



HOW WASHINGTON LOST SYRIA

By Gary C. Gambill

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With the failure of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to broker a ceasefire in Syria, Western policymakers and pundits are increasingly coming to acknowledge that the country's descent into civil war is all but inevitable. But this begs the question of when and why it became so. Was it a foregone conclusion when the uprising against President Bashar Assad began last year?

Civil war was always the most likely end to the saga. Syria is the only majority Sunni Muslim country of the modern era to be governed by a largely heterodox Muslim elite, a peculiar historical anomaly that Daniel Pipes likens to "an untouchable becoming maharajah in India or a Jew becoming Tsar in Russia."¹ The Alawite-dominated Assad regime survived for over four decades in the heart of the Sunni Arab Levant in much the same way that Saddam Hussein's Sunni-led government endured in the heart of the Shiite Crescent—through brute force. As Iraq's recent history illustrates, minoritarian autocracies cannot be peacefully unmade.

If there was a window of opportunity for avoiding a full-blown civil war, it came early in the uprising, when spreading mass mobilization threatened to overwhelm the regime's capacity to maintain order, Syrian officials were in a panic, and revolution was in the air. The military-security apparatus hadn't yet been filmed committing the kind of unspeakable crimes that give its officer corps little future in a democratic Syria, and demonstrators hadn't yet taken up arms. Only popular mobilization of the kind that brought down Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu could have circumvented the need to physically overpower and defeat the Assad regime, and this was as close as the Syrian people had ever come to it.

But it was not to be. Fearful that chaos in Syria could spill over into the region and convinced that a negotiated transition was possible, the White House refused for months to break with Assad. Coming on the heels of quick American decisions to abandon Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, this conspicuous hesitation had the (possibly intended) effect of dampening popular morale at perhaps the most critical juncture in modern Syrian history.

Unfortunately, there is no going back. Assad used this last reserve of American goodwill to contain the spread of the uprising, fan the flames of sectarianism, force dissidents to take up arms, and persuade the country's minorities to remain at least passively loyal. Today, Syria is far too polarized for Washington to achieve through coercive intervention what words might have accomplished 14 months ago. The fight for Syria is going to be long and bloody.

BACKGROUND

Minoritarian autocracy necessitates a particularly invasive form of state-society domination, particularly when the ascendant minority is small. Because of the ruling elite's ethno-sectarian scarlet letter, any independent aggregation of political, social, or economic power has the potential to synergize with majoritarian resentments and produce massive upheaval. Just as Saddam brooked no dissent for fear that Iraq's Shiite majority would seize the opportunity to mobilize against him, the Assad regime tolerated very little freedom of expression or aboveground opposition among its subjects.

Such wholesale domination of civic life by the state is greatly enabled by communal solidarity (*asabiyya*) within the governing elite. Just as Saddam relied upon Sunni sectarian and tribal identification to build a powerful security apparatus willing to murder without question, the Assad family could count on Alawite loyalties to maintain the infrastructure of oppression. Both bolstered their support base with patronage, a diversionary foreign policy, and a secular Arab nationalist ideology that

¹ Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria, The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 175.

abnegates political threats from the left and draws allegiance from minority Christians. However, sect provided the firewall that kept their regimes afloat.

While minoritarian regimes are difficult to topple, their Achilles Heel is susceptibility to subversion by outside actors, particularly those with transnational ethnic or religious ties to the disenfranchised majority. Saddam was so threatened by anti-regime incitement from (Shiite) Iran's Islamic Republic that he invaded the country. The Assad regime's bloody confrontation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s happened to coincide with a nadir in its relations with pro-Western Sunni Arab governments. It was so threatened by Sunni leaders in occupied Lebanon that it assassinated dozens of them over the years for displaying the slightest whiff of infidelity (Christians had to reach a much higher threshold of misbehavior before being marked for death).²

While the Assad regime was less brutal than its Iraqi counterpart, this is largely because it faced considerably less external subversion. The crowning achievement of the late Hafez Assad was positioning Damascus as an indispensable partner to all of the important regional and international players. Everyone preferred a stable Syrian regime that gave them *some* of what they wanted over the chaos that would presumably ensue upon its collapse, and for a time this umbrella extended to Syria's client state in Lebanon.

U.S. President George W. Bush had a falling out with the Assad regime over Iraq and vigorously contested its domination of Lebanon, but his hardball tactics weren't really designed to undermine its grip on power. American officials denounced the lack of democracy in Syria and held high profile meetings with secular opposition leaders, but gave the cold shoulder to the Muslim Brotherhood. Washington wanted Syrian cooperation in Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza, and for that it needed a stable government capable of honoring its commitments.

Though outraged by the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (in Western capitals, arguably the most personally well-liked Mideast leader of his day), European governments steadily reconciled with Damascus as its allies subsequently battled for supremacy over Lebanon's pro-Western March 14 coalition. When EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana visited Assad in March 2007, the subject of reform and human rights in Syria didn't even come up.³ The incoming administration of U.S. President Barack Obama steadily fell in line with European consensus.

Thus, the Syrian people were keenly aware that, whatever foreign demands might be made of their president, the international community wanted him in power. With no credible opposition organizations and few impassioned defenders on the outside, they were forced to interact with the state as isolated individuals. Occasional disturbances, such as the 2008 Sednaya prison riot,⁴ were put down with great ferocity, but ferocity was seldom needed to secure obedience.

EXTERNAL SIGNALS AND MASS MOBILIZATION

Although popular uprisings are always fueled by grievances, grievances alone do not lead people to rebel. Even severely disaffected citizens will abstain from banned political activity if the likelihood of severe punishment is great. However, the risks decrease rapidly once the number of participants exceeds the government's capacity to punish every infraction.

External signals can make it easier to reach this critical mass, by leading large numbers of individuals to simultaneously conclude that now is the time to act and giving them confidence that others will do likewise. The Arab Spring uprisings have become the paradigmatic example. Satellite television coverage of the 2010-2011 revolt against Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali inspired Egyptians to rise up, which then led to demonstrations across the region.

U.S. diplomatic and behavioral signals have also triggered mass mobilization in the Arab world, due in part to exaggerated local perceptions of American power and influence. The most (in)famous example is the Shiite-Kurdish uprising against Saddam in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, which came after President George H. W. Bush called for "the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands" and "force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside" in a statement broadcast on Voice of America.⁵ After an estimated 100,000-180,000 Iraqis died in the ensuing government crackdown,⁶ Human Rights Watch

² The most notable victim was former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (killed in 2005). Others widely presumed to have been killed by the Syrians include Subhi al-Salih, a respected theologian who criticized Syria's role in fanning sectarianism (1986); Muhammad Shuqair, an advisor to former President Amine Gemayel who played a major role in negotiating Lebanon's 1983 peace agreement with Israel (1987); MP Nazim Qadri, shortly before a scheduled meeting with Gen. Michel Aoun, who was waging a "war of liberation" against Syrian forces (1989), and the Grand Mufti of the Lebanese Sunni community, Hassan Khalid, days after meeting with Aoun's representatives (1989). See Gary C. Gambill and Daniel Nassif, "[Syria's Campaign to Silence Lebanese Muslims](#)," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, April 2001.

³ Radwan Ziadeh and Nadim Houry, "[What Solana Forgot to Say in Damascus](#)," Human Rights Watch, 3 April 2007. "[Summary remarks by EUHR Solana at the press conference with Syrian FM Muallem](#)," March 14, 2007.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "[Syria: Lift Blackout on Prisoners' Fate](#)," December 10, 2009.

⁵ "[Excerpts From 2 Statements by Bush on Iraq's Proposal for Ending Conflict](#)," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1991. Bush made

criticized the American government's "lack of sufficient concern for the consequences of the signals it gave."⁷

Even unintentional signals can spur collective action if they are seen as indicating a shift in U.S. policy. The failed April 2000 Geneva summit between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Hafez Assad was the main impetus behind an unprecedented upsurge in Lebanese Christian protests against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon.⁸ The March 2004 Kurdish uprising in Syria was triggered by the promulgation of an interim constitution in U.S.-occupied Iraq that recognized Kurdish autonomy.⁹

Signals can also have the reverse effect. A striking illustration followed the death of Hafez Assad in June 2000, when the region was awash with speculation that Sunni Vice-president Abdulhalim Khaddam might try to assert his constitutional prerogatives against Bashar Assad, who held no major government office at the time. Bashar's estranged uncle Rifaat announced that he was returning from exile to lead a "revolution,"¹⁰ while Saudi Arabia and other Arab states appeared to be hedging their bets.¹¹

Into this mix, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright convened a press conference and declared that "it's important for Dr. Bashar Assad to take on the mantle" in Damascus.¹² One after the other, Arab and Western governments followed suit.¹³ Even UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's spokesman referred to Assad as the "future leader of Syria" nearly three weeks *before* his election.¹⁴ Assad's ascension would likely have gone smoothly without this intervention, but if anyone was entertaining thoughts about obstructing it, Washington clearly helped put them to rest.¹⁵

Presumably, then, Obama administration officials were well aware that their reaction to the 2011 uprising against Assad would weigh heavily on the minds of regime elites and ordinary Syrians alike.

BEYOND THE FEAR BARRIER

When the Arab Spring began spreading from Tunisia and Egypt to the broader Arab world early last year, Assad was not particularly concerned. Unlike Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he could count on a fiercely loyal security apparatus willing to do whatever necessary to render anti-regime activity prohibitively dangerous for his subjects. In contrast to Egypt, the overwhelming majority of Syrians had never even seen an anti-government demonstration in their country, let alone participated in one. Convincing them to sit out the mass hysteria sweeping the region wouldn't be pretty, but regime insiders were certain it could be done.

Efforts by Syrian activists to organize rallies via Facebook fizzled at first due to the heavy advance deployment of security personnel. On February 17, however, the police beating of a Damascus merchant led 1,500 people to demonstrate in Al-Hamidiyah Souq, exposed a glaring loophole in the regime's security screen—spontaneous demonstrations in response to local grievances are impossible to pre-empt. The regime was so caught off guard that it dispatched the Syrian interior minister to personally calm the crowd with promises of an investigation—an unprecedented spectacle in Baathist Syria.

a number of earlier statements suggesting that the Iraqi people should oust Saddam. For example, he stated in August 1990: "[I]t wouldn't disappoint me if the Iraqis got up and said, 'Look, this man is our problem.'" ["Excerpts From President's News Conference on Gulf Crisis,"](#) *The New York Times*, August 31, 1990.

⁶ ["2 Mass Graves in Iraq Unearthed,"](#) *The Los Angeles Times*, June 05, 2006.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, [Human Rights Watch World Report 1992](#).

⁸ On the eve of the summit (which was expected to fail), Gibran Tueni, the editor of Lebanon's *Al-Nahar* daily newspaper, published an open letter to Assad, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. As the first major resident Lebanese journalist in nearly a decade to make so explicit a demand, Tueni broke a long-standing taboo and opened the way for a stream of similar editorials in other publications. *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), Mar. 23, 2000.

⁹ The constitution was seen locally as an indication that the Washington was no longer axiomatically opposed to Kurdish self-determination. The proximate spark of the uprising was appreciative Syrian Kurdish soccer fans chanting slogans praising Bush and the resulting clashes with Arab fans and security forces. See Gary C. Gambill, ["The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria,"](#) *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 4, April 2004.

¹⁰ "Rifaat threatens new revolution in Syria," Agence France Presse, 12 June 2000.

¹¹ Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak pledged to "respect the view of the Syrian people in their choice of president" when asked about Bashar's ascension, while the Saudi royal palace voiced support for "the Syrian people and the person [they] choose to succeed the late president." See "Egyptian president calls special cabinet meeting after Assad's death," Agence France Presse, 11 June 2000; "Saudi Arabia pledges support for Assad's successor," Agence France Presse, 10 June 2000.

¹² "Albright urges Syria to open up, urges Bashar to assume father's mantle," Agence France Presse, June 12, 2000.

¹³ "Saudi Arabia assured over Assad's succession," United Press International, 14 June 2000. "Egypt shows signs of concern for Syrian stability," Agence France Presse, June 11, 2000.

¹⁴ "Annan to seek Syria's 'continuous support' in keeping Lebanon calm: spokesman," Agence France Presse, June 22, 2000.

¹⁵ Even Rifaat Assad had a change of heart and publicly praised his nephew when he took office weeks later. "Bashar Assad sworn in as president, discusses economy, Israel," The Associated Press, July 17, 2000.

The following month, sporadic protests began breaking out across the country, all of them small and easily dispersed. On March 18, however, thousands of demonstrators in the predominantly Sunni southern city of Deraa converged at the city's historic Omari mosque to protest the arrest of 15 teenagers for scrawling anti-government graffiti. Four were shot dead, after which funerals for those killed became flashpoints for further protests.

As cell phone footage of brutal government reprisals made its way to Syrian living rooms via Youtube and satellite television, the fear barrier started to disintegrate in outlying, predominantly Sunni areas of the country. There, citizens confronted the government in such numbers that the *individual* risk of public anti-regime activity declined dramatically (from roughly a 100 percent probability of arrest just a few weeks earlier), despite steadily intensifying government reprisals.

Unable to either deter individual protestors or physically eliminate their command and control, the Syrian regime faced an existential crisis. Given the Arab Sunni community's five-to-one demographic advantage over Alawites, the continued spread of mass mobilization threatened to completely overwhelm the regime's capabilities. An unequivocal American break with Assad early on would undoubtedly have facilitated this.

However, the Syrian people found little encouragement in the words and actions of U.S. officials. Whereas the White House called for Qaddafi to step down less than two weeks after the start of the 2011 Libyan uprising,¹⁶ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Assad a "reformer."¹⁷ The administration criticized the crackdown, but urged Assad to "exercise restraint," "respect the rights of [Syrian] citizens,"¹⁸ and "bring about a reform agenda,"¹⁹ not leave office. Obama himself conspicuously avoided speaking about the Syria crisis on camera.

Rather than rapidly metastasizing along the lines of Egypt's 18-day revolution, the uprising spread piecemeal. Fearful of sticking their necks out only for Assad to reconcile yet again with the West (an anxiety familiar to his former Lebanese subjects), prominent Sunni leaders inside Syria kept quiet. This allowed the regime to contain the uprising without having to rely heavily on predominantly Sunni military units (and risk mass defections) or compromise its ability to suppress dissent in more vital urban centers, particularly Damascus and Aleppo. While this game of whack-a-mole held little prospect of extinguishing the revolt, it enabled the regime to prevent the fear barrier from collapsing in most of the country.

While the Obama administration's initial reluctance to antagonize Assad may have reflected uncertainty about the uprising and a desire not to overstep its allies, it continued along this path even after it became apparent that Assad's troubles were not going away, and after European and Mideast governments began urging Washington to take a stronger stand.²⁰ Two months into the uprising, even as it ratcheted up the pressure with direct sanctions on the Syrian president, the administration remained unwilling to call for his resignation, urging him instead to "*begin* a political transition that ensures fair representation and democratic rights for Syrians."²¹

U.S. officials simply weren't eager to see the regime collapse, determined instead to engineer a peaceful accommodation between the Syrian president and the opposition. Ostensibly, the hope was that Assad, faced with steadily growing international pressure and an increasingly untenable domestic front, would consent to credible reforms, eventually slipping gracefully from the Syrian stage as a Sunni-led majoritarian democracy flowered in his wake—a major strategic victory for the United States, with minimal bloodshed.

However, a credible reform process would have required, at the very least, that the government stop suppressing demonstrations, if only because no one in the opposition had sufficient stature to persuade intensely aggrieved activists to clear the streets. For the same reason, however, lifting restrictions on freedom of assembly would have been suicide for Assad. "If the regime implements the removal of tanks and troops from the streets, 10 million Syrians will take to the streets and occupy all main squares," an Arab League official later explained.²²

It's unlikely that American officials had any illusions about this. As the uprising escalated last summer, U.S. ambassador to

¹⁶ The White House issued a statement saying that "has lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now." "[Readout of President Obama's Call with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany](#)," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 26, 2011.

¹⁷ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on "[Face the Nation](#)," March 27, 2011

¹⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/24/statement-press-secretary-violence-syria>

¹⁹ "[Clinton says reform still possible in Syria](#)," Reuters, May 6, 2011.

²⁰ As early as May 2011, according to Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, France was "said to have concluded that major powers, including Paris and Washington, should signal publicly that it is time for Assad to leave office." The Obama administration was not willing to give up on him yet.

David Ignatius, "[Bashar al-Assad's endgame: Can a bloodbath be avoided?](#)" *The Washington Post* (blog), May 17, 2011.

²¹ "[US imposes sanctions on Assad, six other Syrian officials](#)," Agence France Presse, May 18, 2011.

²² "[Arabs put credibility on line with Syria mission](#)," The Associated Press, December 27, 2011.

Syria Robert Ford focused much of his outreach on futilely urging opposition leaders to negotiate with the regime,²³ but the objective seems to have been to secure a truce at any price, not reform.

Meanwhile, the administration continued to gradually adopt more antagonistic positions vis-à-vis the regime, believing that a seamless, steady intensification of pressure was most conducive to swaying Assad. In August, Obama finally stated that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside,”²⁴ though the wording was ambiguous (did “step aside” mean step down?). In October, he recalled Ambassador Ford. In February 2012, the U.S. embassy in Damascus closed.

This gradual increase in external pressure perfectly complemented Assad’s strategy for combating the revolt. Because the diplomatic noose was tightened incrementally, there was no one identifiable turning point for the Syrian people to rally around, and no “moment of truth” when pro-regime constituents faced a clear fork in road. By the time the true costs of Assad’s defiance were clear, it was too late.

Assad has carefully modulated his regime’s suppression of the uprising to polarize the country as much as possible. It continues to devote more resources to suppressing peaceful dissidents than to fighting armed rebels. Indeed, the intent is to transform the former into the latter, strengthening the Islamist role in the insurrection—in effect, to orchestrate a narrative of the conflict that galvanizes support for the regime among Syrian minorities and secular Sunnis. Suicide bombings and blood-curdling anti-Alawite proclamations by Sunni clerics²⁵ suit the regime just fine.

The Obama administration belatedly came to accept that Assad had no intention of accommodating his enemies, only to place considerable hope in persuading his henchmen to do the same. Seeking to engender institutional and factional conflicts of the kind that helped bring down Mubarak, it reportedly communicated to high-ranking regime officials (and the Russians) that they could stay on during the transition period if they oust Assad. Even as Syrian security forces were besieging the city of Homs in February 2012, Ambassador Ford declared that a “peaceful transition for the Syrian people ... is still possible.”²⁶

However, by this time the scale of atrocities had reached a point where no one in a position of authority to challenge Assad could realistically expect to escape justice after he’s gone. Whereas Mubarak was the single most hated person in the Egyptian political establishment, Assad is almost universally viewed as the least sadistic powerful figure in the regime. Sacrificing the president wouldn’t gain prospective coup plotters much purchase with the opposition. After months of covert American contacts and no high level defections, U.S. intelligence officials concluded in March 2012 that Assad’s inner circle was “remaining steadfast,”²⁷ knowledge that would have served the administration well had it come sooner.

The White House is now said to be covertly assisting efforts by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to arm the rebels,²⁸ but its newfound enthusiasm for bringing down the Assad regime has come after the battle lines have already been drawn. The Obama administration can try to help the ‘good guys’ overpower and defeat the ‘bad guys’ (terms that will assuredly grow less distinct as the country falls apart), but it is too late to stop them from slugging it out.

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²³ Tony Badran, “[US indulging in fantasy](#),” Nowlebanon.com, June 24, 2011, and “[The curious role of Robert Ford](#),” Nowlebanon.com, July 1, 2011.

²⁴ “[President Obama: The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way](#),” The White House Blog, August 18, 2011.

²⁵ “[Syrian Cleric Sheik Muhammad Badi' Moussa: We Ruled It Is Permissible to Kill 'Alawite Women and Children, but Advised the Free Syrian Army to Warn 'Alawites before Raiding Their Villages](#),” The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), March 14, 2012. “[Arab Clerics Call to Kill Assad, Fight His 'Illegitimate' Regime](#),” MEMRI, March 23, 2012.

²⁶ Robert S. Ford, “[A Note on Recent Events in Syria](#),” U.S. Department of State Official Blog, February 10, 2012.

²⁷ “[Syria's Bashar al-Assad firmly in control, U.S. intelligence officials say](#),” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2012.

²⁸ “[Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors' money, U.S. coordination](#),” *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012.