



THE MIDDLE EAST

Any Coherent Sense of Direction for Syria?

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I do not mask the fact that I have in the past often looked up to Syria due to its rich history and centrality in the heartland of the Arab World let alone its seeming resistance to Israeli, Arab and non-Arab plots woven against it. But this sense of qualified albeit tacit admiration has been gradually and painstakingly replaced over the past five months by another state of angry despondency: after all, what would have passed for steadfast resistance in the past now qualifies as steadfast cruelty.

Following the military attacks against cities and towns like Homs, Hama, Deir el Zour, Idlib, Dara'a and many others, there are in my opinion three options still staring Syria blankly in the face at this ninth hour. The first option would involve the government continuing its wanton use of force in an effort to try and quell the citizens' revolt. The second one is that the opposition tires from the daily demonstrations and accepts to engage in dialogue that leads to limited political liberalisation, keeping the current leadership in place and thereby capitulating on one of its principal demands. The third option, however, would involve sustained confrontations that shatter the economy, send millions of Syrians into economic meltdown, and ultimately bring down the regime because cracks appear in one or more of the three key constituencies of the ruling authority - namely, the Alawite minority from which the regime draws disproportionate support and manpower, the security and military services or the mainstream business elites in the major towns such as Aleppo and Damascus.

However, as a recent report by International Crisis Group suggested, the Assad regime could have perhaps largely overcome the crisis if it had handled it differently from the start. Instead, the Syrian government, beholden as it has been to the intelligence and security elements, has been shooting itself in the foot with its inflated insistence on blaming the uprising on outside conspiracies, let alone its attempts to ramp up the brutality of its crackdown and inflame sectarian tensions - particularly between the majority Sunnis and all other communities. However, with the regime increasingly losing credibility with large numbers of its own people and the audible creaks in the economy, this appears like a cruel fight that will test the mettle of both sides. The question now is who blinks first or whether the status quo is sustainable.

In the midst of those three options lie many imponderables. The first in my estimation is whether the regular army will split beyond the few that have already done so - with influential officers drawing away from attacks against civilians. As the pressure on the Assad regime mounts, might there be more military defections the likes of which we witnessed in the town of Abulkamal in eastern Syria? Does the replacement of General Ali Habib by General Daoud Rajha as defence minister indicate divergences within the military central command over the military tactics of the regime let alone over the loyalties of Alawite different constituencies? Yet it is not the army that props up the regime; rather, it is the likes of Maher Assad's elite Fourth Republican Brigade let alone the seventeen intelligence and security agencies and their henchmen the likes of Hafez Makhoulf, head of General Security Directorate in Damascus or Dhu al-Himma Shalish, head of Presidential Security or Mohammed Dib Zaitoun, head of the Political Security Directorate. The second wild card is still the sectarian

violence between Sunnis and the ruling Alawite minority as much as smaller communities - such as the various Christian confessions and perhaps even the hesitant Kurds - that could potentially lead to ethnic fights and pit Syrians against each other and so freeing up the regime to re-consolidate its position. The constant reassurances emitted by dissidents such as Radwan Ziadeh and Burhan Ghalyoun against such a scenario lend credence to this fear amongst opposition figures. Besides, it is also a fact that not all the smaller non-Sunni communities are necessarily pro-regime or anti-change. Even within the Alawite community, the likes of former political prisoners such as Aref Dalila or Louay Hussein are speaking out against the random massacres we witness every day. And as Fr Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian-born Jesuit priest and noted scholar on the Arab World, stated in a recent interview on Vatican News, "I have the impression that the protestors are so disillusioned that they will not stop. This is something that we have never seen - the more they are killing people, the more people are protesting."

There are a number of parties responsible - directly or indirectly - for the bloodletting across the country over the past weeks and months.

The first culpable party is quite clearly the Syrian regime itself, starting at the helm with the president and across all lines of command and responsibility, who have been deliberately militarising what are mostly - albeit not exclusively - peaceful demonstrations and are shelling their way through different cities, towns and hamlets with so many deaths, casualties, arrests, detentions and disappearances. A recent batch of figures suggests as many as 2300 deaths, 14,000 prisoners, 3000 disappearances and 12,000 injuries. Those canons that must surely have been directed toward the occupied Golan Heights have indiscriminately caused Syrian deaths, not least those of young children such as Hamza Ali al-Khatib. But my most poignant symbol to date remains the killing of Ibrahim Kashoush, known as the robin of the revolution in reference to his songs, whose vocal chords were cut off as a dire warning to others. But as Amnesty International also stated this week, the day of reckoning would surely arrive once a UN fact-finding delegation manages to get into the country, and the International Criminal Court is in my own legal opinion a distinct possibility for the Syrian leadership given the sheer impunity of their crimes.

The second culpable party is collectively the Arab World. True, the Gulf Cooperation Council - headed by the Saudi Arabian monarch - has suddenly woken up from an indolent slumber, but it is disconcerting that the secretary-general of the Arab League, Nabil Al-Arabi, formerly foreign minister of Egypt and himself a post-revolutionary politician, was only recently assuaging the actions of the Syrian regime during a visit to Damascus. It is reprehensible that the Arab World is by and large mum on what is occurring in Syria, fearful as they are of the skeletons in their own cupboards let alone their dread that what is happening in other countries might well be exported in the future into their own territory as the popular movement turns unstoppable and continues its forward surge. However, many pundits would agree that this belated Arab intervention derives its real roots from a deep-seated fear of Iranian regional hegemony through the Syrian gateway, coupled with a centuries-old latent distrust of Turkey.

In fact, Turkey is trying to walk a thin line as it is faced with a small refugee crisis on its southern border and there are persistent rumours that it might even create a buffer zone inside Syria. However, Turkey has also been playing both sides of this uprising: on the one hand, it is expressing its disapproval of events unfolding in Syria whilst also pursuing a cautious and even conciliatory tone with Syria. (The mission by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Damascus today could well be an example of such diplomatic double-entendres). But Turkey exhibits these days its own resurgent neo-ottoman designs as much as the fact that it shares 500 miles of borders with Syria that render it vulnerable to many uncertainties, not least to the Kurdish presence in the region as well as the historical dispute over the Alexandretta / Iskenderoun city in the province of Hatay that was taken away from Syria and annexed to Turkey in 1939 - whose sovereignty has been recognised by

Syria but which has now reappeared in some of the Syrian press again. Yet Turkey does not hold many cards, and its roar is often much louder than its bite.

There is also a critical Palestinian dimension to the uprisings with roughly 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria - the largest camp of Yarmouk having also witnessed deadly clashes. Most Palestinians are terrified of being sucked into this crisis: ironically, the PLO and Hamas are barely making any comments in support of freedom and any demonstrations in Gaza or the West Bank are being snuffed out by Palestinian heavy-handedness.

The international community has also failed to act more boldly. After all, the UN presidential statement earlier this week was woefully inadequate when compared to the vicious crackdown by the Syrian authority apparatuses. As Amnesty International stated, "it is deeply disappointing that the best the Security Council can come up with is a limp statement that is not legally binding and does not refer the situation to the International Criminal Court". This limp response owes much to Russian opposition - alongside the reluctance shown by China, Brazil and even India and South Africa - toward any UN Security Council Resolution that might impose binding sanctions. This diplomatic recalcitrance emanates largely from a fear that the Libyan scenario would be replicated in Syria through another military campaign - which Russia opposes in view of its cold-war-era alliances as much as its large naval supply and maintenance site in the port of Tartus that beefs up Russian movements in the Black Sea.

Moreover, the UN initiative was singularly awkward for Lebanon as the sole member to 'disassociate itself' (legalese for neither endorsing nor opposing) from the presidential statement when the Lebanese UN deputy ambassador Caroline Ziadeh endeavoured to justify the refusal to support a mild and largely toothless statement. This is due to a large part to Lebanese domestic political considerations, not least the fact that Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi'i militia movement in the country, is now a key player in the Lebanese March 8 government and is supportive of its Syrian ally. But does one not wonder about the philosophy of an audacious resistance movement that 'checkmated' Israel in its attack against Lebanon in 2006 and hailed the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents only to work hand-in-glove with a Syrian regime that has to date as much blood on its hands as most other Arab leaders put together - including Libya and Yemen.

However, irrespective of the craven or vested attitudes of many other parties, the West also cannot easily free itself from blame despite its recent efforts. After all, I would maintain that the inconsistency of its policies, the usurious expediency of its goals and the failure to root its actions legally and ethically over decades - not least over Palestine and Iraq or its support of the most dictatorial of regimes - has led to the lack of trust in its current motives.

Overall, I believe that the whole series of 'Arab Spring' movements have proven over the past six months is that there is a firm resolve for citizenship rights, freedom, dignity and democracy within the Arab World that can no longer be quashed - even ruthlessly. But one cannot expect such a process to be linear or be achieved overnight. After all, the deliberate decades-long repression of the people by their leaders have meant that there are hardly any genuine political parties in most of these countries and no civil society institutions ready to take over either. As such, the more I observe those events in the whole MENA region, the more I realise that this is less of a seasonal 'Arab Spring' than it is an 'Arab Awakening' that will possibly play out over the next few years before it settles down. In fact, what started as a spring movement will most possibly live through many seasons and multiple years. After all, most Arabs are beginning to experience democracy for the first time. There are bound to be many painful birth pangs as well as mistakes on the political and economic fronts. But if the masses succeed in their vision, it is largely because they have stopped feeling powerless and are willing to challenge their rulers in order to regain their citizenship rights with all the dignity and liberties that

such co-equal rights carry with them. Yassin El-Haj Saleh is himself a Syrian writer and thinker who was incarcerated in the Syrian infamous Tudmor jail during the 1980's and understands the better than many others the thinking of the Syrian inner elites. In an article in Dar al Hayat on 7th August, he explains that one overriding and principal reason why Syrians cannot fold back and are instead defying helicopters, canons and bullets is simply because they realise that the alternative is no longer available to them. If they were to stop their demonstrations, the authorities would arrest many of them and torture them in inhumane ways - as has often been done in the past.

"Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens, and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen" is a saying attributed to Lenin that captures some of the tectonic shifts taking place in the MENA region today. But that statement by itself is facile. As the Russian revolutionary also soliloquised in December 1916, only two months before the outbreak of the Russian revolution, "The revolutionary movement grows extremely slowly and with difficulty." The following month, in January 1917, he also went on to add that, "We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution."

Given the vicious bloodletting in Syria, the open war in Libya, the unending clashes in Yemen, the sectarian tensions in Bahrain, the ructions in Egypt and Tunisia and the silent fears as well as loud uncertainties in many other countries of the vast MENA region, it is clear that we are in for the long haul that goes well beyond the holy month of Ramadan this year.

A popular Arabic expression goes (transliterated): mann daqqa, douqqa! Roughly translated, it implies that those who beat others will also be beaten themselves. So today, I can only emphasise that Syria is a lesson on how motivated citizens can challenge governments that seem invincible. In a nutshell, when stripped from the veneer of political sophistry, those Arab men, women and children across the whole region are claiming - proudly, at times forcefully, and often with sacrifice - their long-overdue citizenship rights and fundamental freedoms. But given the dusky realities emerging from many corners, I am also wary against religious radicalism or fanaticism on the one hand, and military arrogance or political kleptocracy on the other, infiltrating those virginal movements and co-opting them only to impose new forms of dictatorships, totalitarian control, subjugation and discrimination.

Otherwise, and almost as a classic act of double jeopardy, we might again be witnessed to the wilful murder of the Arab human soul - in fact of any human soul.

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