

# Syria: Another Regimefall Looming

AMMAR ABDULHAMID

After so many years of talking, writing and quibbling about the necessity of democratic reforms in the Arab World and the “Broader Middle East,” observers really need to concede what should by now be quite obvious to all, namely that reform in this bedlam region needs to affect the entire political

spectrum and culture hereabouts as well as all the groups involved in shaping them: regimes, opposition groups, individual dissidents, and the society at large.

In a country like Syria, for instance, forty years of Ba’th oppression has practically decimated the country’s “professional” political class replacing it with a closed junta of corrupt militaristic ruffians of rural background who simply lack the necessary education and sophistication to envision and lead a viable and credible political reform process.

Their interest, their ideological predilections and their basic worldview, still mired in anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric, have made it virtually impossible for them to show the minimal amount of pragmatism required to help “lure in” some new faces from outside the usual ranks of the regime, to help chart a new course for the future of the country.

## Lack of vision

The few haphazard attempts that took place in the 1990s, under the late President Hafiz Al-Asad, and those that his son and successor, Bashar, has engaged in have come to naught. The lack of a future vision, a sustained methodological approach and the willingness to trust and stand by the new figures that were brought in to help produce the needed vision and advice on the reform process, gradually weakened the hands of these reform elements and hindered their ability to produce any viable change in the institutions in which they were infused.

In truth, the two presidents were simply more interested in maintaining and concentrating power in their hands, than in the reform process they have supposedly launched.

As often occurs, opposition groups that managed to survive the dark years of Ba’th oppression, which reached its climax in the 1980s, had long before become mere pathetic copies of the regime itself. Indeed, and with regards to their basic structure, ideology, and operation mechanisms, opposition groups often betray the same traits exhibited by the ruling Ba’th regime.

Corruption and nepotism are endemic; lack of transparency and inefficient organizational structures are basic qualities of Ba’th institutions; lack of necessary leadership skills and exposure to changing realities in the world and the region are readily visible even to the most casual of observers.

## Failing opposition

Islamist parties aside for now, all secular oppositions groups are either Nasserist, socialist, or communist in their ideological orientation. Still, and despite the long-heralded failure of the Nasserist dream and the catastrophic collapse of the Soviet Union, none of parties involved engaged in any introspective effort or dialogue, or any serious attempt at reassessing their basic vision and platform in light of these critical developments. As such, opposition groups remain mired in outdated rhetoric that is as equally cut-off from reality as that of the ruling regime.

Despite the fact that conditions seem to have improved somewhat since the arrival of President Bashar Al-Asad to power with regard to the greater degree of tolerance shown to opposition groups, none of these groups have so far managed to modernize its operations and its

**In the absence of credible alternatives, “regimefall” is not something to look forward to. Still, when regimefall has been made inevitable by the very internal logic of the regime involved, one cannot but watch, with a certain amount of awe, sorrow, and macabre fascination, the unfolding event.**

platform. Indeed, none of them has been able to formulate even a rudimentary platform.

The failure of the new President to offer any vision for reform throughout the five years that elapsed since his assumption of power or to show the necessary leadership skills, will, and

gumption that were expected of him, have provided opposition figures with a unique opportunity to attempt to fill the gaps themselves. Instead, five years have elapsed and the regime managed to drive the country into international isolation, and yet, the best thing that opposition figures and groups had been able to do at this stage was to rally behind the regime in a foolish though predictable show of solidarity and patriotism.

A similar stance was also adopted by most individual dissidents, who, despite their own criticism of opposition groups for their inability to modernize their parties and their programmes, and despite their occasional finger-pointing at the regime for paving the way to this untenable situation, still could not divorce themselves from their former ideological garb and could not help but fall in line with the usual “patriotic” stand that Syrians have been accustomed to for the last four decades.

Thus, and despite being directly responsible for drawing up the policies that led to the adoption of the US sanctions against the country and of the UN Security Council Resolution 1559, not to mention the humiliating withdrawal from Lebanon, the Syrian President was given the opportunity to fall back on old tactics and mobilize, unchallenged, the population in his favour, by organizing “popular” demonstrations wherein people reiterated the old chant of “our blood and souls are yours.”

## Riots and protests

Meanwhile, there have been signs for years now that the Syrian Street is growing restless. Indeed, mere months after the arrival of President Bashar to power in 2000, trouble broke out in the Southern province of Suweida, where Bedouin clans and Druze farmers clashed over land rights. The situation was quickly contained though by security forces sent from Damascus. The student demonstrations that took place on the Damascus University Campus were also put down and a number of students were arrested.

Coupled with the previous crackdown against the dissidents of the by now “infamous” period known as the Damascus Spring, that brief period of relaxation that followed the young President’s inauguration, the regime appeared firmly in control. Indeed, it was never the regime’s own control of society that was in question at the time, rather it was the degree of control that the President himself seems to have exerted. Most Syrians were willing to admit at the time that the only reason these events and crackdowns took place was the fact that the young President was not yet fully in charge of the situation, and that he simply needed more time to exert his will and vision upon the old guard around him and appoint his own people.

Still, mere months after these events had taken place, the Syrian streets witnessed an unusual phenomenon, namely: student organized rallies in support of the Palestinian Intifadah. Though, this was not exactly an opposition movement, most of the participants were young university students who were behaving at their own initiative. The authorities were indeed right in seeing the “danger” of this phenomenon and they launched a campaign of intimidation against the students who organized and took part in the various demonstrations and sit-ins and eventually forced them to put an end to their activities. Had these



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demonstrations been allowed to continue, the demonstrators might have indeed stumbled in time upon a domestic agenda, a development that could have spelled plenty of troubles for a regime that bases its legitimacy upon a mythical popular approval.

As it were then, the regime remained to appear firmly in control of the security situation in the country until March 2004, where riots broke out between Kurds and Arabs in the northeastern parts of the country. The riots soon spread to other parts of the country as well, including the capital Damascus. Specifics notwithstanding, the main issue was clearly the growing dissatisfaction of the country's Kurdish minority with their status as second class citizens whose region remains as one of the country's most neglected parts, and who have no right to speak their own language, not to mention study it, at school.

Indeed, for a long time, the country's Kurdish Question lay forgotten and dormant, but developments in Iraq seem to have put an end to that. The development could not be said to have come as a complete surprise to the Syrian authorities. Indeed, and mere days before the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Syrian President paid a visit to the Kurdish regions of the country for the first time since his ascent to office and called for and stressed the importance of "national unity." The authorities, therefore, seem to have been quite aware of the growing potential for trouble in those regions, but they did nothing on the grounds to prevent the situation from imploding.

Months later, it was the turn of the country's Assyrian community to riot. More recently, clashes took place between the country's Alawite and Ismaili minorities in the historic town of Misyaf.

Despite the fact that at the heart of all these issues lie some well-documented socioeconomic grievances, the fact that the rioting took place along sectarian and ethnic fault lines is pretty telling. Moreover, the failure of the local or central authorities to predict or prevent these riots is also pretty revealing. Despite the fact that the situations were always contained from a security point of view, with relative ease, the political fallouts have always been grave. The frailty of this regime can now be seen by one and all. Indeed, there is a growing sense in the country that no one is in charge, which gives ample room for individual initiative.

## A divided majority

In the absence of organized and capable opposition movements, however, and, in the absence of charismatic figures that inspire popular approval, and in view of the growing streak of extremist and atavistic trends among the country's various confessional groups, most notably the Sunnis, which form more than 75% of the population, the situation does not augur well for the future. The initiative is more likely to be seized by demagogues acting on the local level and fomenting communal hatred.

Still, and despite the fact that they seem to form the overwhelming majority, the Sunnis are far from being a homogenous group. Indeed,

they are themselves divided along ethnic, tribal, provincial, and ideological lines. Many are committed secularists. Others, though religious, are not necessarily in favour of establishing an Islamic state, being aware of the divisive nature of such an aspiration. For their part, the Sunnis of al-Jazira (as the northeastern parts of Syria are known) do include many Kurds, who identify themselves more as Kurds than Sunnis. The al-Jazira Arabs, on the other hand, tend to be more tribal in allegiance than their counterparts in Damascus, Aleppo, and other major cities in "western Syria." The Arabs of southern Syria are also tribal, but they belong to different tribes. Meanwhile, the Sunnis of the central and western Syria tend to be divided along ideological lines. Some are Sufis of different types, while others are Wahhabis and Salafis of different types as well. Some still yearn for the "good old days" of the Muslim Brotherhood, while others have shifted their allegiance to Hizbul Tahrir. Some follow this shaykh, while others follow that shaykh, and so on. The majority, that is the Sunnis, is only real vis-à-vis other confessional groups. Internally though, the Sunnis do not represent a singular community.

So, what does that exactly mean for the country, and for the future of the opposition movements in the country? Well, in the absence of an organized political opposition, and in the absence of a strong ruling regime, people, unsurprisingly, are falling back upon atavistic forms of belonging. But, in view of the increasing external political pressures being brought to bear on the country at this stage, and in view of the worsening socioeconomic conditions therein, a situation made even worse by the influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, the most likely scenario for the country at this stage seems to be implosion. Both regime and country seem poised to collapse under the increasing weight of their own internal contradictions. The conference of the Ba'th Party's regional command last June, and despite the hopes being hinged upon it by so many commentators and observers, demonstrated, once and for all, the total impotence and sterility of the current regime with regard to its ability to reinvent itself and provide a new vision for the country's future. As such, it is more likely to hasten rather than slowdown the eventual implosion.

In order to prevent such a catastrophic development, the Syrian opposition has to provide the missing vision and leadership needed to help this country pull itself out of the current quagmire. Considering our previous analysis, however, the opposition seems simply incapable and ill-equipped to do that. Consequently, we may not be simply witnessing the end of another Arab regime, but the death pangs of an entire country, that was nothing more than an artificial creation to begin with.

Ammar Abdulhamid is a Syrian novelist based in Damascus; he is coordinator of the Tharwa Project, a programme that seeks to foster a greater civic awareness in the broader Middle East.

Email: ammar@daremar.org

**The Ba'th Party  
top at the  
conference of  
its Regional  
Command,  
Damascus,  
6 June 2005**