

Strategic Implications of Syria's Instability

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Some regimes go for broke when trying to protect themselves from the wrath of their own people. They deny the obvious and obfuscate the facts; they deploy large security and military assets; they shoot unarmed demonstrators; they deny international media access to their streets; and they gradually lose whatever false legitimacy they have cultivated over long periods of time. Such has been the case with the Syrian regime whose President



Bashar al-Assad only last January asserted in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*

that his country was immune to the conditions that led to change in Tunisia and Egypt.

But aside from the domestic repercussions that will ensue, what makes the inevitable collapse of the Syrian regime in the near future revolutionary is the strategic implications it will engender for the entire Middle East. And such implications were made possible only because of the



regime's over-reliance on its foreign policy to maintain domestic stability and to direct internal frustration away from its repressive nature and failed economic and social policies.

The first such implication is on the way Syria will look at its relations with Iran and the subsequent Iranian response to the loss of a strategic partner. On the Syrian side, whatever political setup inherits the Assad family and the Ba`ath Party will likely be secularist in nature or be influenced by a moderate version of the Muslim Brotherhood, two possibilities that will spell doom for the Syrian-Iranian relationship that was codified in a strategic agreement in 2004. On the Iranian side, the loss of Syria will simply sever the lifeline Iran has extended to Hezbollah, its proxy in Lebanon and guarantor of its strategic reach to the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran will no longer be free to assert that it can project its ideology and interests or to threaten war with Israel whose dire consequences only Lebanon will feel. No wonder then that Iran and Hezbollah are alleged to supply the Syrian regime with equipment, weapons, and personnel to help quell its peaceful uprising.

The second strategic implication of change in Syria concerns the cold peace with Israel and possibilities for upsetting it along the Golan Heights. In its frenzy to send messages to the American administration and the Israeli government about the dangers of its fall, the Syrian regime mobilized Palestinian youths along the Golan on May

15 and June 5 to coincide with the 62nd anniversary of the loss of Palestine in 1948 and the 44th anniversary of the 1967 war. Israel duly responded by murdering and maiming hundreds of unarmed demonstrators. But by upsetting the status quo, Syria lost whatever faith the United States and Israel had in its ability to maintain the peace along the border. It also unwittingly gave reason to the US, Europe, and Turkey to possibly discuss a post-Ba`ath political arrangement in Damascus that could include the secularists and the Muslim Brotherhood. (It was interesting that while Hezbollah sponsored a similar action on the Lebanese-Israeli border on May 15, it refrained from doing so on June 5.)

The third such implication concerns the eventual fate of Lebanon which for more than three decades played the role of 'backyard' where Syrian foreign policy extracted benefits for domestic consumption. Lebanon provided political and economic opportunities to help regime survival through the supply of funds, goods, employment, and illegal sources of enrichment for regime officials. The regime in Damascus, and since the 1980s, used Lebanon to send overt and hidden messages, both belligerent and peaceful, to Israel and the United States to improve its negotiating position whenever the issue of the Golan was up for discussion. Syria squeezed the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia, through the careful manipulation of Lebanese factions. And since 2005 when the late Premier Rafiq Hariri was assassinated, the regime threatened and cajoled both the

Arabs and the Americans through strategic moves coordinated with its Lebanese allies, chief among whom is Iranian-supported Hezbollah, to make itself indispensable.

It is not likely that finally allowing its allies in Lebanon to form a government under Najib Miqati- almost five months after it helped the collapse of another under Sa`ad Hariri- will help it re-establish its relevance in the Middle East. However, with Hezbollah calling the shots in Beirut, Lebanon may be the only neighbor to feel the negative repercussions of Syria's domestic upheaval. At least in the short term, and under Hezbollah's eyes, the Damascus spring will translate into a Lebanese mild winter; mild, yet a winter. Hezbollah and its allies are already trying to re-draw the contours of Lebanon's strategic alignment to possibly compensate for the loss of Syria. While such a possibility is a mirage given Lebanon's makeup and history, the Party of God will surely try its luck, in the process causing anxiety and instability and, possibly, its own demise.

Syria's strategic importance has in large part, and for decades, been a function of its regime's ability to maintain domestic control and order. Damascus has also reciprocally used its foreign policy and alignments in the service of this regime's demands. But the brinkmanship apparent in the way this regime is dealing with the upheaval on its streets is quickly severing this symbiotic relationship. If President Assad maintains his present course of repression and continues to use killing as a tactic, he may

win the battle of control but witness long years of international ostracism. On the other hand, if he allows the inevitable change to take place, his country may enjoy the benefits of international cooperation and friendship. In either case, tomorrow's Syria is going to be a different actor in the Middle East.



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Bashar al-Assad image:

<http://img.ibtimes.com/www/data/images/full/2011/01/28/61606-syrias-president-bashar-al-assad-answers-journalists-after-a.jpg>

Syrian Protest 2011 image:

http://www.mpnews.it/img/attachments/thousands-protest-in-syria-where-clashes-killed-5-2011-03-20_1.jpg

Syrian Map:

<http://www1.american.edu/ted/images4/sy-map3.gif>

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