



USIPEACE BRIEFING

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SYRIA AND POLITICAL CHANGE

This *USIPeace Briefing*, written by Scott Lasensky and Mona Yacoubian of the Institute's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, is based on discussions at a recent seminar. The views expressed do not reflect those of the Institute, which does not take policy positions.

Syria is facing unprecedented pressure from the international community on issues ranging from Syrian meddling in Lebanon to its support for terrorist groups. The United Nations investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri will release its second report in mid-December 2005. The current crisis has increased speculation about prospects for political change in Syria. The opacity of Syrian politics means there are more questions than answers. Nonetheless, a number of key indicators suggest a changing political environment, in a country where political development has essentially been frozen for thirty-five years.

Main points:

- Despite abiding tribal/clan solidarity, new rifts are appearing among the Alawite ruling elite. The regime's long-term options are narrowing as its power base diminishes.
- Signs of an emboldened, if leaderless, opposition suggest the possibility of a more cohesive counterweight to the regime, although the likelihood of a renewed crackdown is high.
- The Muslim Brotherhood has emerged as the most powerful opposition force, inside and outside the country. It is evolving and beginning to forge important links with secular opposition groups.
- It is unlikely in the near-term that disaffected blocs—including oppositionists, Sunni urban elite, and dissident Alawis—will form a grand alliance.
- Outside pressure has put the Syrian regime on the diplomatic defensive, but too much could be counter-productive and ultimately strengthen the regime's position at home.

Inside the Regime

Dissent among the Alawites? Tribal/clan solidarity (*'asabiyah* in Arabic) is often cited as a key factor that pulls the Alawites together during times of crisis. But numerous developments signal a deepening rift. Several senior Alawite power brokers—including Bahjat Suleiman (intelligence), Hassan Khalil (military intelligence), and Adnan Badr Hassan (political security)—were recently “retired.” Second, the suicide/assassination of leading regime figure Ghazi Kenaan—under questionable circumstances—signaled concern within the ruling elite. There is some speculation that he was in touch with former Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam and former military chief of staff Hikmat Shihabi in Paris, possibly planning a coup. Members of the Alawite establishment are reportedly worried about President Bashar Assad's judgment and repeated miscalculations. Rifts within the ruling elite are also being exacerbated by the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the Assad and

Makhlouf families. Conversely, the Alawite elite has seen their “piece of the pie” shrink over the last five years.

But critical questions remain unanswered, particularly whether the current crisis is forcing a reconsideration of loyalties between Bashar Assad, his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat and his younger brother Maher Assad. Although there remain sufficient safeguards within the security establishment to prevent an Alawite “palace coup,” as some outsiders hope for, dissension within Alawite ranks is worsening. Indeed, Bashar Assad appears to be increasingly reliant on an ever-smaller inner circle, comprised of close family members.

At the same time as the regime struggles to deal with regional and international pressures, the state itself is slowly disintegrating. Autonomous fiefdoms are sprouting. Sectarian and communal riots and fights are breaking out in different parts of the country, sometimes at the slightest provocation.

Dynamics within the ruling clique. The regime's coercive power remains formidable. While the Baath party is nothing more than an empty shell, the secret police (*mukhabarat* in Arabic) remain at the apex of power. Within this apex three individuals from one family stand at the pinnacle. If Maher Assad and Asef Shawkat stick with Bashar, then very little can be done to unseat the regime.

On the other hand, inherent tensions among the three do exist. At times these tensions have erupted into violence, such as in October 1999, when Maher Assad reportedly shot Asef Shawkat in the stomach during a family dispute. Ultimately, Bashar may be confronted with the difficult dilemma of being forced to give up Asef or Maher, or put Syria on a diplomatic collision course with the United States. Without Bashar, the others lack legitimacy. The Syrian leader remains the ultimate arbiter of tensions at the top. Even though a coup may not be possible under present circumstances, neither is a brutal, Hama-style crackdown. The ruling clique may be “hanging together,” but if the situation escalates the security forces are not likely to use large-scale violence against demonstrators.

Little hope for regime-driven reform. The tenth Baath Party Congress this summer demonstrated that the political elite does not have the will to push for greater reform. The recently announced relaxation of martial law did nothing to open up society or the economy. Political parties, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish nationalist parties, remain illegal and economic reforms, superficial. The authoritarian mindset has not changed. Indeed, with the publication of the initial Mehlis report, the regime appears to have adopted a siege mentality.

The regime could be more resilient than we think. Even disgruntled Alawites may rally around the regime if they believe they stand to go down with it. Three factors are working in the regime's favor:

- **Iraq** - Syrians worry that their fate will resemble the chaos unfolding in Iraq.
- **Humiliation** - The Syrian public feels deeply humiliated by the tenor of political discourse in Lebanon and the criticism the Lebanese are leveling at Syria.
- **U.S. Role** - Many Syrians see the U.S. campaign against Syria as heavy-handed and one-sided, having begun well before the Hariri assassination.

Political Economy and a Weakening State

Shifts in Power? There has been a major shift in the Syrian economy, with capital formation increasingly in the hands of non-state actors. Even though proximity to the state remains the best guarantee for capital preservation, these new concentrations of capital are “flexible” and can easily be

withdrawn from the state. This may already have begun, although the process is still far from a tipping point.

Liberal/Conservative Bloc. This alignment is best represented by the liberal/conservative Sunni bloc rooted in the traditional urban marketplace, or *suq*. This bloc combines economic power and neo-liberal leanings, but with Islamic coloring, conservative social values, and high social standing. It is “organic” and deeply rooted, and distinct from those recently enriched regime figures (and their sons) who could quickly lose legitimacy should the regime fall. This liberal/conservative bloc is strong and well organized, if muted and latent. It has a reservoir of untapped social power and could be a potential force for maintaining political-economic stability.

But the Sunni business elite has a lot to lose and may not be prepared to take a stance against the regime—even in the face of the Brotherhood's new, more pluralistic discourse. Syrians have not practiced politics in a long time, and are not schooled in the art of compromise. Still, it is hard to deny that the environment has changed dramatically. The Internet is playing an important role. It allows for a virtual dialogue between opposition groups. Syrians are also looking at Lebanon as a hopeful example where the power of popular demonstrations was shown on satellite television.

The Opposition

Significance of the Damascus Declaration (October 2005) Signed by a broad spectrum of oppositionists, the statement does not mince words. “The authorities' monopoly of everything for more than thirty years has established an authoritarian, totalitarian, and cliquish (*fi'awi* in Arabic) regime,” the signatories declare bluntly, accusing the regime of isolating the country through its “destructive, adventurous, and short-sighted policies on the Arab and regional levels, and especially in Lebanon.”

The declaration is notable in several respects. First, it calls for comprehensive, non-violent democratic change—a significant departure from previous opposition demands, which were limited (e.g. lifting emergency laws, release of prisoners, etc.). Second, the declaration brings together the widest array of opposition groups. Third, it addresses the Kurdish question for the first time. Finally, the timing of the declaration—just before the release of the first Mehlis report—was intended to signal that there is an “emerging” alternative to the Assad regime. At this point, the regime has not moved decisively against the in-country signatories. But a crackdown against this new alignment of opposition forces remains a possibility, one that the United States and international community should prepare for.

Role of Muslim Brotherhood. All opposition groups want to involve the Brotherhood and recognize the importance of its participation, although the extent of Syrian popular support for the Brotherhood remains unknown. The Brotherhood's own discourse and agenda has evolved substantially. Following the defeat at Hama, the *Ikhwan* turned introspective, asking why its efforts in the 1970s and 1980s failed. As a result, the more radical forces were pushed out of the movement. The evolving discourse of the Brotherhood, and the influence of other Islamist movements (i.e. Egypt), is clearly evident in two earlier documents—the May 2001 “Pact of Honor,” and the August 2002 “Syrian National Pact,” which was signed with other opposition forces in London.

They no longer call for an Islamic state, instead proposing a modern state (*dawlat hadithiyya* in Arabic) that is, a “contractual” state, based on citizenship, the rule of law, representation, pluralism, institutions, and the peaceful transfer of power. Beyond the level of discourse, there are also practical signs of a new orientation. For example, the *Ikhwan* played an important role in drafting the Damascus Declaration. The *Ikhwan's* apparent evolution may give more confidence to other opposition groups.

What Can the Opposition Do? Despite the opposition's weakness, it draws strength from the regime's own fractiousness, coupled with its poor judgment. But the Syrian public is largely unfamiliar with the various opposition groups. The opposition needs dynamic spokespeople who can explain to Syrians why it is the regime—not outside powers—that poses a threat to the country. But there remains a serious absence of leadership. Fear remains a factor. Without inspirational leaders it will be difficult to mobilize popular opposition to the regime. Local leaders, as opposed to exiles, are better positioned to catalyze disaffected groups within Syria and also to fend off any accusations by the regime of foreign meddling.

The opposition remains concerned that the international community might make the mistake of punishing the Syrian people for the crimes and mistakes of the regime. Many opposition figures emphasize that those implicated in the Hariri assassination should be punished, not the Syrian public. Broad-based sanctions would give the regime greater room to crack down, they say, and an opportunity to rally the Syrian people. The fear of sanctions has already restored some popular support for the regime—particularly from the middle and lower class, whose relative position has been declining in recent years.

A capacity to oppose does not necessarily translate into a capacity to govern. Three dynamics will shape whether Syrian oppositionists can exploit a power vacuum, should it arise: the weakening of the regime, the maturation of the opposition, and growing disillusionment at the popular level. If the regime should suddenly fall apart, or popular discontent or unrest emerges, the opposition may not be poised to seize the advantage. Outside parties interested in helping the Syrian opposition must be aware of the interplay of these forces.

Next Steps

The reality of internal repression shifts much of the weight onto oppositionists outside the country. Another conference bringing together all opposition forces to present an alternative to the Assad regime could be an important next step. The last such meeting took place in Paris two months ago. Two previous meetings were held in Europe over the past two years. Although the Paris meeting was successful in bringing together a diverse group of Syrian opposition figures, it is not clear whether the momentum will be maintained. Meanwhile, some in the opposition are disappointed that despite all the pressure Washington is putting on Syria, the U.S. has not made the case for democratic change there. Indeed the arrest of Syrian opposition figure Kamal Labwani upon his return to Damascus, following a series of visits to the White House and the State Department, may dissuade other Syrian oppositionists from openly meeting with official Washington. Although Labwani's arrest prompted the Bush Administration to speak out against internal repression, some Syrian oppositionists still seek a more forceful declaration by Washington on the need for democratic change.

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