

Syria: the limits of external influence

Barah Mikail

>> When the winds of change started blowing through the Middle East in December 2010, analysts were quick to predict that Syria would not succumb to the wave of popular protests. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad claimed that his country was exempt from the factors driving other protests. Yet contrary to most predictions, the Syrian population has voiced its desire for change. The potential for far-reaching reform now exists. While the EU must stand ready to help, however, it is unlikely to play a primary role in ushering in political liberalisation. This is because of the structural nature of the Syrian regime, the country's place in the regional context and ongoing difficulties in Libya. The EU reaction to Syria's protests has been ad hoc and uncertain, and European governments could certainly do more. But Syria may show the limits to what kind of impact can be expected of European support for democratic reform.

SYRIA AND THE PROTESTS

The roots of the Syrian protests were different to those in Tunisia and Egypt. In the case of the latter two, poor socio-economic conditions led to mass demonstrations and demands for deep political reforms. In Syria, small scale protests in Deraa were against the arrest of youths who had scrawled graffiti in support of the North African movements. The brutal response by the military and intelligence services sparked further outrage and revolts spread to several Syrian towns. Instead of trying to understand the motivations behind such protests, the Syrian regime proceeded further to deter demonstrators from taking to the streets en masse. President Assad avoided directly addressing his population, and instead made only vague promises of change at some future stage. His

HIGHLIGHTS

- Contrary to many predictions, the Syrian regime now faces strong pressure for democratic reform.
- Despite this, the nature of the regime and Syria's regional role mean that a democratic breakthrough will be more difficult to achieve than it was in Tunisia and Egypt.
- The EU needs to respond more resolutely to Syria's unrest, but for a number of reasons in this case is unlikely to be highly influential.

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»»»»» parliamentary address on March 30 only served to heighten the growing frustration and disappointment felt by the Syrian people. Assad did not mention the 48-year old emergency law, which many expected him to lift. He has blamed the pockets of dissent on rogue Islamists and foreign conspiracies.

Assad's response to the protests has been clumsy. Protests initially had nothing to do with demands for regime change; putting an end to the abuses committed by the intelligence apparatus may have been enough to quell dissent. But the regime's refusal to compromise for fear of appearing weak eventually led it to pour more oil on the fire. With Deraa besieged by the army, it looked at one stage as if events would lead to a repression like that of the 1982 Hama revolt. The more violence was deployed against protestors, the more their attitude shifted from demanding policy changes to seeking outright regime change.

Despite a lack of reliable information on what is really going on in Syria, it is erroneous to believe that the entire Syrian populace has taken to the streets to call for Assad's demise. Pro-Assad rallies have generated displays of support equal to those voiced in anti-Presidential rallies. Nevertheless, both sides seem to be in agreement over one point: their commitment to an alternative political formula which would decrease the military's dominance. Many Syrians still believe that their president has the will to reform, but that he is impeded by the State apparatus's most conservative elements. Even though Syria's opacity makes it hard to determine who and what drives national policy in the current circumstances, indicators point to a president dependent on his entourage for exerting his prerogatives.

In a volatile regional context and with Israel as its neighbour, Syria does not want to appear vulnerable in any way. The dominant Ba'ath political party is strengthened by a powerful security apparatus and loyal military. Oversight of these two bodies means Bashar al-Assad, like his father before him, has so far countered any

potential opposition to his rule. This said, the system adopted by Hafez al-Assad may not be the most appropriate for his son.

The suddenness with which Bashar al-Assad inherited power and his lack of preparation for such an event - he had neither the military training nor the political preparation to step into his elder brother's position - partly explains the initial weaknesses in his presidency. Bashar also found himself saddled with several powerful figures from his father's entourage. Many saw the son as young and inexperienced, and not to be allowed to unsettle the traditionalist status quo in Syria. Even though Bashar rapidly proved himself to be to both pragmatic and intelligent, the Syrian President was denied the opportunity to implement his 'reformist thoughts'. His initial willingness - whether genuine or not - to encourage openness in Syria through what became known as the 'Damascus Spring', did not last long. Promises of full and free access to internet for instance were watered down by severe restrictions.

The key elements of the regime remain the holders of positions in military intelligence, the political security body, as well as both the interior and the defence ministries. The result has been an ascendancy of the military and a marginalisation of the official political class. Whilst undeniably more reformist-minded than his father, Bashar al-Assad has indulged in his own share of nepotism. His brother Maher al-Assad heads Syria's presidential guard, his cousin Rami Makhlouf owns a powerful telecommunications company, and his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat holds one of the top positions in the military intelligence apparatus. These blatant cases of nepotism cast doubt on Syria's advances towards serious governance reforms in the past decade.

Bashar-al Assad's role in the situation at hand since March's demonstrations could be interpreted as that of a reluctant reformer still prisoner of the logics of a regime customised by his father. But in his capacity as head of state, Assad is fully accountable and responsible for

escalating events and the brutal repression deployed against protestors. Until now he has been able to play on fears of Syria slipping into sectarian discord and weakening in the face of its traditional enemies, namely Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. But even if Assad currently benefits from room for manoeuvre, this does not guarantee his ability to rule in the future without introducing deep changes and wide reaching reforms.

SYRIA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

With the Middle East and North Africa region dominated by autocrats, Arab regimes have not pressed their Syrian counterpart to exercise restraint. Nor would the Syria regime have heeded such calls. Indeed, when the Qatari Foreign Minister headed to

Damascus in April 2011 to have talks with Assad, the latter refused to meet him. Consensus holds that Qatar is behind a strategy coordinated by several countries including Saudi Arabia and the United States, which aims to topple the Syrian regime. Qatari-based news satellite channel

al-Jazeera has also been accused of according biased coverage to certain regional movements (Libya and Syria) whilst conveniently neglecting others (Bahrain).

Compared to the mistrust which prevails between certain Arab states, Western governments are in a position which allows them to exert significant pressure on Syria. But they have reacted very slowly. The US and EU's relationship with Syria is complicated, especially in light of the ongoing and unresolved assassination case of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri. The period 2005 to 2008 saw the isolation of Syria as a result of its association with Hezbollah, Hamas

and Iran. Under the Bush administration, Syria suffered further political isolation for these alliances. The EU largely followed suit.

In the face of such international hostility, Syria turned to some of its 'reliable' neighbours. Political and economic support from Ankara and Tehran allowed Syria to behave to a large extent as before. But governments such as Russia and China also have an advantage over their Western counterparts: neither of them is likely to insist that Damascus seek to normalise relations with Israel. Syria has arguably managed to turn its weaknesses into assets. In this vein, it has been approached by the international community in dealings with Hezbollah and Hamas. In the case of Iran, Western states realise how important Syria's potential mediation could be.

This current of isolation has come in fits and starts. In 2008 French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed Syria join the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), claiming that engaging Syria would be more productive than the apparently failed policy of ostracism. Most EU members acted in agreement. In 2009 when Barack Obama became president, he also gave indications of wanting to work with, not against, Assad. Despite renewing economic sanctions, Obama also nominated a new ambassador to Syria for the first time since 2005.

These efforts however were not matched on the Syrian side. The EU offered an association agreement which Syria refused to sign. Assad seemed to consider rapprochement with Europe as tantamount to political surrender in the form of signing a peace treaty with Israel and abandoning traditional alliances.

In this context, the regional upheavals may have comforted Syria when it came to evaluating the nature of its alliances. Western governments proved unable to defend Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak. Nevertheless, what occurred in Libya showed that these same governments were also capable of promoting strategies based on direct military intervention. Therefore, it remains



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»»»»» germane to consider whether Western states have the will – and the capacity – to intervene in Syrian affairs, and whether Syria would soften its attitude if such a scenario occurred.

WHAT OPTIONS LEFT?

Syria's historical reluctance to submit to Western demands has not so far caused it major setbacks. Hafez al-Assad skilfully negotiated the middle ground between firmness on certain issues (Israel-Lebanon relations) and flexibility on others (his decision to be part of the anti-Saddam coalition in 1991) when he felt the regional context was shifting. His son has displayed the same scepticism towards the West, albeit alongside a willingness to open up on the economic front. The difference between father and son is that for Bashar an opportunity to build bridges with the West has presented itself in the form of shared opposition to Islamists in general and al-Qaeda in particular. His political survival to date can also be attributed to the US's Iraqi and Afghan quagmires rather than his own anti-Islamist conceptions.

Nevertheless, now that the political shape of the region has started to change dramatically, it seems that the costs of isolation may begin to be felt. Since Syria decided to respond to demonstrations with violence, Americans and Europeans have promoted further sanctions against key elements of the regime, before finally extending them to Bashar al-Assad himself. The international community remains reluctant however to exert any more decisive pressure on the regime or indeed, to intervene militarily.

Had intervention succeeded quickly and clinically in Libya, attitudes may have been different with regards to Syria. Instead, the failure to oust Gadhafi by force was a failure that makes it hard for any country to believe in the possibility of military options leading to smooth democratic processes. Given the current situation, and considering that Afghanistan and Iraq still present huge military burdens to the West, it is highly

unlikely that Western states will pursue Assad's eviction by force of arms.

On the contrary, the EU's decision to exclude President Assad from the first round of sanctions reflects a willingness to allow him to change his behaviour. The absence of any viable and stable political alternative to Assad's regime is part of the explanation, as is his role in preserving a degree of stability in such a volatile region. Despite his anti-Israeli rhetoric, Bashar al-Assad has proved to be pragmatic, and has undertaken indirect negotiations with Israel since 2008. The popularity and legitimacy he enjoys amongst his people means that in the eventuality of peace with Israel, such a decision would likely be accepted without too great opposition. Finally, several Western governments also seem to fear that any severe targeting of the Syrian regime could provoke an unleashing of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iranian regional military capacities. Their attitude is one of 'better the enemy you know...'

The consequences that internal Syrian instability could have on the region's general equilibrium must also be considered. The Kurdish issue remains highly sensitive: Turkey fears any reshuffling of the political situation in Syria could lead the Kurdish community to push for autonomy and seek to merge with their counterparts in northern Iraq. The state of relations between Alaouites and Sunnis in Syria is also part of these calculations: tensions between these two communities could lead Syria into civil war if the regime were to collapse. The same risks are to be found in the case of Syria's Christian community, as events in Iraq and Cairo have shown. Transitions indubitably entail risk.

Therefore, even though forceful intervention in Syria cannot be excluded, several elements indicate how hard it would be to achieve this successfully. Assad's hostility to external pressures is well-known, and there is no indication this attitude will change soon. The army and intelligence services have chosen (or been ordered) to respond violently to demonstrations, making it hard for them suddenly to switch roles to a more neutral stance

such as that played by the Egyptian and Tunisian armies. Economic sanctions and travel restrictions on key members of the regime are necessary but to a large extent ineffective: Syria has been living under an official embargo for more than thirty years but has always found ways to compensate these pressures. Western capacities on the ground are limited, as failure so far in Libya attests to. Finally, Syria's neighbours, especially Turkey, are understandably reluctant to create a new exacerbated Iraqi-like situation in the region.

In short, Syria is less prone to external influences because of a host of internal and regional particularities. Yet Assad should bear in mind that the context is evolving. The state of exceptionalism claimed by Syria is not an excuse for violent repression of demonstrators. Nor is it justification for foreign intervention. Syrian public opinion and hostility to Western policies should not be underestimated. Syrians tend to compare their state with neighbours who they consider to have too much of a Western agenda: Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and the Gulf countries. It would be wrong to think that, because of their desire to achieve change, Syrians are waiting for a foreign hand to give it to them.

CONCLUSION

President Assad heads a state which is key to regional geo-political dynamics. Relations with Iran, Turkey, Hezbollah and Hamas all guarantee Assad regional manoeuvrability – and help explain the international community's initial reluctance to impose blanket sanctions. Nevertheless, even though President Assad may presently feel comfortable, time is far from being on his side. Momentous events in a shifting region bear testimony to this. But if he seriously considers opening up political space and restraining the violence used by his security forces, Assad may yet ride out the consequences of domestic protests. If, however, he opts to continue hiding behind conspiracy theories and blaming protests on rogue/foreign elements, he may find his luck shifting. Either way, it is

looking increasingly unlikely that he will enjoy his father's political longevity.

Syrian particularities and the limited tools on offer to the international community do not justify inaction. But a pragmatic compromise must be found. Limiting means of cooperation with Syria may work, in moderation. Syria's relations with Russia, Iran, and China allow it easily to enhance its relations with other potential allies. Syria believes the world will evolve towards multilateralism, making it hard for the United States and its Western allies to dominate. Therefore, if Western countries in general and European countries in particular decide completely to cut off their relations with Syria, they will merely be contributing to pushing Syria more towards their Chinese and Russian challengers. Finding a good equilibrium between firm rhetoric and nuanced action may be the best way for Europeans to react in the Syrian case. Expectations must not be raised too high: before any progressive opening, the Syrian regime will most probably deploy every possible means to silence the voices of dissent. In the meantime, nothing indicates that any external actor will be able decisively to influence the pace of events in Syria.

Barah Mikail is a senior researcher at FRIDE.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**