

Going... Going... Gone? Not Quite Yet!

The Assad Regime on the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard

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Bashar, the Loyal Son

For the last decade or so, western analysts puzzled over the portrayal of the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, trying to understand his beliefs on important issues and how much real power he exercised within a regime that his father built and nurtured for over 30 years. The lack of consensus on whether he was “a neophyte”, “a closet reformer” or “a loyal son” exacerbated the lack of consensus on the appropriate course for policy towards Syria. This debate began in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, almost a year into Assad’s first term, intensified after the American occupation of Iraq and became most notable following the Hariri assassination in Lebanon in 2005. More than 10 years into his reign, Bashar Al-Assad can no longer be seen as a neophyte and has done very little to advance reform and democracy in Syria. The “loyal son” has proven to be a force for continuity and stasis (if not retrogression) in Syrian domestic and foreign policy. A thoroughgoing product of the system his father built up, whose principal goal is to protect the core constituencies of the Assad regime and preserve the main elements of his father’s foreign policy. Today, as the echoes of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen reverberate across the Middle East, the voices of Syrian dissidents - silenced for over 40 years by the Assad Regime - are given an audience and used as the backdrop of an international coalition to topple young Bashar. The brittle system in Damascus is in a fight to keep intact its old ways of control. This makes him very much part of the “problem” in Syria rather than a prospective part of the solution.

The Shift in US Policy

Over the past few weeks, we have seen US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with a number of European leaders call on President Bashar Al-Assad to “step down” and “go out of the way”. This represents quite a shift, at least in US policy, towards the Assad regime and an end to the conditional engagement¹ adopted by the previous administration; an engagement that has failed to yield the desired results. Under Bashar’s watch, Syria continued to be on the State Department’s list of states that sponsor terrorism, it is said to pursue weapons of mass destruction in the shape of chemical and possibly nuclear weapons and has proven time and again that democracy is not on its regime’s menu. Most importantly Bashar’s regime - unlike his father’s - has openly aligned itself with the Iranian camp in the Middle East region, not just rhetorically but also on the ground in Iraq and Lebanon. Iran’s policy since the Islamic Revolution has been persistently aimed at building a regional coalition resistant to US influence and opposed to American interests. This Iranian-led anti-American camp includes today many Iraqi and Bahraini Shi’a-Muslim groups on the basis of sectarian affinity, the Shi’a-Muslim Hezbollah party-cum-militia as a strategic arm in Lebanon and the Alawite (Shi’a sect) Assad’s regime as a willing ally in Syria. Assad’s strategic alliance with Iran divested him of the Saudi “laissez faire” afforded his dad for more than thirty years and with it the approval of the pro-American camp in the region. Gone is the steady hand of the old juggler, Hafez Al-Assad. Gone, too, is the tortured US diplomacy that had courted Damascus and catered to its sense of importance as a big player in the Fertile Crescent. With his regime increasingly isolated and facing unprecedented pressure from within and on the outside, there is little Bashar can do to weather the storm.

Persian Chessboards and Saudi Bishops

The unrest in Syria today, although similar in appearance to the popular uprisings in other Arab countries, carries within it the imprint of a regional conflict between the Iranian-led anti-American camp and a Saudi-led pro-American one. The ethnic and sectarian dimensions of this conflict go back several centuries but at heart today is the control of the Middle East geopolitical space. America’s primary interest in the Middle East is to help ensure that no other power comes to control this geopolitical space and that the global community has unhindered financial and economic access to it. As Zbigniew Brzezinski² puts it in his book *The Grand Chessboard*, “that puts a premium on maneuver and manipulation in order to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition that could eventually seek to challenge America’s primacy.” This “hostile coalition” is led today by Iran with Syria’s Assad as its primary regional partner and Lebanon’s Hezbollah as its prominent military arm.

Following the Iraq War and banking on the suffering of Iraqi Shi'as under Saddam's regime and their justified mistrust of US policy, Iran extended its hegemony over Iraq politics in a direct affront to US military presence there. The US and its allies responded on many fronts; in addition to direct pressure and sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, they passed UN Security Council resolution 1559 in 2004, which mandated among other things the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon - meaning primarily Hezbollah - and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanese territories - meaning the Syrian army, which had occupied Lebanon for close to thirty years.

This resolution effectively reactivated Lebanon's front on the Middle East "chessboard" where pro- and anti- American camps play their game. The assassination of Rafiq Hariri - Saudi tycoon and former prime minister of Lebanon - in 2005 was seen by many as a response to UNSC 1559 and a hit by Iran - via Syria - on Saudi Arabia's number one man in Lebanon. If Hezbollah represents a "**Rook**" for Iran in this game of chess, Rafiq Hariri represented the "**Wazir**" (Queen in Arabian chess) for Saudi Arabia. His removal could have very well precipitated a checkmate on American interests in Lebanon and significantly broadened Iranian influence in the region, something that did not happen immediately.

The chess game that unfolded in Lebanon with the Hariri assassination continued to be played over the coming years through a back and forth between the two camps that manifested in a number of key events: the Cedar Revolution, assassination of Lebanese public figures, withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, UNSC 1595 establishing an international Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, Nahr El-Bared War in 2007, the May 7th conflict in 2008, the Doha accord, appointment of a president, parliamentary elections, etc. Through it all, Syria has consistently been a key player on the anti-American side and Lebanon's political crisis has been spiraling out of control until the collapse of the Lebanese cabinet headed by PM Saad Hariri (Rafiq Hariri's son) in January 2011. The ousting of Saad Hariri from government, through a constitutional maneuver staged by the pro-Syrian camp in Lebanon, took place while Hariri was meeting with Obama at the White House. If Rafiq Hariri was the Saudi "**Wazir**" on the chessboard, his son Saad was one of its "**Bishops**". His removal from power dealt a major blow to the pro-American camp and necessitated a firm response against the Iranian "**Vazir**" (Queen in Persian Chess) itself on the board: Bashar Al-Assad.

Few weeks after the government of Saad Hariri gave way in Lebanon to a Hezbollah-led coalition, a Shiite uprising - supported by Iran and Hezbollah - came to light in the Kingdom of Bahrain (February 14, 2011). In the span of one month, the Iranian coalition managed to launch attacks on two fronts against pro-American forces and was gearing to take control. Retaliation was swift on both fronts. On March 14, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates entered Bahrain with the stated purpose of protecting essential facilities including oil and gas installations and financial institutions. The maneuver was carried out under the aegis of the Gulf Cooperation Council. On March 15, less than two months after Hariri's fall and one month after the attempt in Bahrain, the Syrian "street" was ablaze demanding the fall of the dictator!

The Pitfalls if Assad Falls

The Assad dynasty has controlled Syria for more than forty years, "raising" generations of loyalists to a regime that advocated secularism but practiced, in a strict sense, "Assadism". The exile, imprisonment, torture and assassination of dissidents and opposition figures over the Assad years in power left Syria with very few independent leaders who have any significant presence on the ground or influence amongst the people and who can assume the country's charge in a post-Assad era. The massacres carried against the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982 - gone unnoticed by Arab and International communities - instilled in young Syrians fear of the Assad regime and a sense of awe at its might and invincibility. At the same time, it galvanized the hate of many Sunni Muslims, namely radicals, towards Assad and strengthened their resolve to exact revenge from his regime at the right time. This situation, compounded with Syria's diverse ethnic and sectarian mix, makes a smooth transition of power an unlikely scenario.

In fact, ethnic and sectarian minority groups in Syria make up more than 30% of the population (which include Alawites, Shi'a, Druze, Kurds, Christians and Jews); despite their muted hopes and aspirations for change and democracy, they would rather hold-on to the devil they know than face possibly a fate similar to that of the Iraqis after Saddam. Iraq is viewed by many observers today as a gangland rather than a nation in order. Minorities - namely Christians - are brutally maimed, their women raped and children kidnapped and killed, ultimately forcing them to seek refuge outside their homeland. The fear of a similar fate in Syria if Assad is forced out of power is keeping minority groups by his side. The slogans shouted by the demonstrators help, in many cases, to inflame those fears. Therefore, minority participation in

the current uprisings is abysmal not to say absent. Admittedly, it is difficult - especially on the outside - to get an objective assessment of the size and make-up of the demonstrations in Syria, but most of them seem to follow Friday prayers in a limited number of Syrian towns. Furthermore, Damascus and Aleppo - the two largest Syrian cities with Sunni majorities - have seen very little movement on the ground, if any. For a country of more than 22 Million citizens, the numbers on the streets are nominal. For a society with a complex demographic mosaic, which prides itself in its historic ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and its so-called "secular" government, the demonstrators do not seem to represent a true cross-section of the population, but rather disgruntled groups of radicals who may have a feud with Assad's father and with an agenda that remains ambiguous at best. Besides, more than five months since the beginning of the unrest, the Syrian armed forces seem to be holding together with Assad. No defections to speak of, certainly nothing like the world saw in Egypt, Yemen or Libya.

With the internal conditions unripe yet for change, and given the tremendous Iranian interest in the survival of Assad's regime, any attempt at ousting him by force could spell a civil war in Syria and ultimately breaking-up the country. Furthermore, the unrest may not remain limited only to Syria.

Assad's Strategic Choices

At present, it would seem that two important pieces of the Iranian coalition are forked on the chessboard: Hezbollah, implicated in the Hariri assassination by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the Assad regime in a fight for its survival. Iran's options are limited: letting go of Hezbollah is out of question for ideological and strategic reasons; on the other hand, letting go of Assad strips it of a strong ally and disrupts Hezbollah's arms supply route. Both parties are vital to the survival of the anti-American coalition in the region. That being the case, it would be safe to assume that any outside military intervention against Assad will unavoidably clash with massive resistance on several fronts. Inside Syria, Assad can always count on a cache of armed loyalists whose interests are intertwined with those of the regime. Hezbollah could mobilize the "resistance" from military training camps throughout the country. This move may substantially weaken the "Party of God" in neighboring Lebanon, but rescuing the Assad regime is a primary strategic goal. Assad's defense strategy may as well stretch beyond Syria's borders. This could spell trouble for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Bahrain, for the pro-American camp in Lebanon, for Israel on the Lebanese and Syrian borders, for Egypt in Sinai and for the United States in Iraq. In fact, the Iraqi insurgency is known to often wax and wane with the "mood" of the Syrian-American entente. Egypt, right before the fall of Mubarak, arrested a number of Hezbollah cells operating on the border with Gaza. Similar cells may be ready in Bahrain and other Arab countries. Iran and Venezuela will make sure Assad has enough liquidity to survive and he can always rely on Russia and China to protect him at the UNSC.

At present, a smooth change of guard in Syria seems unlikely. It is more likely that Assad may stay in power, possibly for years. The situation could remain in flux for a long time and the unrest could progress into chaos and possibly a civil war. On the other hand, Assad's regime could very well weather the storm à la Saddam after Desert Storm. He may even reinvent his policies and seek international acceptance like Gadhafi did in 2007. That may cease to be the case if a handful of senior army officers were to take charge of Syria on a transitional basis, appease minorities' fears and institute necessary reforms that take into account Syria's diverse society, rich history, its aspirations for a secular democratic government and its rightful place in the world. That would mean for starter a Syria oblivious to Iranian and Saudi influences and focused on the rebuilding of its institutions. The coming few months will tell.

¹ For more on the conditional engagement with Syria, see "Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire" (2005) by Flynt Leverett, former director of Middle Eastern affairs at the National Security Council in Washington.

² Zbigniew Brzezinski: United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter and author of "The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives" (1998).

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