

CHAPTER FIVE

SYRIA

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CONTEXT: ARAB SPRING

Two outcomes have emerged from the recent Arab Spring. On the one hand, the cultural paradigm erected by neo-Orientalists has proven to be blatantly wrong. No one can argue anymore that inherent features of the Arab and Islamic cultures make them incompatible with democratic values. Massive popular protests have shaken the region since the dramatic suicide of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia; they have remained non-violent, secular, and focused on dignity, social justice and freedom. On the other hand, the successful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia have been clear rejections of the failed war-imposed 'democratisation' projects which have led to the destruction of a country such as Iraq.

SOCIAL JUSTICE, FREEDOM, DIGNITY AND HUMAN SECURITY

In the case of Syria, the regime's response to five months of popular uprising was to opt for survival strategy: responding by violence and threatening the population with chaos and civil war in the event of its demise. The objective was to launch a war of attrition by playing on time to wear out any internal revolt. It chose however the wrong combination of brutal repression and gradual concessions. The result was a crisis of confidence which was too deep to be overcome by mere calls for national dialogue and reform. The death toll is estimated at 2200 civilian casualties (including more than 150 children), and 500 members of the security services.

BACKGROUND: FAILED REFORMS

Bashar al-Assad's personal popularity since 2000 had also allowed the regime to limit the scope of internal reforms and preserve the power of the security services over society. The 'Chinese model' of neo-liberal economic shift with no political reform was adopted in 2005.

The liberalisation of the economy followed steady progress with public-private partnerships in the oil and transport sectors; private banks, media and universities were legalised, and more space allocated to the private sector.

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However, no defined policy or adequate tools were adopted. The Baath Party and secret services were given increased power in administrative and economic decisions, and new monopolies controlled and established by governmental elites. Further crackdowns were carried out on intellectuals, activists and the private press.

As a consequence, Syria remains a developing country with a weak economy and poor results in sectors such as housing, education and employment. One third of the Syrian population lives on two dollars a day or less; 65 percent are under the age of thirty; and food insecurity and youth unemployment are major problems. Events have unfolded dramatically since mid-March. The trigger was the arbitrary imprisonment and torture in the small town of Deraa of school children for drawing graffiti inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

TODAY

The situation has now reached a stalemate. Neither side appears to be able to defeat the other. Protests are rallying major urban and rural centres, including Damascus and Aleppo in the last weeks, Hama, Homs, Lattakia, the Idlib province, and continue to be met with massive military assaults and house to house arrests. The cities of Homs, Hama and Deir ez-Zor have been brutally besieged by the regime's armed forces; about 400 civilian casualties have fallen since the start of the Holy month of Ramadan in early August. In Deir ez-Zor, the regime was met with strong resistance by local tribesmen, including the leading Baqqara tribe who joined the opposition movements.

Besides sporadic demonstrations, most people in Damascus and Aleppo have remained silent, waiting to see the turn of events. The country's economy has suffered considerably with the drastic decrease in tourism and external trade. And pressures on the regime from within the business community are expected to grow in the coming months.

WAY FORWARD

Events can turn in any direction and the next months will be crucial. A long-term and responsible vision is much needed at this stage to prepare for sustainable and peaceful transition. To secure legitimacy, the opposition movements will need to focus on the internal front. A combination of backward and forward looking approaches could help in establishing a viable new regime. The battle can be won from the inside while preserving the country from chaos and insecurity in an inclusionary rather than exclusionary process.

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All religious and ethnic components of the population, including the Alawite community, should be included in the process. Syria is one of the few states remaining in the region which has successfully managed to build a secular state with a strong national identity transcending ethnic or religious affiliations. So far, protestors have remarkably resisted the regime's attempts at framing the unrest along professional lines, by calling for national unity. Minorities, such as Christians, Alawites and Druze, continue to actively contribute to the uprisings in the provinces of Deraa, Homs and other parts of the country. Defections from lower ranks of the army are also increasingly reported.

The defected officers and soldiers appear to have constituted a Free Syrian Army. If given guarantees for the post-revolution phase, the 1200 Alawite officers with hundreds of men under their command could be drawn in the transitional phase leading to political pluralism and the rule of law; otherwise, they might resist to the bitter end.

Prosecution should be sought against the ones who have perpetrated crimes. But the bulk of the army (with approximately 200,000 soldiers and officers) will need to somehow be integrated. All this presumes that control of military and security affairs is effectively handed over to civilian rule in the transition to democracy.

GEOSTRATEGIC ORIENTATION

Having improved coordination and strengthened its outreach, the Syrian opposition still remains scattered and weakened by struggles of power and ideological differences. A significant step forward was reached with the establishment of a Syrian National Council, including several respected opposition under the presidency of a highly respected Paris-based academic, Dr Burhan Ghalioun. Whilst some members of the Syrian opposition now openly state their will to distance themselves from the Iran-Hezbollah nexus, this choice is not shared by all.

Many Syrians consider Egypt, Turkey and Iran as their natural partners in the region for the future. The regime has indeed lost any internal legitimacy previously drawn from its foreign policy but the Syrian population would not settle for any foreign policy re-alignment which would not secure the full return to Syrian sovereignty of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

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EXTERNAL ACTORS: NO MILITARY INTERVENTION
International condemnation and continuous scrutiny of the repression is much needed to mobilise and increase pressure over the regime. An oil embargo and ban on European investment in the Syrian energy sector have been decided by the United States and the European Union. With 95 percent of Syrian oil exports usually ending in European countries, this latest move will be felt harder in Syria than the previous, largely sym-bolic, US ban on Syrian oil imports or earlier European sanctions on the assets of regime figures.

Wider energy sanctions to strangle and weaken the Assad regime however are ill-advised as they imply collective punishment of a population already under severe economic and political hardship. Foreign military intervention is also firmly rejected by the majority of the Syrian population and opposition movements. Local Coordination Committees have asked, at most, that the international community dispatch international human rights monitors to prevent any further massacres.

Syrians are now extremely worried about the fragility of their country and the dangers that lurk around the corner. Being in a web of strategic networks, the consequences of instability and insecurity in Syria would potentially be far-reaching. On the regional level, the discredited US-sponsored Middle East peace process has entrenched occupation in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and failed to reach any viable agreement between Israel, the Palestinians and Syria.

The British Government now has a unique opportunity to start a new chapter and act as an 'honest' peace broker in collaboration with the European Union and the United States. New partnerships should be reached with the region's populations to strengthen emerging democracies and develop what should be perceived from the region as balanced economic and strategic relationships. This would pave the way towards effective and lasting regional stability.