traced to Alawi social sycophancy and servility to the mainly Sunni political establishment prior to Syria's independence, have not dissipated. It was not out of an altruistic naivety that Bashar's Grandfather, Suleiman al-Asad, petitioned the Leon Blum government in 1936, when Syria was under the French mandate, to express Alawi aspirations for independence separately from Sunnis in Syria. It was not also out of a sacrosanct belief in pan-Arabism that Alawi officers met Alawi dignitaries, shortly after the abortive Nasserite coup of July 18, 1963, to lay foundational plans for the future establishment of an Alawi state with the city of Homs as its capital and to encourage Alawi young men to enlist in the armed forces.[2] In much the vein, it was not a political aberration that the regime, at the height of its vulnerability in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, not only maintained the principal role of the Ba'th party in the state, but also began to arm and train what came to be infamously known now in Syria as *asa-Shabiha* (The thuggish ghosts of the regime), who have been behind most of the atrocities committed against the opposition. As such, it's not feasible to draw a distinction between Bashar and the regime; or, at the moment, to separate the regime and the Alawi community. The regime is through and through Alawi; and it is not unreasonable to believe that the regime, in collaboration with Alawi dignitaries, has already drawn emergency plans to establish a minoritarian state.

The Syrian Regime and Regional Dynamics

Concurrently, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 helped bring Iran (and Hezbollah) and Syria closer together. Feeling threatened by Washington, Tehran and Damascus cooperated to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq and prevent the creation of a Pax Americana in the region.[3] The 2006 War between Hezbollah and Israel only reinforced this alignment of forces that King Abdullah of Jordan notoriously called the Shi'a crescent, linking Shi'a Iran, via Baghdad and Damascus, with Hezbollah's Shi'a stronghold in West Beirut. Significantly, the seizure of West Beirut by Hezbollah in 2008 intensified the polarization of Lebanon's sectarian politics and sectarianism. A pro-Western, pro-Saudi camp, led by Hariri's majority Sunni Future Current, has opposed a pro-Iranian, pro-Syrian camp, led by Hezbollah. Tension between the two camps manifested not only in sharp sectarian discourses, but also in skirmishes in Lebanon's major cities, especially in the northern city of Tripoli. Meanwhile, Damascus has maintained its political and military support of Hezbollah to the chagrin of Sunnis and other members of Lebanon's confessional groups.

Similarly, Tehran can ill afford the loss of the Syrian regime as a regional ally and a nodal point for its projection of power and deterrence strategy against Israel. Hezbollah, Iran's proxy militia, can also ill afford a regime change that may put the Islamist party far out on a limb by severing the overland weapons supply from Tehran and denying the party Syria's strategic depth. Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah, has consistently supported the regime and accused United States and Israel of conspiring to topple it. In his Martyr Day's Speech on February 16, 2012, Nasrallah asserted that " we stand by the Syrian regime. Can anyone say that the Syrian regime is not a rejectionist regime and did not support the resistance in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq? The regime in Syria has stood in the face of the US-Israeli project in the region...Is it not strange that an alignment of the United States, the West, and moderate Arab states, was formed along with al-Qaeda to bring down the Syrian regime?"[4]

Consequently, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah's militants have systematically expanded their operations in Syria in order to protect the regime. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have supported the rebels. Ankara played a key role in helping establish the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army. Mecca and Doha, besides supporting a motley of Islamist and Salafist groups, have allegedly been behind smuggling weapons to Syria. Lebanese authorities have intercepted several trucks and ships laden with weapons destined to Syria.[5]

The Paralysis of the International Community and Arab League and the Rise of Violence

Meanwhile, Western efforts to put a stop to violence in Syria and force Bashar from power have been stymied by Russia and China, which have vetoed UN Security Council resolutions calling for punitive actions against the Syrian

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regime. Moreover, several meetings by the so-called Friends of Syria, which included Western and Arabic countries, failed to come to a unifying position regarding the Syrian crisis. In a recent Arab League summit in Baghdad, Iraqi Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki railed against Arab calls for arming the opposition, asserting that “the Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime will not fall and attempts to overthrow it by force will aggravate the crisis in the region...We reject any arming [of Syrian rebels] and the process to overthrow the regime.”[6]

It was against this schism in international and Arab ranks that former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan brokered his six points plan to stop violence and initiate a political process to address the aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people. Sadly enough, but expectedly so, the plan was flouted by parties to the conflict, but more egregiously so by the Syrian regime. In fact, sectarian strife has deepened and spilled over into Lebanon’s combustible landscape. Blood-spattered fighting along sectarian lines between pro and anti-Syrian regime erupted in Tripoli and Beirut. Eleven Shi’a Lebanese were kidnapped in Syria while en route home. And, regrettably as well as ominously, a massacre in Houla was allegedly committed by the regime’s forces.[7] Houla is a Sunni village ringed by Alawi villages.

On closer examination, the trend of violence appears to be the norm in Syria. The regime is digging its heels, casting aside concerns about potential international intervention or punitive actions. Motivated no less by sectarian concerns and survival than by Iranian (and by extension Iraqi and Lebanese) and Russian political and military support, the regime would, at a maximum, fight to maintain its authority throughout Syria, and at minimum, try to establish an Alawi minoritarian state. The opposition, despite its chronic disunity, will have no other choice but keep fighting the regime’s forces and try to secure with regional support safe havens, from which to expand its area of operations. Lebanon is threatened with flare-ups at any time. The only barrier to a widespread sectarian conflagration is the recognition among all parties that civil strife will have collective disastrous consequences.

The Iranian Solution?

Taking all this into consideration, it is safe to argue that the key to resolving the politico-military, sectarian conflict in Syria rests now with how the international community addresses Iran’s nuclear file, which has become tightly linked with international sanctions against Tehran and Tehran’s regional standing. Tehran’s recent real or duplicitous flexibility over its nuclear program stems largely from its concerns over the Obama administration’s abandonment of its containment policy as a result of intense pressure from the Netanyahu government, the reach of international sanctions that have affected Tehran’s economic policy, and the precarious state of its only regional ally Syria. Tehran believes there lies an opportunity in this layered crisis. Apparently, it seeks a Grand bargain with the West, especially with United States, by which to protect its nuclear program, reduce the burden of sanctions and underwrite a new regional order in cooperation with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In return, Tehran may well act on its Supreme leader Khamenei’s assertion that Iran will not pursue nuclear weapons. In a televised speech in February, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that “the Iranian nation has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons. . . . Iran is not after nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin and believes the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive and dangerous.”[8] However, the Mullahs in Iran will neither give up nor consign their uranium enrichment to outside actors. Significantly, Tehran may force a compromise on the Syrian regime whereby Assad and his family will leave the country. It may also temper Hezbollah’s activities within and beyond Lebanon’s borders.

Otherwise, the path to stability in Syria and the region is arduously and sanguinarily long and replete with uncertainties. In any event, and regardless how the Syrian crisis is handled, the bankruptcy of Arab nationalism in the land considered as the cradle of Arab nationalism, coupled with the rise of both sectarianism and Islamism, will undoubtedly exert centrifugal forces raising the specter of dividing Syria along sectarian lines.

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recently *Religion, National Identity and Confessional Politics in Lebanon: The Challenge of Islamism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). www.robertrabil.com.

[1] For details on the regime's policies and political discourse, see Robert G. Rabil, *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel and Lebanon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), pp. 10-38.

[2] Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. 301.

[3] For details, see Robert G. Rabil, *Syria, the United States and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Wesport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), pp. 139-208.

[4] See Nasrallah's speech in *al-Intiqad*, February 17, 2012.

[5] For example, on April 27, 2012, the Lebanese army intercepted a Sierra Leonean ship with weapons aboard originating in Libya and bound for Syria. See "Khoury Thanks Lebanese Army for Seizing Syria-bound Arms shipments," *Daily Star*, May 5, 2012.

[6] Al-Maliki's statement was issued on April 1, 2012. See "Syrian Regime Will Not Fall," *Daily Star*, April 1, 2012.

[7] Neil MacFarquhar, "U.N. Security Council Issues Condemnation of Syria Attack," *New York Times*, May 27, 2012.

[8] See Ayatollah Khamenei's speech "Iran Will Never Seek Nuclear Weapons," *PressTV*, February 22, 2012, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/228014.html>.

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