SYRIAN REGIME STRATEGY AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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The Asad regime has always suffered from a legitimacy deficit. When an uprising against it began in March 2011, the regime possessed few options other than brute force. Following a few desultory attempts at offering cosmetic reforms, the regime declared war against the insurgency in June 2011, seeking to crush it by force. Given the narrow base of his regime, Bashar Asad has pursued probably the only policy that was available to him. Asad's policy of repression has passed through a number of distinct phases. The regime has been forced to retreat from large parts of the country, due to its narrow sectarian base and a lack of sufficient manpower to hold these areas. The direction of events is clearly against the regime. However, at the time of writing, it shows no signs of imminent collapse.

INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of the uprising against the rule of the Asad regime in Syria in March 2011, the regime response to the challenge has passed through a series of identifiable phases. All these have been intended to produce a single identifiable outcome–namely the continuation of the exclusive and unchallenged rule of the Ba'ath Party under the leadership of Bashar Asad. However, as the nature of the uprising has developed and changed, so the regime's response has also undergone a series of transformations. These have been defined not by any changing perception among the ruling elite regarding the essential nature of the uprising. Rather, they have been determined by the regime's perception of the strength of the revolt against it, and consequently of the realistic options available to it in responding.

The Asad regime has passed through a number of distinct phases in its response to the uprising. Initially, having previously awarded itself a certificate of immunity from the "Arab Spring,"[1] the regime clumsily tried to present a series of reforms, which it apparently hoped would placate protestors and nip the uprising in the bud. When this failed, from mid-April 2011, Asad abandoned promises of further reform and went into an all-out effort to crush the rebellion. By the end of summer 2011, this effort had clearly failed. Instead, Asad's brutality brought an armed insurgency against him, in place of the early peaceful demonstrations.

Asad's military was over-stretched. The emergent pattern was one in which the government forces went from area to area, putting down demonstrations and fighting with rebels. Yet once the regime forces departed, the rebellion re-emerged. By autumn 2011, as a consequence, areas under the daily control of the insurgency had emerged in parts of the country.

In February and March 2012, Asad made a concerted effort to reconquer these areas. Yet it became apparent that while the regime could inflict dreadful losses on its enemies, it simply lacked the sufficient manpower to wage an effective campaign of counterinsurgency throughout Syria.[2] Hence, by summer 2012, the contours of a new regime strategy were visible.

According to this approach, Asad effectively ceded parts of the country to the rebels or to elements not engaged in the conflict on either side. Thus, parts of the northeast came under the rule of Kurdish separatists. Largely, Sunni Idlib Province in the north was left effectively under rebel control. The regime, meanwhile, began to carve out an Alawi base for itself in the northwest,[3] while at the same time seeking

to maintain control of the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo. This latest phase represents an acknowledgement on the part of the regime of its apparent diminishing strength, but in no way of the inevitability of its defeat. Throughout, Asad has continued to reject any process of transition away from the authoritarian system of government in Syria. Rather, the regime is digging in for what it expects to be a protracted civil war.

This article will focus in more detail on the various phases of the regime's response to the insurgency and will attempt some speculation regarding the regime's likely responses in the period ahead in light of the consistent elements in its strategy so far.

FIRST PHASE: DENIAL AND COSMETIC ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

In the first months of 2011, as revolts broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian regime appeared unperturbed. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on January 31, 2011, President Bashar Asad outlined the thinking behind the regime's lack of concern. In a key and much quoted passage in the interview, Asad explained that the reason Syria had remained stable, despite the difficult economic situation there, was to do with the deeper feelings and beliefs of the Syrian people. He asserted that there was a harmony between the stances of the regime and those of the people on an ideological level, and this resulted in stability. Asad expressed himself in the following terms:

We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening.[4]

Throughout the interview, the Syrian president sought to turn the subject of discussion from the question of internal reform to that of the "peace process" between Israel and the Arab states. His position, a familiar one in the context of Arab politics, was that any diversion from the main subject of the Israeli-Arab conflict made the error of dwelling on "details," rather than focusing on the central issue. Bashar maintained that progress on the "peace process" would rapidly lead to advances in other areas.[5] Though the Syrian president did not state this in the interview, he presumably also thought that the greater capacity for repression available to him when compared with other Arab authoritarian rulers would further shield his regime from the foment taking place elsewhere.

The *Wall Street Journal* interview is a fascinating document in that it offers an articulate and concise version of precisely the ideology and language of justification that characterized the Arab military republican regimes that have been the victims of the 2011-2012 Arab uprisings. Arguably, these regimes have been eclipsed by the 2011-2012 events. The Asad regime, because of its alliance with Iran and Russia, and perhaps also because of its greater willingness for extreme brutality, is now the "last man standing" of the regimes of this type.

Bashar's assumptions in the interview nevertheless proved erroneous. The Syrian revolt, famously, began in the poor, southern Sunni region of Dar'a. The regime's overreaction to the writing of graffiti demanding its downfall by a number of schoolchildren was the spark. The killing of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib in custody, and the return of his mutilated body to his family, led to widespread rioting throughout the

province.[6] In retrospect, this was the beginning of what would turn into the rebellion against Asad's rule and the subsequent Syrian civil war.

It did not seem that way at the time, however–certainly not to the regime itself. Protests spread from Dar'a itself to other Sunni Arab areas of the country–Homs and Banias, Idlib, Douma, and Latakiyya city. The regime's initial response was to attempt to drain public anger by announcing a series of reforms. In addition to the "full enquiry" into the death of Hamza al-Khatib, a number of other measures were announced in the following weeks.

The regime attempted to blame the Dar'a events on the local authorities there. An example was made of the governor of Dar'a province, Faisal Kalthoum, who was dismissed from his position.[7] In addition to this gesture, it was announced that a ruling banning elementary school teachers from wearing the Islamic *niqab* dress would be rescinded.[8] This was a fairly transparent gesture to the public that the regime considered most likely to take part in any uprising–namely, conservative, Arab Sunni Muslims. Also, citizenship rights were granted to a number of Syrian Kurds. Syria contained a population of around 300,000 Syrian-born "stateless" Kurds whose families were stripped of citizenship by the Arab nationalist Ba'th regime in 1962.[9]

Demonstrations had taken place in the majority Kurdish city of Qamishli in April 2011, and again the regime clearly wanted to head off any possibility of the Kurds joining any rebellion against it. Syrian Kurds had taken part in a series of protests against the regime in 2004, in which there had been a number of deaths. [10] As such, there was a particular sensitivity to the mood among the Kurds. The regime, whose claims to legitimacy rested on an Arab nationalist outlook, was aware that this section of the population had perhaps the least reason for any feelings of loyalty to the Asads.

In a speech to the tame Syrian "parliament" on March 30, 2011, Asad indicated the direction the regime would take in its propaganda against the growing revolt. He referred to the uprising as a "conspiracy" against Syria, deriving from the defiant stance it had taken toward the United States and its policies. The conspiracy was "highly organized" and involved "some countries abroad."[11]

The speech did nothing to stem the growing tide of dissent, containing as it did a reiteration of tired and familiar clichés. Indeed, an organization monitoring events on the ground in Syria reported that demonstrations began immediately following the conclusion of the speech. On April 16, 2011, a month into the uprising, President Bashar Asad gave a second speech, this time to his newly-appointed Cabinet. On this occasion, Asad outlined a series of proposed reforms.

He pledged to draft legislation that would codify the right to protest and civil dissent in Syria. He also spoke of the need for economic reforms and greater accountability. In addition, he promised to lift emergency laws in place in the country. Syria has been in an official "state of emergency" since the coming to power of the Ba'th party in 1963.

This second speech differed from the first. This time, Asad more openly acknowledged that Syria did have internal problems, and therefore implicitly that popular discontent had some basis in reality and was not merely the product of outside sedition. He spoke of youth unemployment, corruption, and the need for greater responsiveness from public officials.

Yet predictably, Asad failed to commit to the rescinding of Article VIII of the Syrian constitution, which

refers to the Ba'th Party as the "leader of the state and of the society of Syria." As such, the reforms were dismissed as meaningless by opponents of the regime.[12] The proposed "reforms" and the speech also predictably failed to stem the tide of growing public protest against the regime.

The protests at this stage did not involve massive numbers of people–hundreds, rather than thousands. The barrier of fear had still not been entirely broken. In this regard, and because of the subsequent pace of events, it is important to remember just how unassailable the Asad regime appeared to be before the outbreak of the uprising. The regime had built up a daunting police and security state on the model of the Communist states of pre-1989 Eastern Europe and Russia.

The security services employed around 65,000 full-time workers, with a much larger circle of agents and informants.[13] The reach of the four main intelligence agencies (military, air force, state, and political security) and a variety of smaller organizations of this type extended throughout the society. One analyst perceptively pointed out at the start of the uprising that this barrier of fear would be the main obstacle to be toppled, since Asad's power rested precisely on the population's fear of him. Once this was broken, all that would remain available to the regime was the active application of brute force. Yet in the absence of any other legitimating factor, this would be unlikely to prove sufficient to restore the situation as it pertained before the uprising.

Thus, with its initial attempts at reform rebuffed, the regime set out to crush the rising by force, while trying to make sure that the majority of Syria's citizens–in particular in the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo–were able to pursue normal daily lives.

SECOND PHASE: ATTEMPT TO CRUSH REBELLION BY FORCE PROVOKES ARMED REVOLT

The result of this was a rising death toll in the course of the summer of 2011. By early June 2011, 887 people had been killed, just under half of them in Dar'a. [14] In these initial months, the protests were also still confined to particular parts of the country–in the main, rural, conservative, and poor Sunni areas. Of these, the most significant were Homs, Syria's third largest city; Hama, Latakiyya city (a Sunni town surrounded by Alawi villages), Dayr al-Zour in the northeast, Idlib province in the north, Banias, Rastan, and Douma near Damascus.

In its official propaganda and media, the regime continued the theme of presenting itself as facing an armed attack from Salafi jihadi "gangs." This assertion remained unconvincing. Armed attacks on regime forces at this stage were minimal. Yet while the world as a whole may have found the regime's explanations for its conduct unconvincing and even ludicrous, this appeared to be of secondary concern to Asad.

Explaining its case had never been the regime's strong suit. The outbreak of revolt had clearly caught the regime unawares and entirely unprepared to deal with the revolution in communications that had taken place over the previous two decades. The initial response had clearly been simply to attempt to nip the demonstrations in the bud by repression. This had reckoned without the ability of Syrians to take pictures and report via the internet, in particular YouTube. A notable contrast emerged between the relatively sophisticated propaganda techniques of opposition activists and the extremely anachronistic methods of the Syrian state news agency SANA.

Rather than seriously compete in the information battle, the regime sought to control the flow of

information. It did this by primitive, but not entirely ineffective methods. Thus, the regime tried to prevent foreign journalists and media organizations from entering the country. It also severely restricted the freedom of movement of those reporters that it did allow in. The regime's closing of much of the country to coverage did not succeed in diverting media attention from events in Syria, though it did have a serious effect on the ability to build a clear picture regarding events on the ground.

The somewhat primitive response of the Asad regime in the information field, and the half-hearted attempts at self-justification in the March and April 2011 speeches point to a central element of this regime–namely, its apparent awareness of the brittleness of any claims to legitimacy it could make, and its consequent decision to resolve the issue through the use of force alone. Asad did not succeed in closing Syria off, of course. The picture that emerged in the course of the summer and autumn of 2011 was one of brutal repression.

In a third speech given on June 20, 2011, at Damascus University, Asad's tone once again shifted. Now there were no more promises of reform. Rather, the theme was once again that Syria was the target of a foreign-inspired conspiracy. This time, however, the Syrian president's tone was more belligerent. He spoke of different types of people engaged in the rebellion, with a core group of "people of sedition," numbering 64,000, supposedly leading the way. He referred to conspiracies as "germs," spreading and increasing.

This third speech effectively marked the end of any attempt by the regime to pretend that the rebellion against it was of minor proportions or trying to damp it down with concessions. Since then, three subsequent public addresses by Asad, on Army Day on August 1, 2011; again at Damascus University on January 10, 2012; and again at parliament on June 3, 2012, have reiterated the themes of the earlier speeches–claims of conspiracy and reassertions of the regime's determination to defeat the "enemies" of Syria, both external and internal.[15]

The summer of 2011 saw a sharp increase in the daily number of casualties as the regime sought to crush the rebellion. This period also saw increased defections from the army, and the first appearance of organized, armed opposition to the Asad regime. On July 29, 2011, Syrian officers who had defected to the opposition announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[16] Initially, the role of the armed group was to protect demonstrators. However, as the regime repression continued, the FSA and similar groups began to adopt the tactics of an armed insurgency.

By the end of September 2011, the abandonment of restraint by the regime and the attempt to crush the rebellion by force had brought the number of those killed to 3,000, according to human rights groups.[17]

Yet the campaign had not ended in successful counterinsurgency and the end of protest. Rather, by the end of summer 2011, the battle lines were set for a situation of civil war in Syria, which continues until the time of the writing of this article. Yet few had yet used the term "civil war" to describe the events in Syria. This term would take another year to come into widespread circulation.

Nonetheless, the essential situation had settled into a clear pattern. The regime had sought to crush the demonstrations by force, once it became clear that its cosmetic proposals for reform had had no effect. As a result, the opposition had increasingly turned to armed resistance. The regime had then sought to engage and destroy the armed rebels and their supporters.

Yet as defections from the military continued, it became increasingly difficult for the regime to reassert its control permanently over the centers of Sunni Arab population, which formed the heartland of the revolt. Rather, the regime forces would pacify one area and then move on to take on another. However, once the forces were removed from an area in revolt, the rebellion would re-emerge.

The Asad regime's vastly superior firepower to that of its opponents at this stage meant that it was able to conquer any specific point that it defined as a target. It did not, however, possess enough forces to suppress and hold all areas in revolt permanently.

The rebellion had from its outset been mainly confined to areas of predominantly rural Sunni Arab population. These areas had never been centers of support for the Asad regime, nor were they economically vital to its survival. As a result, starting from the autumn of 2011, a regime strategy of de facto withdrawal from some areas of rebel support–except for occasional raids–began to be discernible. The result of this was the slow emergence of areas of precarious rebel autonomy, in which the flag of the rebellion flew, and the only real authority was that of units loyal to local power structures and operating under the broad, loose umbrella of the Free Syrian Army.[18]

The regime was far more tenacious, however, about holding on to the larger towns. It fought tooth and nail to remain in the two cities that had exhibited support for the rebels–Homs and Hama, as well as maintaining clear control and quiet in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

THIRD PHASE: STALEMATE

From autumn 2011 to the spring of 2012, a situation of effective stalemate existed between the sides, as the bloodletting continued. This stalemate derived from the fact that while the regime was unable to reconquer and hold all the areas that it had ceded to the insurgency, the rebels themselves lacked the strength to move forward into regime-controlled areas and defeat Asad head on. The deficiencies of the sides did not mirror one another. Asad lacked sufficient manpower to hold all parts of the country. The rebels lacked both sufficient manpower and sufficient weaponry to take on the regime head-on.

In late February and March 2012, as a UN-sponsored "ceasefire" due to take effect on April 10, 2012, neared, the regime launched a series of offensive operations against rebel-held areas. This was a concerted attempt to reassert control in urban areas. The regime succeeded in expelling the rebels from Homs, areas of Damascus in which they had established a presence, and Idlib City. However, the essential picture in which neither side could deliver a fatal blow to the other remained.[19]

The rebels continued and continue to seek the elusive "tipping point." They are aware that Asad is slowly losing manpower and ground. They are slowly advancing, having now succeeded in bringing the fight to the big cities of Damascus and Aleppo. The regime is continuing to do its utmost to drive the rebels back, but appears gradually to be shedding strength, through defections of personnel.

REGIME REDUCED TO ETHNIC CORE

The Asad regime has been beset by a central paradox throughout its existence. It has advanced the interests of the Alawi sect to which the Asad family itself belongs. The Alawites, who number around 12 percent of the Syrian population, form the core elite of the regime's military and security services. Yet the regime has also taken care to avoid the appearance of ruling on behalf of a particular sectarian group.

Indeed, the official ideology of the regime stresses pan-Arab identity and depicts Syria as the "beating heart of Arabism." The uprising and subsequent civil war against Asad's rule has served to work out this contradiction.

The civil war in Syria is taking on a more openly sectarian character as a contest between the Sunni Arab population of Syria and the Alawi-dominated regime. Some (though not yet all) of the most prominent Sunni figures in the regime have now defected to the rebels–such as Major-General Mnaf Tlas.

The army units upon which the regime relies, also, are those of predominantly Alawi composition, such as the 4th Armored Division, Special Forces, and Republican Guard. The Shabiha paramilitary forces, which have played such a prominent role in the repression, are of course overwhelmingly Alawi. As the Alawi nature of the regime has become increasingly laid bare, so evidence has emerged that the regime itself is following an increasingly open sectarian logic.

Evidence has emerged, for example, that the regime is seeking to establish an Alawi ethnic stronghold in the northwest of the country, west of the Orontes River.[20] Alawites form a majority, though not the totality of the population in this area. Some analysts have speculated that this effort forms part of a "Plan B," whereby the regime would take on an openly Alawi sectarian character and leave the main cities when it could no longer defend them–in order to continue in existence as the ruler of a small Alawi enclave or statelet. Others have disputed this, suggesting that such an enclave would lack any legitimacy or long-term viability.

It seems likely, however, that the regime is indeed carving out an enclave of this kind, not necessarily as part of a full-blown strategy for the partition of the country, but rather in order for this area to serve as a base and safe zone of control for what the regime now expects to be a long and drawn out civil war. (In this regard, it is worth noting that the Alawi enclave would contain the Russian naval facility at Tartous. This is an important Russian interest in Syria. It is also the main landing site for the Russian weaponry, which is vital to Asad's survival.)

Asad is still making supreme efforts to pacify the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and to turn back rebel gains in these areas. He appears confident that the diplomatic and military support of Russia, and the assistance afforded him by Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hizballah, will enable him to continue his war effort against the rebels. The regime's strategy is a straightforward one, at this stage. It is to buy time, preserve the support of its vital foreign backers, and continue the military struggle against the rebels until such time as the insurgency is weakened and eventually destroyed.

Despite the unimaginative nature of its strategy, and its tactical inability to carry out a successful counterinsurgency because of its lack of manpower, the Asad regime is nevertheless still in existence after many months of rebellion against it and shows no signs of imminent collapse. What can explain the surprising longevity of this regime when similar systems have fallen elsewhere in the Arab world? Also, what explains the absolute refusal of the regime to countenance any genuine dialogue or negotiation with the rebels, despite what looks like Asad's poor strategic look-out.

The dictator, after all, can certainly hold on for what may be some considerable length of time, by virtue of his superior military hardware, but with his regime having shed any vestiges of legitimacy, it is hard to see how Asad can entertain serious hopes now of a return to the situation as it existed prior to the outbreak of the revolt in March 2011.

CONCLUSION

The Asad regime has always suffered from a legitimacy deficit. It was a regime whose support base was unusually narrow. Only a single ethnic minority community, the Alawites–from whom the Asad family themselves had emerged–had a clear commitment to the regime. To mask this deficit, the regime cloaked itself in Arab nationalist ideology and rhetoric.

The legitimacy deficit meant that when an uprising against it began, the Asad regime possessed few options other than brute force. The Asads created and maintained their rule through fear. They would either reinstate this fear or their rule would come to an end. This was clear to both supporters and opponents of the regime. As a result, following a few desultory attempts at offering cosmetic reforms, the regime effectively declared war against the insurgency in June 2011, seeking to crush it by force. All subsequent political moves by the regime (the "referendum" on a new constitution in February 2012 and the oft-repeated declarations of willingness to negotiate) were clearly attempts to buy time, so as to allow the destruction of the insurgency to take place.

The sectarian nature of the regime has also proved, however, a source of strength to it. As the sectarian contours of the civil war in Syria became clearer, so the core support of the Alawites for the Asads remained (along with the neutrality of Christian, Druze, and Shi'i Syrians who feared the emergence of a repressive Sunni regime). The Asads have succeeded in "implicating" the Alawites in their rule. As a result, the Alawites form the main part of the manpower still available to the regime. This, coupled with the ongoing international support for Asad from Russia, China, and Iran as well as the vastly superior weaponry available to the regime when compared with the rebels, has enabled Asad to preserve his rule thus far. The strategic direction appears to be against him, as the rebels slowly extend their areas of activity in the urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo. Yet the civil war in Syria may continue for a considerable time to come.

Given the narrow base of his regime, Bashar Asad has pursued probably the only policy that was available to him, other than simply giving up his rule. The Asad regime's rule was established and maintained by the use of force and the imposition of fear. It is therefore not surprising that when beset by internal dissent, it turned swiftly to the application of extreme force as the means by which it sought to defeat the popular uprising against it. It has been forced to retreat from large parts of the country, due to the narrow sectarian base of the regime and a lack of sufficient manpower to hold these areas. However, at the time of writing, the regime appears to show no signs of imminent collapse.

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NOTES

[1] "Interview with Syrian President Bashar Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, http://online.wsj.com.

[2] See Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," Institute for the Study of War, June 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org.

[3] Tony Badran, “Alawistan,” *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com.

[4] “Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html.

[6] Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2012), p. 10.

[7] Jim Muir, “Syria: Setting the Country Alight?” *BBC Online*, March 24, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk.

[8] “Syria Reverses Ban on Islamic Face Veil in Schools,” *al-Arabiya*, April 6, 2011, http://www.alarabiya.net.

[9] “Syria to Tackle Kurds’ Citizenship Problem,” *Kurd-Net*, April 1, 2011, http://www.ekurd.net.

[10] Robert Lowe, *The Syrian Kurds: a People Discovered* (London: Chatham House, 2006).

[11] “Speech to the Syrian Parliament by President Bashar al-Assad,” *Syria Comment*, March 31, 2011, http://www.joshualandis.com.

[12] “Bashar Assad Speech April 16 2011: Promises of Reforms and Brushing off Protests,” April 16, 2011, http://worldnews.about.com.

[13] Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003), p. 2.

[14] Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 75.

[15] For English translations of Assad’s recent speeches, see http://www.presidentassad.net.

[16] Free Syrian Army profile, Jane’s Information Group, July 24, 2012, http://articles.janes.com.

[17] Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 91.

[18] Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency”; also as witnessed by the author in Idlib Province, February 2012.

[19] “They Burned My Heart: War Crimes in Idlib During Peace Plan Negotiations,” Human Rights Watch, May 4, 2012, http://www.hrw.org.

[20] Badran, “Alawistan.” See also Josh Landis, who outlines his skepticism regarding the likelihood that an Alawi statelet would be established, in “Five Reasons Why There Will Not Be an Alawite State,” *Syria Comment*, July 1, 2012, http://www.joshualandis.com.