

Asad's Lost Chances

by [Carsten Wieland](#) | published April 13, 2011

On January 31, the *Wall Street Journal* printed words that Bashar al-Asad must wince to recall. In an interview with the newspaper, the Syrian president said that Arab rulers would need to move faster to accommodate the rising political and economic aspirations of Arab peoples. “If you didn’t see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it’s too late to do any reform,” he chided his fellow leaders. But Asad went on to assure the interviewer (and perhaps himself): “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...you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances.”

Not even two months later, confrontations between protesters and security forces across Syria shook the Baathist regime harder than any challenge since the 1980s. No matter what the course of the upheavals, the Syria that many have known for decades will never be the same. The protests have torn asunder the delicate fabric of rules, explicit and implicit, that for decades have determined the relations between the regime and the citizenry. By Syrian standards, the political concessions promised by regime representatives to quiet the unrest are far-reaching; long years of civil society activism were unable to achieve them. By the yardstick of the times, however, the moves have turned out to be inadequate. Following a presidential speech to Parliament on March 30, it looks like sweeping reform is an empty promise. And a rising number of Syrians are not swallowing their disappointment. The pervasive fear for which this police state is infamous has given way to unpredictable bursts of popular anger, as well as hope for a better future.

President Asad, for his part, may soon feel twinges of nostalgia for the days when Syria’s main source of dissent was a group of intellectuals of the Civil Society Movement, most of them elderly, who for the past ten years have called for political pluralism and civil rights. He may miss the occasions on which he was presented with elaborate declarations, lists of signatures and critical articles appearing in the Lebanese press but meant for Syrian consumption. Many of the authors share the Baathists’ pan-Arab orientation and hardline stance toward Israel; they could have been secular partners who built bridges to Islamist and other more radical forces.

Just after the US invasion of Iraq, in May 2003, many observers pricked up their ears in surprise when a central regime figure commended the Syrian opposition for its prudence. Bahjat Sulayman, the powerful former head of Syrian intelligence, wrote in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir*, “In Syria, the regime does not have enemies but ‘opponents’ whose demands do not go beyond certain political and economic reforms such as the end of the state of emergency and martial law; the adoption of a law on political parties; and the equitable redistribution of national wealth.” ^[1] Forcible regime change, Sulayman knew, was only on the agenda of select exiles and US politicians.

But President Asad treated the Civil Society Movement intellectuals, with their debating clubs and talk of a soft landing for Syria’s transition away from authoritarianism, like a gang of criminals. The days are over when obstreperousness is defined as discussion in the back rooms of teahouses suffused with the aromatic smoke of water pipes. Now the Syrian president faces tumult in the streets and the whiff of gunpowder.

Patterns of Unrest

No one knows how the street unrest in Syria will end, and not only because information about the demonstrations and clashes is so scarce. The focal points of unrest in mid-April, the southern agricultural town of Dar‘a and the Mediterranean port of Banyas, are no-go zones for journalists, with all forms of

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communication with Banyas reportedly cut. Reporting from anywhere in Syria has been scanty throughout the crisis. An additional question is to what degree Syrian cities and villages have been gripped by fears of sectarian incidents, score settling among groups with vested interests or heightened criminal activity -- all specters raised by the regime -- as the protests escalate.

Yet the outlines of a minimum outcome have already emerged: Power relations will be renegotiated. Inside the regime, key posts have been reshuffled amidst rumors of open discord between Bashar al-Asad and the security services, between Asad and the army, between Bashar and other members of the Asad clan and, possibly, between ‘Alawis, Sunnis and members of other sects in the upper echelons. The regime has less leeway in its social, economic and political decisions going forward; it will have to frame them more cautiously, with more urgent attention to good governance and less reliance on repression, lest the next round of protest be far more vigorous than that of 2011. But the current round is far from over, in any case, and its maximum outcome is regime change. For years, Asad has quelled demands for fundamental change with piecemeal, sometimes cosmetic reforms. Some strata of the public have considered him part of the solution; the danger is that he will lose these people and become part of the problem.

In its foreign policy, ideological makeup and social composition, Syria differs greatly from Tunisia or Egypt, so the momentous events of 2011 in those countries will not simply be replicated. Yet the pattern of Syria’s immediate crisis is quite similar to those in other Arab countries. The protests were sparked by a minor incident: Teens in Dar‘a were detained for spray-painting buildings in town with graffiti inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, including the famous slogan, “The people want to overthrow the regime.” A “day of rage” was declared. The police, unused to civil unrest, overreacted and shot several protesters dead. Anger rose countrywide and triggered more widespread demonstrations, which have been met with more brutal force, in turn fueling more protest.

Bashar al-Asad has mostly kept a low profile, feeding the early gossip that he and his family were feuding over how to respond. The president has behaved like the leader of a “*jumlukiyya*,” as the Syrian opposition calls the country’s political system, melding the Arabic words for republic and monarchy. Rather than assuming responsibility for the crisis, the “republico-monarch” has shunted the blame downward, offering to replace the cabinet and sack the lieutenants responsible for the hot spots around the country. In terms of public relations, the regime has tried to make do with sending advisers, deputies or ministers before the cameras to explain its point of view, trotting out the president only in extremis. Much of the regime’s verbal response has aimed to criminalize the protests or portray them in sectarian terms; in tandem, the regime has resorted to lethal force to suppress the agitation. As the protests spread, the regime turned to attempts at political accommodation and, eventually, measures of appeasement.

In Tunisia and Egypt, such concessions had no conciliatory effect upon the crowds because they always came a few days or weeks too late. In Syria, as well, the concessions appear poorly chosen for the circumstances. On April 7, Asad granted citizenship to some 150,000 of Syria’s Kurds who had been stateless, answering a long-time demand of Kurdish advocacy organizations. The measure was so overdue that Asad got little credit. “Citizenship is the right of every Syrian. It is not a favor. It is not the right of anyone to grant,” retorted Habib Ibrahim, leader of a major Kurdish party. Other concessions, like permitting schoolteachers to wear the *niqab*, or full face veil, and closing a casino, are meant to placate Islamists but mean little to the wider base of opposition demonstrators calling for real political reform.

In the initial weeks, the demonstrators’ wrath has not, by and large, targeted Bashar al-Asad himself. But the hits are drawing closer and closer to home. Great fury is directed toward Bashar’s brother Mahir, who has a reputation for personal cruelty and, as head of the Fourth Division of the Republican Guard, is a bulwark of authoritarian rule in the country. Other names increasingly heard in the protesters’ chants are ‘Asif Shawkat, husband of Bashar’s sister Bushra and deputy chief of staff of the army, and, above all, Rami Makhlof, who

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owns Syria’s cell phone companies, duty-free shops and almost everything else that promises quick profits. Like his counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, Makhlouf is beneficiary of a classic predatory arrangement, whereby his unquestioning political loyalty buys him commercial monopolies bestowed by the state. The stories of Makhlouf’s corruption incense ordinary Syrians, from the working poor to the endangered middle class. No wonder the first wave of protesters in Dar‘a burned down the local cell phone company outlet, as well as the court building and the Baath Party offices.

Sitting It Out

As late as January, Asad thought he could sit out the season of Arab revolts. As supportive Syrian columnists tirelessly point out, Asad is a relatively young man at 45, unlike the aging Arab leaders in trouble elsewhere. He has made no pact with the US or Israel, keeping him close to public opinion on regional issues. His backers adduce additional pillars of legitimacy: Asad has maintained law and order in times of great turbulence in the bordering nations of Iraq and Lebanon; his secular Baathist regime has safeguarded an atmosphere of relative religious and ethnic tolerance, which many in the region admire; and the president has cultivated a humble public persona, in contrast not only to dictators like Saddam Hussein or Muammar al-Qaddafi, but also to their uncouth sons. In the eyes of many Syrians, the junior Asad has not lost his image as a reformer frustrated at every turn by an irascible old guard.

The country has indeed made progress during the ten years of Asad’s rule in areas that are not directly related to democracy or human rights. Syrian media outlets are more numerous and plainspoken than under Bashar’s father Hafiz, from whom he inherited power in 2000, provided that they do not cross red lines related to politics, religion and sex. Arts and letters have benefited from more freedom of expression. Though several Internet sites are permanently blocked, Syrians have far more access to information and the outside world, through satellite TV, blogs and foreign media. Cell phones and other modern equipment have become accessible to a wider range of people. Women’s organizations have gained strength and are granted room to maneuver even if they are not legally registered or explicitly supportive of the government.

There is, in fact, considerable sympathy for Bashar al-Asad among the population, though some of it stems from fear of the unknown. The manifestations of pro-regime sentiment that have popped up alongside the protests, particularly in Damascus and Ladhqiyya, may be orchestrated by the state, but they are also emotionally real for the participants. Many members of religious minorities, such as Christians and the Druze, not to mention ‘Alawis, watch the present upheavals with distinct unease, as they contemplate possible backlash from the Sunni majority. The ‘Alawis, from whose tribes the Asads and their inner circle hail, worry they will suffer communal retribution for the ruling clique’s ways. But much of the Sunni merchant class, as well, has so far stuck to an alliance with the Asad regime. As minorities and middle-class Sunnis make up more than 50 percent of the population, they are not a negligible constituency.

No Damascus Spring

Here lay an opportunity for Asad shortly after he took power in June 2000: Had he mustered the courage to curtail vested interests and dismantle obsolete Baathist structures in the early years, he might have called for free elections and won them. As a leader with a genuine social base, he could have confronted the militarist policies of President George W. Bush without falling back upon dusty pan-Arab themes or Islamist-sounding rhetoric. His position would be correspondingly stronger today. But Asad chose not to put his rule to a popular test.

The Civil Society Movement of Syria claims the mantle of intellectual pioneer of the 2011 Arab revolutions, with the addendum that Tunisians turned out to be the champions in practice. The short-lived heyday of this

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opposition movement starting in September 2000 was known, indeed, as the “Damascus spring.” That fall, the writer Michel Kilo headlined a group of intellectuals who published the “manifesto of the 99,” followed in December by the “manifesto of the 1,000.” The distinguished secular philosopher Sadiq al-‘Azm was a key signatory. The intellectuals’ aim, to paraphrase the pointed words of Alan George, was both bread and freedom. [2] Riyadh Sayf, an entrepreneur and outspoken member of Parliament, went the furthest, putting forward social-democratic ideals of a “fair market economy” that he upheld with decent labor practices in the companies he owns. Politically, he called for a constitutional state, an independent legislature and courts, and a free press. But Sayf crossed a red line when he announced his intention to found a party of his own. He was arrested, and the “Damascus spring” turned cold as the debating clubs in Damascus teahouses closed down.

Today, the regime may hastily introduce political pluralism (or a semblance thereof) under the pressure of the street. A new party law meant to break the stranglehold of the Baath Party has been gathering dust in a presidential desk drawer for years. But it is one thing for the regime to introduce such reforms under circumstances of its own choosing and quite another to do so under duress, with the latter step likely to embolden the opposition to press for more. The same dynamic holds for the regime’s various other promises, like tackling legal discrimination against citizens of Kurdish ethnicity, erecting a legal framework for the activities of NGOs or promulgating a new media law. It even holds for declaring an end to martial law, a step that, rhetorically, has always been tied to liberation of the Golan Heights from Israeli occupation and the end of hostilities with Israel. Now it is purely domestic stresses that are bringing such measures to the forefront of regime calculations. The regime is losing one trump card after another.

Waves of Suppression

The massive street protests reached Syria precisely when the regime was in a phase of increased suppression of opposition forces, whether the older Civil Society Movement or the bloggers and Internet activists of more recent vintage. Several well-known human rights defenders are languishing behind bars. The unrest also arrives at a time when Syria has managed to extricate its head from the noose of international isolation.

The successes in establishing better international relations are rooted in a series of decisions since 2008 that, on the one hand, reflect a break with the past, even paradigm shifts, and, on the other hand, display the growing maturity of President Asad in foreign policy matters. A new Syrian pragmatism has emerged after a phase of ideological encrustation during the early phases of the Iraq war that can be explained by both *raison d'état* and desperation amidst the bellicose talk emanating from Washington.

In the past, it was plausible to advance the thesis that Syria’s isolation and the regime’s feeling of existential threat from outside was making the regime reluctant to open up the political system and apt to crack down heavily on opposition movements. Many had hoped that Syria would adopt domestic reforms when the foreign threat abated. Instead, the reverse has arguably occurred. One experienced Syrian analyst who has worked inside the government conceded in an interview: “I made the same mistake. I thought there was a correlation between foreign and domestic policy.... With or without external pressure, we have no political change in Syria. Domestic pressure is a continuity not a contradiction.”

Three waves of suppression have swept through Syria during Bashar al-Asad’s ten years in power. The first began in 2001 with the completion of the clampdown on the debating clubs of the Civil Society Movement. Asad had adopted the Chinese model: The regime would pursue economic reform, but political and administrative reforms would be discarded. No democratic experiment was in the offing as US threats of regime change began to emerge in 2002, and the Baathist regime subsequently entrenched itself in harsh ideological opposition to the Iraq war. Pressure mounted on Syria, especially from Saudi Arabia, France and the United States in subsequent years, culminating in the autumn 2003 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling upon “all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon,” and then the Hariri

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assassination in February 2005, which eventually compelled Damascus to summon its troops in Lebanon home.

In the face of the regime’s obvious weakness, and with the encouragement of Western diplomats, the opposition picked up momentum. It took a historic step toward unity with the Damascus Declaration of October 16, 2005. For the first time, all major opposition groups -- ranging from the secular civil society movement to Kurdish activists to the outlawed Society of Muslim Brothers in their London exile -- issued a manifesto for democratic change in Syria. The lengthy document called for an end to emergency law and other forms of political repression, a national summit on democracy and a constitutional convention to draft a charter “that foils adventurers and extremists.” The head of the Civil Society Movement, Michel Kilo, composed the Declaration. Under this document, Asad could have been still part of the solution. No Asad statues were toppled in Syrian cities. But, again, he chose to crack down.

The second wave of persecution followed in the first half of 2006, when those who had been spared in 2001, including Kilo and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, were arrested. The hunt for signatories of the Damascus Declaration was justified by the charge that they were pursuing Western interests.

The first two arrest campaigns adhered to the logic of interrelation between domestic and foreign fronts. The third, however, began at the end of 2009 when Syria had already celebrated its reemergence onto the international stage. In October of that year, the regime arrested Haytham Malih, head of the Human Rights Association of Syria, and since then has imposed travel bans upon dissident intellectuals and otherwise sought to intimidate them. The 80-year old Malih was released only during the hectic weeks of late March 2011, after he had gone on hunger strike.

In all three waves of suppression, the secular Baathist regime has silenced the moderate, secular voices calling for pluralism and piecemeal reform. This history is related to why Islamist currents appear to be gaining ground in Syria. To be sure, the Islamization of opposition politics is a general trend in the Arab Middle East and no country is immune. Yet there are other, more specific explanations for its appearance in Syria. First, the regime, despite its secular orientation, and often more out of necessity than enthusiasm, is allied with Islamist partners like Iran, Hizballah and Hamas in an “axis of resistance” to US and Israeli prerogatives. A second explanation is that, not unlike other Arab regimes, Damascus adopted a conscious strategy of toleration for Islamism. A leading Syrian opposition figure characterized the Baathist-Islamist relationship as follows: “We get state power; you get society.” Not only did this arrangement obviate a domestic threat, it could be presented to the West as evidence that Syria would turn Islamist if the Baathists were to lose the state. During its confrontation with the United States in the mid-2000s, Syria facilitated passage of Islamist militants into Iraq in order to weaken the US occupation and also engage in preemptive self-defense.

In the January 31 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Asad was still advancing a version of this argument. Acknowledging the need for some change in the state, he continued: “But at the same time you have to upgrade the society and this does not mean to upgrade it technically by upgrading qualifications. It means to open up the minds. Actually, societies during the last three decades, especially since the 1980s, have become more closed due to an increase in close-mindedness that led to extremism.” [3] In other words, Arab societies are not ready for Western-style democracy. The choice is between stability and chaos, between superficial, state-led secularism and a fundamentalist stone age. In his inaugural speech of June 2000, the young president had already made his position clear. “We cannot apply the democracy of others to ourselves,” he said. “Western democracy, for example, is the outcome of a long history that resulted in customs and traditions, which distinguish the current culture of Western societies.... We have to have our democratic experience which is special to us, which stems from our history, culture and civilization, and which is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality.”

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Some Westerners have bought into the discourse prescribing a cultural path to democracy, at least when it is politically opportune to do so. Michel Kilo has expressed his frustration with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who, during a September 2008 visit to Damascus, reiterated Assad’s notion that Syria would create a democracy of a distinct style. The intellectual says that afterward he reminded the French ambassador in Damascus that it was the French who disseminated the idea of universal human rights. Sadiq al-‘Azam, similarly, has warned against the tendency to posit a “Western human rights” that differs from “Islamic human rights” or the “Asian human rights” that Malaysia and China have tried to propagate. [\[4\]](#)

No Arab leader has explained why it has taken so long for his allegedly immature people to learn the ropes of democracy. It grows harder and harder to explain, since the reigns of some autocrats have lasted over 30 years, as in the Yemeni case. Even the ten-plus years of Bashar al-Asad’s rule in Syria have apparently not been enough time to pursue incremental change and build institutions without compromising on security, foreign policy restraints and other Syrian particularities. Now the window of opportunity may have closed.

Sparks Igniting

The movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and other Arab states have proven four postulates. First, the aspirations of peoples are indeed universal. As peoples in other parts of the world have done, Arabs have revolted against poverty, social injustice, corruption, censorship, police intimidation, disrespect for the rule of law and lack of individual opportunity. The calls for accountability, freedom and political pluralism in the Arab world have no cultural or religious coloring and are very much compatible with demands elsewhere. Second, the protesters are articulating these grievances without any foreign impetus, save the urge to emulate the achievements of fellow Arabs. The revolts are homegrown.

Third, the civility, creativity, peacefulness, communitarian spirit and social, religious and ethnic solidarity during the protests have shown in a remarkable way that, whatever their rulers say, Arabs are indeed mature enough for democracy. The militarization of some movements, as in Libya, has to be considered separately from the origin of the protests. Fourth, the carriers of revolution come from many strata of society, including the educated, but politically muzzled middle class that is exposed to economic shocks and fears of socio-economic decline. Most of the protesters in the Tahrir Squares of the Arab world are not inspired, and apparently not very impressed, by the slogan “Islam is the solution.” The Arab peoples, as Rashid Khalidi points out, have reasserted their dignity by refuting the patronizing attitudes of kings and presidents-for-life. [\[5\]](#) Today’s revolutions, Khalidi continues, are not the first democratic ones in the Arab world but the first directed against Arab, rather than colonial, rulers.

A new Arab nationalism of a civil nature has begun to crystallize around the demonstrations. Egyptians have placed photos on Facebook showing themselves holding up ink-colored fingers as proof of their participation in the March 19 referendum on constitutional amendments in advance of the free elections that are scheduled for the fall. Others uploaded a new status message: “Proud to be an Egyptian.” Still other Facebook pages display the crescent and the cross -- the twin religious symbols of the protests in Cairo and, now, Damascus.

The calls for dignity, participation, accountability and freedom will put Syria’s neighbors to the test as well. The Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is close to Syria in the fields of security, foreign policy, economy and tourism. Both sides speak of “family ties.” Joint meetings of the countries’ cabinets have become routine. At the same time, Turkey is seen as a model by many Arab opposition forces that seek to build democracy in majority-Muslim societies. Erdoğan has emerged as a sharp critic of Israeli human rights violations but also of Arab despots, whom he has urged to pursue reforms, most vocally in the case of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. The Syrian crisis will test the commitments of Erdoğan and his government. Can he uphold a democratic agenda while supporting a deeply troubled, undemocratic Assad regime?

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On another front, Israel may ironically turn out the actor that most sincerely hopes for a continuation of the Asad regime. Syria has been an enemy of Israel, but a stable and reliable one. The Asad regime has retained sufficient influence over Hizballah to persuade the Lebanese Shi‘i Islamist party, if need be, to exercise restraint on Israel’s northern border. With the developing unrest inside Syria, however, all bets are off. The lowest-order question is whether a weakened Baathist regime in Damascus will still be able to negotiate a peace with Israel (that is, if either side really wants it). From there, the questions for Israel only grow more difficult. If the regime is replaced by parties unknown, nostalgia for the Baathist era could soon set in among the upper echelons in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The status quo, for all its irritations, has often been convenient: Whatever their outcome, the Arab revolts have already eroded Israel’s ability to stake claims on Western sympathies by calling itself the only democracy in the Middle East.

The West has a strong interest in stability in Syria, too. In January, President Barack Obama decided to bypass Congress and send the first US ambassador to Damascus in five years -- just in time, as it turned out. Western politicians once again face a precarious balance between their stated values and pragmatic interests, the latter of which include the protection of Israel. The interest in stability on Israel’s northern flank goes a long way toward explaining the US stance as the upheavals in Syria broke out. Speaking on the CBS program “Face the Nation” on March 26, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointedly declined to condemn the repression in the harsh terms used in the Libyan case, much less entertain talk of intervention. An international consensus behind such measures “is not going to happen,” Clinton said. She continued, “There’s a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress from both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he’s a reformer.” Subsequent US statements have been stronger, but the tone remains dramatically different not only from the condemnations of the Libyan regime, but also from rhetoric employed by President George W. Bush.

Against the background of demonstrations across the country, it is not shocking that the Syrian security services have approached representatives of the Civil Society Movement. The intelligence officers whose invitations to chat were once the equivalent of warning shots, if not warrants of arrest, are now asking their old “opponents” to revive their movement. But it is too late in the game.

Over the years, the Civil Society Movement has lost Clinton’s faith in Asad’s will to reform. In November 2010, when today’s events seemed a remote possibility at best, Michel Kilo reflected upon the movement’s failures. He complained that the movement was stopped in its tracks before it was able to broaden its circle of supporters, much less engineer the foundation of parties. But, in accordance with revolutionary patterns in Europe, he said, Syria’s educated middle class had been awakened. “Once the spark ignites the younger generation, we can withdraw,” Kilo concluded. “At least we have paved the way.” [6]

Endnotes

[1] *Al-Safir*, March 15, 2003.

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

[3] *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011.

[4] Interviews with Sadiq al-‘Azm, Damascus and Berlin, November 2010.

[5] Rashid Khalidi, “Preliminary Observations on the Arab Revolutions of 2011,” *Jadaliyya*, March 11, 2011.

[6] Interview with Michel Kilo, Damascus, November 2010.