

Syrian Scenarios and the Levant's Insecure Future

The waves of Arab popular protests have been edging ever further towards the Middle East conflict. With Syria in turmoil there seem to be no limits of imagination to where fundamental changes may lead in the region. The illegal but peaceful trespassing of Israeli borders by Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon on Naqba Memorial Day in May 14, 2011, shows a new quality of agitation that is taking place not only within Arab countries but also spilling over their borders. These were the first troubles on the Israeli-Syrian border since ex-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated the line of separation on the Golan Heights in 1974. Who would have thought that the first 'incident' at the quietest UN observed border was to be of a purely non-military nature, although hardly less dangerous?

The upheavals in Syria will have more repercussions for the Middle East conflict than other popular revolutions in Tunisia or even in Egypt. Unlike Egypt, Syria has not signed a peace treaty with Israel. Any new political leadership will not be bound to formal agreements. And an old leadership struggling for survival is likely to cross formerly respected lines, too. The suspicion that the Syrian-Palestinian intrusion into Israeli occupied Druze villages in the Golan was at least supported by the Asad regime in order to divert attention from its domestic struggle is not too far-fetched.

Moreover, in the past years, in particular following the Iraq war from which Iran emerged as a net winner, Syria and Lebanon have been integrated into the interface of the Saudi-Sunni and Persian-Shiite spheres of interest. The tectonic plates of this growing power struggle lead right through the Levant. In the long-term perspective, Syria has to worry about its influence in Lebanon. Time will show after Syria's rising domestic challengers how much leverage Damascus will still have over Hezbollah and to what extent Hezbollah has gained in power to such an extent that it can dictate terms of its own. Moreover, Iran's direct influence in Lebanon is rising and a Syrian nightmare is that one day Syria will be reduced to a logistical interface between Iran and Hezbollah.

The overwhelming welcome of Iran's President Mahmud Ahmedinejad in Lebanon in mid-October 2010 is the more visible aspect of this development. During Ahmedinejad's visit the British daily

Telegraph published an article prophetically titled: "A landlord visiting his domain."¹ On the radical Sunni side, Syria could turn into an interesting playground for al-Qaida activists because of its proximity to Israel. A country that for many years has been fighting Islamic extremism and terrorism – although it was often left alone in its efforts by the West because of US and Israeli pressures – may lose the capacity to fight on this domestic front. Already now Syrian inhabitants report an increasingly aggressive tone by Sunni extremists who mingle into the protesters or lead the protests in certain areas fostering the worst fears of Christians and Alawis.

Sadiq al-Azm, Syrian philosopher and leading member of the Civil Society Movement, said weeks before the Syrian uprising:

"If the revolts reach Syria, it will become far bloodier than in Tunisia or Egypt because of the sectarian nature of Syrian politics."²

Instability in Syria is also a worst case scenario for Israeli security strategists. Syria has always been a stable and reliable enemy. If it was politically opportune, Syria was able to restrain Hezbollah's shelling of northern Israel. It was Asad who dissuaded Ahmedinejad from throwing stones toward the Israeli border during his visit to southern Lebanon. The occupied Golan Heights served both Syria and Israel as a welcome status quo, too. During the upheavals Syrian opposition figures commented with contumeliousness on the lifting of Syria's Emergency Laws from 1963. They reminded of the fact that the state of emergency has always been justified by the Syrian regime with the official state of war with Israel. Suddenly, it was lifted – at least rhetorically – due to street pressure (and thus lost any political effect of showing the will to reform). Adding fuel to the fire, the fourth branch of the presidential guard that is commanded by Bashar al-Asad's brother Maher is militarily responsible for the Golan dossier – and it was Maher who commanded the bloody clampdown on the people's protest in Der'a. Some of the protesters shouted: "Maher you coward. Send your troops to liberate the Golan."³ Almost everything that is happening inside Syria has a visible foreign policy aspect to it. Therefore, the future of Syria is crucial for the whole region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well. Here are a few scenarios how

¹ "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Lebanon: 'a landlord visiting his domain'", in: *Telegraph*, October 14, 2010.

² Interview with the author in February 2011.

³ "Bashar al-Assad's inner circle", in: *BBC news* (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13216195), April 27, 2011.

events in Syria could unfold:

(1) Bloody Clampdown with Regime Survival, including al-Asad.

After a painful process of maybe months, the regime will be able to suppress and suffocate the upheavals through brute force, targeted arrests and sophisticated intelligence work. Bashar al-Asad will ever more grow into the traditional role of his father Hafez who successfully ruled with blood on his hands after the massacre of Hama in 1982.

In this scenario, the younger Asad will be able to continue his career in Syrian politics by playing the sectarian card more visibly. At the very least he will face a more sectarian scenario that is fuelled by Sunni extremists. Asad himself can rely on major parts of Christian and Alawite minorities (although they may be personally appalled by the regime's violence) and he may manage to forge new alliances in an alternating manner as his father did. Asad may also be able to maintain the bond with the pragmatic Sunni merchant class. This, however, requires an economic upswing in order to distribute wealth and privileges as in the past. At this point, this looks at the least very difficult to manage.

Asad will hardly have any soft power left and will depend ever more on his security apparatus and on the crueler members of his family clan like Maher al-Asad, Asef Shawkat, brother-in-law and deputy chief of staff of the armed forces, or the much hated tycoon and Asad's cousin Rami Makhloof. Asad will continue to play the tunes of false alternatives such as 'Islamism and chaos or Baath rule and law and order'. And he may need to get tougher with the external enemy Israel to compensate for his loss of credibility among Syrians.

Those who had hoped that the President would embark on reforms as soon as he can rid himself of hardliners and vested interests will finally turn away from him. After the clampdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001 Asad will become known for the clampdown on the Arab Spring in Syria.

Moreover, painstaking efforts to improve Syria's image abroad are lying in tatters. Not long before the wave of Arab protests reached Syria, the regime in Damascus had started to regain the initiative in foreign policy matters. European governments and even the US administration

seemed to have come to the conclusion that Syria was at least a stable, politically approachable, and important geo-strategic player in the Middle East whose president was on the path of piecemeal reforms. US President Barack Obama played soft on Syria in his effort to reverse the Syrian drift towards Iran and sent an ambassador to Damascus in January 2011 after nearly six years of diplomatic vacuum. This represented the last foreign policy success for Bashar al-Asad before the popular protests.

It was hard work for Asad to get to this point after years of isolation and stigmatization following the Iraq war. Two years of successful diplomacy, constructive engagements like in Lebanon, rapprochement with Europe and even with the US, and a clever diversification of foreign policy with Turkey as a partner were destroyed by the unsuccessful approach of the Syrian regime towards popular demands.

On the other hand, clinging to power with all means has created common grounds with other autocratic Arab states and can ease traditional tensions with Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States, for instance. Remember that Syria declared that the Saudi military invasion to crush the protests in Bahrain had been justified.⁴

By contrast, Syria's shift away from pragmatism will have its cost in another area. If Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan remains serious about his democracy agenda in the Middle East, he will not be able to do business as usual with Syria in the described scenario. The loss of Turkey as a partner will be hard for Syria to compensate. Moreover, Turkey was Syria's back door for mending relations with the West.

(2) Bloody Clampdown with Regime Survival, excluding al-Asad.

In this scenario many of the above mentioned consequences apply, too. There will be hardly any scope for a quick healing of Syria's estrangement from the West. Relations with Turkey will be strained. The alliance with Iran will remain the most important anchor for Syria's foreign policy. Syrian influence in Lebanon will be exerted more openly and bluntly again. An aggressive stance *vis-à-vis* Israel is probable.

Already during the first weeks of the mass protests, rifts within the Syrian power structure looked like a possible collateral effect. Some in-

⁴ "Syria Justifies Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain", in: *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, March 20, 2011.

