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Comment

"Reformer Assad" Myth Finally Dead

Syrian president has shown by his actions that removing him is the only option.

By Fouad Hamdan - The Arab Spring
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A Swiss journalist recently called me up for background information on Syria, and asked me whether I was worried about what would happen if President Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed. After all, he argued, the regime had been a "source of stability" in the Middle East, and it might be replaced by Muslim fundamentalists.

My answer was polite but a bit frosty. "The Baath regime has been anything but a source of stability," I told him. "It was, it still is, and as long it isn't toppled, it will remain a major source of instability in the region and beyond."

Forty years of Baathist rule had resulted in wars and misery for the Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese and many other Arabs, I said.

By now, I was getting more and more upset.

“The dictators Hafez al-Assad, until his death in June 2000, and his son Bashar since then, have propagated nothing but hollow slogans of pan-Arabism, socialism and a liberated Palestine. Nothing more than hypocrisy. In reality the Assad clan has one goal only – securing the regime at any cost.”

I calmed down only after the journalist interrupted to say his comments were just meant to provoke a reaction.

But having to explain why the Syrian Baath regime is an incarnation of evil brings back too many memories of the misery and horror that has affected people in the Middle East.

The history of Hafez al-Assad's rule and that of his son, Bashar, is dotted with assassinations, wars, brutal repression and corruption. There's been so much blood, so many tears over so many decades. The Assad clan's "rationale" –in fact, the essence of the regime – is cynical opportunism, violence and deceit.

Since Bashar al-Assad took over in June 2000, some Arab journalists, academics, Nasserists, Baathists and hard-core leftists have propagated the idea that he is a “young reformer”, prevented from pursuing reforms by the old-guard and some family members. They also highlight what they say are Syria's economic achievements and Assad's "first steps" towards fighting corruption.

After more than 11 years of Assad in power – and that's what counts when assessing a politician's performance – the picture is depressing. A rational analysis of his achievements and a comparison of his promises with his deeds lead to a clear conclusion – the dictator's son has held onto power unconditionally since day one, and he is entirely responsible for all the failures that led people to rise up against his dictatorial regime.

Let us recall what Bashar al-Assad has said publicly in speeches and interviews since the uprising started in March 2011. He blames "gangs" and "foreign hands" for the trouble; he has promised reforms and a dialogue with his opponents; and he has pledged to lift the state-of-emergency law.

But nothing has changed. The only form of dialogue he pursued was with guns and tanks.

As one Syrian human rights activist told me in 2009, “Under Hafez al- Assad we knew exactly where the red lines were. We knew that one thing was acceptable, another would result in a warning by phone, another would lead to serious threats, this would make them jail me, and that would probably kill me. With Bashar, there are no clear red lines and no logical boundaries to political work. Some people would end up in jail for just voicing an opinion, while others would be left in peace. Any activity could lead to all kinds of repression. We live in constant fear, in a republic of fear called Syria.”

Bashar al-Assad's reformist mask slipped in March 2011 when Syrian troops were ordered to crush peaceful protests in the town of Deraa.

By early 2012, more than 5,000 people had been killed, and many more wounded and maimed, according to the United Nations. These figures do not include casualties among the security agencies, or the thousands who are reported missing.

Meanwhile, ordinary people armed with mobile phones, cameras and laptops are risking their lives to produce a stream of images and news from inside Syria. Using these “weapons of mass information”, they bear witness, unmask Assad and the Baathists, mobilise people and keep their spirits up.

The official propaganda machine has no chance against them. No sleight of hand and no propaganda can ever delete the thousands of films on YouTube and Facebook photos showing the brutality of soldiers and the “shabiha” militia.

The role played by citizen journalists has been crucial because no independent Syrian or international journalist is allowed to report freely from the country.

“Reporting the news – that's how we started,” said activist Rami Nakhle, known online as Malath Aumran.

Even before the uprising, activists smuggled in cell phones, satellite modems and computers in preparation for the uprising. Initially, they provided a narrative of the uprising that was revealing, if incomplete and subjective.

In the weeks that followed, the activists coalesced into committees that reached out to one another. According to Nakhle, the first of these appeared in Daraya, a restless suburb of Damascus, while the best-organised are in Syria's third-largest city, Homs.

Activists in Homs came together in committees, so that a small number of people helped coordinate many more on the ground, like a news agency coordinating hundreds of citizen journalists.

Nationwide, there are thousands of people, most of them young, fully engaged in the committees. Across Syria, activists acknowledged as committee leaders try to communicate via internet and satellite phones.

The Facebook page [Syrian Revolution 2011](#) and many others have been a vital source of information for dissidents.

"The only way we get information is through the citizen journalists," said Ammar Abdulhamid, a Syrian activist based in Maryland, who is among a number of exiles helping to send satellite phones, cameras and laptops into Syria. "Without them, we wouldn't know anything."

The Syrian government has been cracking down on the protesters' use of social media and the internet.

Activists say the security services are attacking on multiple fronts. They force detained dissidents to divulge their Facebook passwords, and they switch off the mobile network at times, which restricts uploading of video footage to YouTube. However, many are using satellite technology to bypass this block. Meanwhile, regime thugs confiscate cameras, phones and laptops.

To help counter the protesters' online narrative, government supporters have created Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and YouTube channels to disseminate pro-regime messages.

The "[Syrian Electronic Army Group](#)" is part of this effort to disrupt dissident activity. Facebook administrators shut down the group's page when violated the terms of use by providing detailed instructions on how to attack opponents online. On its [website](#), the "electronic army" describes itself as "enthusiastic Syrian youths unable to stand aside in the face of massive distortion of the facts about the recent uprising in Syria".

The uprising has resulted in the isolation of the Assad regime, in sanctions by the United States, European Union and Arab League, and in more and more defections from the army and other security forces.

A Free Syrian Army has formed, while the Syrian National Council includes the Local Coordination Committees, the exiled Muslim Brotherhood, and liberals and intellectuals from all walks of life.

The only ones left who still believe Assad can introduce reforms and save his regime are autocrats or dictators, the likes of Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin, Sudanese president Omar al-Bashar and the Iranian leaderships. Not the best friends to rely on when in deep trouble.

A ruler like Assad who is responsible for ordering the arrest, torture and killing of peaceful activists is never going to introduce any serious reforms.

The moment a dictator enters the vicious circle of violence, there is no way back. Any serious reform would lead to his arrest and that of his family members and cronies. Look at what happened to former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and his two sons.

This is also why a dictator like Libya's Muammar Gaddafi was unable to give an inch of real power, or institute minimal political reforms. He could only fight to the death. Too much blood, too much plundering.

After declaring, but not implementing, an end to the state of emergency in spring 2011, Assad gave the green light to a "national dialogue" in July. That process saw members of the regime and their supporters talking amongst themselves. In early August, he passed a decree allowing a multi-party system.

At best, these were cynical public relations moves. The constitution still guarantees the Baath party, which has controlled Syria since 1963, the role of "leading the state and society".

Bashar al-Assad has chosen force as his ultimate response to the popular uprising sweeping Syria. He will fight to the bitter end, because he and his entourage have no place in a free and democratic Syria, apart from in jail.

The Baath regime is dying, and it will either be pulled down or it will implode. This is inevitable now that the barrier of fear is gone. Now it is the Assad clan and their stooges who are afraid. People are not going to stop protesting despite the brutal repression.

It is time for the Arab League, whose mission has failed to stop the killing, to ask the United Nations Security Council to take action to protect the people of Syria.

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