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The Syria of Bashar al-Asad: At a Crossroads

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For the last three decades, since the Syrian regime suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, the Baath regime of the Asad Alawi dynasty has been considered the most stable regime in the Middle East, maintaining a firm grip on the country and ruling it with an iron fist.

And still, the wave of protest engulfing the Middle East and causing the collapse of the Arab regimes in Tunisia and Egypt has spread, not surprisingly, to Syria. After all, Syria's social and economic reality is essentially no different from elsewhere in the Arab world. The young people in Syria are no different from their peers in Tunisia and Egypt, and like them, have no hopes of a better future, groan under the harsh economic distress, and suffer under the heavy hand of a brutally repressive regime.

Syrian President Bashar al-Asad initially hoped that the wave of Arab uprisings would bypass Syria. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, he stated with self-assurance – which in retrospect appears both arrogant and without foundation – that “Syria is not Egypt or Tunisia,” as his regime, unlike the regimes of Husni Mubarak and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, enjoys the support of Syrian citizens thanks to its strong anti-Israel and anti-American stance.

However, on Friday, March 18, the fire spread to Syria too, and since then it has refused to die down. All efforts of the Syrian regime to extinguish it have so far failed. Then and on subsequent Fridays, as prayers concluded in the mosques, thousands of people throughout Syria took to the streets demanding freedom. In confrontations with Syrian security forces, which hurried to open fire, dozens of protesters were killed. In some locations, especially in outlying areas such as Dara in the south of Syria or Latakia on the Syrian coast (where there is ongoing friction between the Sunni majority and the Alawi minority), the situation at times raged out of control, and many people were killed as protesters vented their anger, targeting government institutions, public buildings, and of course posters of President Asad and his father and predecessor, Hafez al-Asad.

The Syrian regime has been dealt a blow, certainly to its image, as the protests have erupted throughout Syria, but it remains standing and prepared to fight fire with fire. Indeed, over the past few weeks the regime has proven its strength by recruiting hundreds of thousands of protestors, most of whom are brought in by the government apparatus in an organized fashion to show support for Bashar and his regime. Moreover, in Syria, unlike Egypt, the regime continues to enjoy the unconditional support of the army and security forces. These, unlike the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries, have not hesitated to disperse the demonstrations with brute and even lethal force. Indeed, the leaders of the Syrian army, most of whom are members of the Syrian president's family, tribe, or ethnic group, know that unlike Egypt, where the Egyptian defense minister took the reins of government from Mubarak and became the favorite son of Tahrir Square, in Syria the protesters also want the heads of the top brass of the army and security forces, so that if Bashar falls, they fall too.

On March 30, 2011, some two weeks after the wave of protests reached Syria, President Asad stood before the Syrian legislature, to thunderous applause of his comrades, all loyal supporters. Bashar wanted to project self-confidence and determination in the face of his adversaries and hurried to lay the blame for the riots in Syria on an Israeli plot abetted by the West and certain Arab states, which along with the media banded together in order to dismantle the Syrian state.

Still, Bashar's speech is noteworthy not only because of what it included, i.e., an attempt to enlist support on the basis of the lowest common denominator – hatred of Israel – but also because of what it omitted. Indeed, unlike his fellow Arab leaders, some of whom have already lost their seats while others are still fighting the protests, Bashar did not make any concessions or vague promises of change or reform. The day after the speech, Damascus announced the establishment of several committees that would examine certain changes in the emergency laws in place in Syria, but this is a meaningless step, as it is not the existence of this law or another that will change reality and grant or deny liberty and freedom.

Bashar Asad received the answer to his speech on April 1, when at the end of the Friday prayers, thousands of demonstrators came out across Syria to protest against the regime, calling for liberty and freedom. Following the pattern of recent weeks, demonstrators encountered live fire from the security forces and some were killed.

And so a new Syrian reality is forming. A country that was infamous for the iron fist of its security forces and was seen as more stable than any other Arab state is now seeing weekdays in the grip of the regime, which brings out pro-regime demonstrators en masse from their workplaces, while Fridays belong to the protesters who take to the streets at their will, especially near the mosques.

On a deeper level, one could say that for now the Syrian regime is surviving the deluge that brought down the Arab regimes in Egypt and Tunisia and has maintained its integrity

and grip on the army and security apparatus. Nonetheless, it cannot put out the fire that is smoldering in the country and flares up regularly, albeit on a low level, every Friday after the prayer services in the mosques.

The protests in the streets are still limited to a few thousand, particularly in the outlying areas. Millions of Syrians, especially in Damascus, with a population of 5.5 million, or Aleppo, with a population of 5 million, are still passive observers and have yet to join the protests. The large Syrian cities contain more than half of Syria's total population; they are mostly Sunni Arabs and they will determine the future of the regime. Should they join the protests, it will be harder for the security apparatus, overwhelmingly controlled by Alawis, members of Bashar's own ethnic group, to suppress the protests. However, should these millions continue merely as bystanders to the events, the regime will find it easier to put out the fires. Other minorities, constituting some 40 percent of the nation's population, are staying out of the fray for now. Jabal al-Druze, home to the Druze constituting some 5 percent of Syria's population, is quiet, as are the northeast districts, home to the Kurds constituting some 10 percent of Syria's population. The Christians, 13 percent of the Syrian population, prefer not to join the Sunnis coming out of the mosques. (To complete the demographic picture, the Alawis represent 12 percent of the Syrian population.)

However, the most interesting question is not only what will happen in Syria in the coming weeks, rather where the country is headed in the long term. The wave of protests that reached Syria has not scored the same success as in Egypt and Tunisia and topple the Syrian regime in one fell swoop, but it has shaken its foundations, and, like a glowing ember, the protests will continue to smolder just under the surface. Syria is no longer the most stable state in the Middle East and will continue to stagger from one Friday to the next, pitting the regime, propped up by parts of the Syrian population and the army and security apparatus, against large parts of the population that will again and again express their outrage. It is hard to know what the final result will be; at least in the past, the fate of similar struggles has been soaked in blood, and the blood, spilled mostly by the security forces and army, has tipped the scales.

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