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The Syrian Uprising: Implications for Israel

Eyal Zisser

- In Syria, the story is the emergence of social groups from the periphery and their struggle to gain access to power and take over the center. The emergence of the Baath party and the Assad dynasty in the 1960s involved a coalition of peripheral forces led by the Alawites, but many others joined who came from the periphery. Now, because of socioeconomic reasons, the periphery has turned against the regime.
- Before the uprising, Bashar al-Assad was supported by the Islamic and radical movements in the Middle East. Most Muslim Brothers supported him – in Jordan, Egypt, and Hamas. Now they have turned their back on him, led by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood on a global scale, who reminds them that, after all, Bashar is an Alawite and supported by the Shiite camp.
- Turkey, under Prime Minister Erdogan, had become a close ally of Syria. But Erdogan has no reservations regarding the possibility that Muslim radicals might come to power in Syria if Bashar falls. On the contrary, the Sunni radicals and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are Erdogan's close allies, as is Hamas. So Turkey has nothing to lose if Bashar falls.
- If Bashar falls, the situation is likely to be similar to that of earlier decades, with a very weak central regime. This could lead to border incidents with Israel, but not a war, with terrorist acts that a weak regime cannot prevent.
- The Syrian opposition will eventually take over and, as in the case of Egypt, they know that their interests lie with friendship with Western countries like the United States, and

not with Iran. So in the long run, a new Syrian regime might be better for Israel than this current regime.

The Periphery Has Turned Against the Regime

It is clear that the Syrian regime has failed in its efforts to suppress the protests, which have spread all over the country. At the same time, the regime is still there and it is still strong and can fight back. The army, including soldiers and officers who belong not only to Assad's Alawite community but also to other sects and communities, is still ready to fight for the regime. Unlike Egypt, where the gap between the army and the political leadership became quite clear, this is not the case in Syria. And unlike Libya, when immediately following the beginning of the uprising there were many defections by ambassadors, senior officials, and army officers, this is clearly not the case in Syria.

In Egypt there was a clear generational dimension to the revolution, which was led to a certain degree by the younger generation. In Libya, the tension is between east and west – Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In Yemen, there is the tribal factor – the struggle for power between the south and the north, and also between different tribal configurations. In Syria, the story is a struggle between the periphery and the center, with the emergence of social groups from the periphery and their struggle to gain access to power and take over the center.

This was actually the history of Syria in the 1950s and 1960s. The emergence of the Baath party and of the Assad dynasty involved the struggle of the periphery. It was a coalition of peripheral forces led by the Alawites, the Assad dynasty, but there were many others who joined this coalition and who came from the periphery. Farouk al-Sharaa, the current vice-president and previously the foreign minister, who joined the Baath struggle for power, came from Daraa. Mustafa Tlass, who served as defense minister under Hafez al-Assad for nearly 30 years, came from Rastan, a small town near Homs, where there has been severe violence.

While the key figures in the political echelon are Alawites, the majority of ministers in the government are Sunnis, which reflects Syrian society. They are Sunnis from the big cities, or Sunnis who came many years ago from the periphery and have lost any connection with the periphery. The periphery supported the Baath regime, even during a difficult time in the 1980s when the regime fought the radical Islamists. Now, because of socioeconomic reasons, the periphery has turned against the regime. Thus, this regime has lost a major base of support.

Compare this with Egypt, for example. In Egypt we have not heard about the periphery during the revolution because the movement there was led by young, educated, and middle- to upper-middle-class people who decided to take to the streets and demonstrate against Mubarak. The young, middle-class Syrians in Damascus and Aleppo have not yet decided, and are still waiting to see what might happen. The unrest is still limited to the periphery, while the main urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo, while they may not support the regime, have not yet joined the protest. Once it reaches these places, it might be the end of the regime, but we are not yet

at that stage. We should watch for a shift in the attitudes of the urban Sunni elites in both cities.

The uprising is gaining momentum. It moved from small villages to bigger towns and then it moved to some of the large cities, like Homs and Hama. The key thing to watch for is the continued cohesiveness of the Syrian army. How long will Sunni soldiers and officers be ready to shoot at demonstrators and take part in the efforts by the regime to brutally suppress the uprising?

There is no real opposition in Syria. There are many intellectuals, many critics of the regime, and many human-rights activists inside and outside Syria. Outside Syria there are some groups that call themselves the opposition, but they have no real influence over events inside Syria. Conferences of opposition activists were held in Turkey and later in Brussels which might lead to the emergence of a much more effective opposition with a clear leadership and more influence over the course of events. This could prove to be a very dangerous threat to the regime because this group might eventually be recognized by European and later by other countries as the legitimate leadership of Syria. Right now there are no groups which could be recognized as such, but it may happen in the future.

The Bashar al-Assad Regime

Only ten years ago, Bashar al-Assad was seen as a reformer with a Western mentality. However, Bashar has said that he was raised in Syria in the house of Hafez al-Assad, and is no different from him. The Western countries and the American administration believed that there was no better alternative to the Assad regime – if this regime collapses, the case of Iraq may repeat itself with chaos, terrorism, and Islamic radicalism. But now there is a change in the attitude of the West toward Syria.

Bashar al-Assad's Syria is an important part of the Axis of Evil, supported by Iran and Hizbullah. However, Iran and Hizbullah can do very little to help him, especially inside Syria, because part of the uprising and the unrest has to do with Sunni-Shiite tension and, clearly, Shiite Iran will pay heavily for its support of Bashar al-Assad if he falls.

Before the uprising, Bashar was supported by the Islamic and radical movements in the Middle East. Most Muslim Brothers supported him – in Jordan, Egypt, and Hamas. Now they have turned their back on him, led by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood on a global scale, who reminds them that, after all, Bashar is an Alawite and supported by the Shiite camp. Now Qaradawi, as well as other Muslim Brothers all over the Arab world, and even Hamas, are having second thoughts about their alliance with Bashar.

Bashar also had the support of the pan-Arabists. An example is Azmi Bishara, a former Israeli Arab MK who now lives in Qatar. He is Christian but supported Syria as a stronghold of

resistance to Israel. Now these people have come to think of Bashar as an obstacle to the revival of pan-Arabism.

Turkey, under Prime Minister Erdogan, had become a close ally of Syria. But Erdogan has no reservations regarding the possibility that Muslim radicals might come to power in Syria if Bashar falls. On the contrary, the Sunni radicals and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are Erdogan's close allies, as is Hamas. So Turkey has nothing to lose if Bashar falls.

Clearly, the unrest in Syria has to do with economics. We tend to think that the Syrian economy was doing well, but this prosperity involved the center and some Sunni urban elites, but it had little connection to the periphery (which is exactly what happened in Egypt as well). The World Bank was very satisfied with the conduct of the Syrian economy, but the periphery had reservations. Right now the Syrian economy is paralyzed, and Bashar has made some dramatic changes, bringing back subsidies. The tourist industry has collapsed. Even if he survives, Bashar could pay heavily and might be in desperate need not of Iranian missiles but of economic aid.

In the coming weeks and months, if the unrest continues, the Syrian economy will remain paralyzed and Bashar will have no resources to satisfy the urban elites in Damascus and Aleppo, where the middle class could turn against him. So he is playing for time, but time is not on his side. He needs to bring this unrest to an immediate halt, because if it continues, it will threaten his interests.

When Bashar speaks about reform, what he has in mind is to open new schools, to launch new tourist projects, to encourage industry. It has nothing to do with any political change or reform because this would be against the nature of his regime.

Bashar is now fighting for his life and what is happening outside Syria has no relevance right now. We know exactly what might happen to him and to all of his generals in the event of regime change. Since he is fighting for his life, he will do what is needed to win, and he does not care that the Americans and Europeans are condemning him for his brutality.

The Syrians do not see Egypt as a model that is relevant for them. The model that is relevant for Syria is Iraq or Lebanon. Syrians look at the Iraqi model as an example of what might happen if the regime collapses: disintegration of the state, bloodshed, and ethnic clashes.

So far the protest is limited to the Sunni periphery. We have not heard about unrest in the Druze areas in southern Syria. Christians are clearly in full support of the Assad regime, as are the other minorities. The Kurds in eastern Syria are still in a position of wait-and-see.

Syrian Relations with Israel

The Syrian regime has no interest in an escalation along the Syrian-Israeli border. Syria knows that any small incident can turn into a major war like in Lebanon in 2006. I wonder if it was

indeed the Syrian regime who organized all those demonstrations along the border on Nakba and Naksa days. Clearly, when the regime was strong, it could not have happened. Now that the regime is weaker and Assad is focusing much of his attention on the riots all over Syria, such events can happen. But when it got out of control, the regime made an effort to contain and bring the events to an end. Bashar needs his soldiers to fight the Syrian people and to suppress the revolt. The last thing he needs is a war with Israel in which Israel might destroy his army, leaving him without any defensive shield against this uprising.

Making peace with Israel is not a popular idea in the Arab world. A weak leader will not even consider it. There is a consensus in Syria that one day it will be possible to think about settling the conflict with Israel, but in a weak regime with a leader under attack, this is not the right time. Nobody in Syria cared about the demonstrations on Nakba and Naksa days. All they care about is Bashar and his regime. People in Syria do not care about what the Israelis do right now.

The Syrian regime should be considered a strategic threat to Israel because Bashar al-Assad has sought to develop nuclear capabilities. He provided support to Hamas and Hizbullah – not the kind of support his father used to give them, but strategic support which turned Hizbullah into a major strategic threat to Israel. Bashar was the one who brought the Iranians to Syria and to the region. The Iranians had been present, but only as guests. Now they are in a different position and the alliance became closer. At the same time, Bashar maintained quiet on the Golan Heights border and said he wanted to sign a peace agreement with Israel.

The Syrian ruler came to the conclusion that having a nuclear capability was what saved the North Korean regime, and that what enabled the Americans to attack Saddam Hussein was the fact that he did not have a nuclear option. A different Syrian regime may not have the economic resources and the intimate links to North Korea and Iran, and might not feel the need for a nuclear capability. It could be that Syria under a new regime will be different than Syria under the Assad dynasty. Hafez al-Assad, with Western help, was able to turn Syria – a small, backward state – into a regional power. Take the Assad dynasty out of the equation and Syria will remain an important state geographically, but not the regional power it was before.

As for peace with Israel, there was something personal in the Syrian demand for an Israeli withdrawal to the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee because Hafez al-Assad, as defense minister, was the one who lost the war in 1967. If you remove the Assad dynasty from the equation, perhaps the Syrian stance will become more flexible.

A New Syrian Regime Might Be Better for Israel

The weaker Syria is, the stronger Lebanon will be. Any regime change in Syria could be a blow to Hizbullah, even though Hizbullah does represent many of the Shiites. It is a deeply rooted, authentic Lebanese Shiite power center. However, it was the help of Syria and Iran that turned Hizbullah into a regional power. Taking Syria out of the equation could reduce Hizbullah to a more reasonable size – to become a strong Lebanese party but not more than that.

Syria supported the Shiites in Lebanon, but at the same time gave some backing to the Sunnis because the logic behind Syrian intervention in Lebanon has always been: divide and rule. A Sunni regime in Syria might change the balance in Lebanon in favor of the Sunnis.

A new regime in Syria could mean a return to the 1950s and 1960s when there was a weak, decentralized Syrian government with strong regions. Each region has its own ethnic and communal characteristics, and there may be a coup d'état from time to time and a lack of stability. The worst scenario is that Syria will turn into a new Iraq, because there are now not only historical accounts to settle but current accounts as well. There have been 2,000 Syrians killed and the families will ask for revenge, not from Bashar but from their Alawite and Christian neighbors.

I do not think it is in Israel's interest to have Bashar in power. Certainly, as in Egypt, it is always possible that the Muslim Brotherhood might take over in Syria, but I am not sure that this will be the case. If Bashar falls, the situation is likely to be similar to that of earlier decades, with a very weak central regime. This could lead to border incidents with Israel, but not a war, with terrorist acts that a weak regime cannot prevent. The Syrian opposition will eventually take over and, as in the case of Egypt, they know that their interests lie with friendship with Western countries like the United States, and not with Iran. So in the long run, a new Syrian regime might be better for Israel than this current regime.

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Prof. Eyal Zisser is the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, and former Head of the Department of Middle Eastern and African History and of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, both at Tel Aviv University. He is a leading expert on Syria and has written extensively on the history and modern politics of Syria, Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Among his books are: *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power*, *Lebanon: the Challenge of Independence* and *Assad's Syria at a Crossroads*. This *Jerusalem Issue Brief* is based on his presentation at the Institute for Contemporary Affairs of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs on June 16, 2011.

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