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Unraveling the Syrian revolution

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Since March 2011, Syrian citizens have challenged their government through street protests and, more recently, armed confrontations. Both the protest movement and the government's response to it have their roots in the recent past. This article examines the contours of the last decade, and events in Syria since 2011, to understand the origins of popular protest and the origins of the Syrian government's largely military response. Protest and dissent appeared after Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000. The government's response to such protest was not predetermined, but was rather the result of specific governing structures and political choices made by state elites.

Structures of the system

In the summer of 2000, Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad died, and his 34-year-old, second son, Bashar al-Assad, was elected president in a referendum typical of Syrian presidential contests. The year prior, in 1999, Hafiz al-Assad had won his final referendum. Syrian citizens were legally required to go to the polls (there were a limited number of legitimate excuses not to go) where they were presented with two choices: yes or no. Almost everyone went to the polls, and it was widely understood that voting "no" was not a prudent option. The truly rebellious scheduled medical procedures or left the country for Lebanon on election day. The referendums took place every seven years, and with Hafiz's death, a special referendum for a new president became necessary. Hafiz al-Assad had been ailing in his final years, but the extent of his physical infirmity was a closely guarded state secret, and his death was a surprise to almost everyone.

As president, Hafiz al-Assad had cultivated an atmosphere of total opacity. He sat at the head of government since the inter-Ba'ath Party coup, or Corrective Movement, which he launched in 1970. In an atmosphere of mystery and shadow, no one ever knew what was going on in

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the higher reaches of government. In his final months, amid rumors of his sickness and possible death, he had suddenly appeared on the tarmac at Damascus airport, televised on all channels of state TV, to welcome the incoming Russian ambassador. Of course, such was the normal duty of the foreign minister, but Assad's appearance, thin, and even skeletal as he was, had quieted rumors of his incapacity. Some were disappointed he was not dead, but most, anxious for what might come after his death, were relieved by evidence of his relative vitality. Signs all over Damascus proclaimed his "eternal leadership." Syrians wondered quietly if there was more to this claim than the typical and rather silly, but also ominous, regime hyperbole.

Succession was a complicated issue in Syria. The posters and increasing prominence of Bashar al-Assad, the president's second son and a former ophthalmologist, indicated that he was being groomed for succession. His admirers and would-be courtiers called him "Dr. Bashar." But the notion of hereditary succession in a country that was styled as the Syrian Arab Republic was widely viewed with skepticism and even some quiet disdain.

Suddenly Hafiz al-Assad was dead. The constitution was quickly changed to allow for the election of someone younger than 35, and the ruling party nominated Assad's son. The referendum was scheduled. A sullen, stunned, and fearful capital city and country witnessed an elaborate funeral. Assad-the-son succeeding Assad-the-father suddenly seemed the only viable, safe, solution.

The famous old Havana Café in downtown Damascus was subdued on the day of the funeral. The Café was well known as a haunt of old anti-regime Ba'athist and Communist intellectuals. While the funeral procession, taking place nearby, was live on TV, the handful of Café patrons regarded it with studied indifference. A possibly drunk Sudanese visitor yelled at the TV, "Who are those guys?" The other patrons buried their faces further in their newspapers and ignored his outbursts.

Bashar al-Assad assumes the presidency

The succession occurred smoothly, and a common feeling of anxiety seemed to be lifted. As anxiety and fear for the future receded, long-ingrained fear of the government seemed to recede, too. The referendum for the new designee took place. Few young Damascenes of my acquaintance admitted bothering to vote, in marked contrast Hafiz al-Assad's last referendum.

The new president gave a popular speech in which he announced that Syria would change. He proclaimed an end to sycophantic displays

of regime loyalty, which he said were against the citizens' dignity. The giant, five-story posters on state buildings that had featured central elements of a brooding and oppressive cult of personality came down. The new president declared that change would come, although at a pace that guaranteed stability. The government knew that Syrians, traumatized by memories of civil war in neighboring Lebanon and decades of coups at home in the 1950s and 1960s, valued stability above all else.

In the months that followed, the president seemed to be using his newfound popularity as a weapon against shadowy elements of his father's era and those who may have opposed the succession. Western analysts often called such veteran officials the "old-guard," but it was never entirely clear to whom the title referred. It is certain that the new government used such conflicts—real, imagined, or conjured—to confuse its critics and international rivals. Such a bait-and-switch inconsistency has remained an official Syrian art of state. The president himself, in fairly frequent interviews with foreign journalists and scholars, dismissed the notion of an organized old guard, pointing out that the state had millions of employees, many of whom were certainly set in their ways and reluctant to change much of anything.

In the fall of 2000, as the stability of the state became assured, a movement called the "Damascus Spring" emerged. Ninety-nine Syrian intellectuals signed a manifesto calling for the repeal of the Emergency Law, release of political prisoners, and the assertion of constitutional rights. The Emergency Law had enforced effective martial law and suspended constitutional rights since the first Ba'athist government in 1963. In response, the government closed the infamous al-Mazza prison in Damascus, where generations of political prisoners and former politicians had been indefinitely detained since the French mandate. Hundreds of political prisoners, especially leftists and Communists, were released. The ban and automatic death sentence for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was, however, undisturbed. Famous Syrian satirical cartoonist 'Ali Farzāt inaugurated *al-Dūmarī*, the first independent periodical since the 1960s. A series of discussion salons began publicly to discuss political and social issues.

The thaw was short-lived. Whether because of pressure and dissent from within the regime, from external pressure triggered by the 11 September attacks and the Bush "Axis of Evil" declaration and the "War on Terror," or, more likely, a combination of internal and external factors coupled with, perhaps, an instinct for opportunistic repression, the Syrian government reverted to type. By late 2001, it began jailing activists and intellectuals and punishing any form of public debate or dissent.

The new period of repression was, however, accompanied by proclamations of eventual reform, and, assuredly, some changes occurred. The

streets of Damascus were cleaner, salaries of state employees increased, consumer products became more available, banking laws were relaxed, and private banks began to appear. Foreign investment, especially from Gulf states increased. Famous Saudi financier Al-Walid bin Talal built and opened a Four Season's Hotel near downtown Damascus along the Barada River and the old road to Beirut. A few Syrians complained that the lavish new hotel had been built on the grounds of an Ottoman era public park and had consumed one of the few public green spaces in the capital. Rooms cost $400 a night, about equal to the monthly salary of a senior professor at Damascus University. Tourism increased significantly, and Syrians opened businesses to cater to the influx of foreigners. New tourists were delighted to find Syria beautiful, hospitable, and cheap.

As the government opened what had been a closed socialist economy to capitalist penetration, members of the Assad family, especially the president's maternal cousins, became enormously wealthy. Rāmī Makhlūf acquired the duty-free concessions at the Syrian-Lebanese border and the Damascus airport, as well as the larger of two state cell phone concessions. Syrians were shocked by the once unfamiliar sight of shiny European luxury automobiles and expensively attired people on the streets of the capital. Conspicuous consumption among the children of the vanguard of the socialist Ba'ath Party led to serious discontent. State elites built vast gated compounds resembling affluent American subdivisions on former orchards and farmland in the mountains east of the capital. Syrian and foreign investors built golf courses and resort hotels in the agricultural villages surrounding Damascus. The government legalized private banks and, shortly after, legalized private universities. Rich Syrians could purchase private education for their children and avoid the increasingly underfunded, crowded, and corrupt state institutions.

Meanwhile, state investment in what had once been the ideological foundations of Ba'athist legitimacy withered. For decades, since the 1960s, Syrian governments, comprised of people of modest rural origin, like Hafiz al-Assad, had invested state resources in the countryside, building schools, hospitals, and good paved roads, and providing reliable electricity and water. Rural population growth was high, but standards of living, access to healthcare, education, and rates of literacy had improved since the 1960s. Syria had avoided the disruptive effects of massive rural-urban migration experienced by other developing countries.

The Syrian population increased by seven million in the decade after Hafiz al-Assad's death. As crony capitalism increased and state elites enriched themselves and their families, living conditions in the countryside decreased markedly. Increasingly endemic water shortages and a lack of family planning policies exacerbated the situation.

As the decade wore on, the Syrian government strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and predicted loudly, and with great accuracy, that the invasion would result in disaster. U.S. policy makers of the Bush administration lashed out, blaming Syria and so-called foreign fighters for their own breathtaking miscalculations in Iraq and the resulting catastrophes. The Syrian state stood firm in its public criticism and successfully weathered the storm. The time-honored Syrian political tactic of patient immobility once again allowed an Assad president to outlast the staying power of his powerful international critics and rivals.

In 2005 after the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the Syrian army was forced to abandon Lebanon after nearly thirty years of intimate involvement in the affairs of the neighboring country. The Assad government handled the evacuation and accompanying political crisis successfully, relying, as ever, on a varying repertoire of stalling, obstruction, and periodic conciliation with more powerful international rivals. Less powerful local challengers and critics were dealt with more harshly, and mostly in the shadows.

Israel launched a war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The war was in every sense a joint U.S.-Israeli project intended to defeat Syrian ally Hezbollah in Lebanon and humble the Syrian government. In these goals it failed dramatically, strengthening both Syria and Hezbollah in the process. Pro-U.S. Lebanese politicians had capitalized on the Syrian withdrawal of 2005, and some anti-Syrian, anti-Hezbollah Lebanese convinced themselves that their new friends in the Bush administration would protect them from Hezbollah, the Syrians, and the Israeli Air Force. Such hopes proved delusional, and the war ended in a stalemate as Hezbollah repulsed an eventual Israeli invasion. Damascus, with customary graciousness and opportunism, welcomed hundreds of thousands of Lebanese war refugees, to add to the nearly one million Iraqi war refugees who had arrived since 2003. As Israeli bombs fell on Lebanon, Damascus was calm and welcoming. Syrians opened their homes and public buildings to the influx. The government provided water, food, and waiting buses at the border for the thousands of desperate Lebanese who had fled their villages on foot.

The 2006 Lebanon war destroyed Israeli strategic deterrence and destroyed the last vestige of U.S. credibility in the region. Pro-U.S. Lebanese politicians had their prospects permanently ruined by their association with U.S. president, George Bush; U.S. secretary of state, Condaleeza Rice; and, by extension, Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert. Hezbollah emerged triumphant. The Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad himself enjoyed domestic popularity and significant international stature in the region. Arguably, Assad took the wrong lesson from these episodes and from his

ability to survive and even thrive politically while his international rivals appeared to be busily destroying themselves. The cautious, tentative, self-proclaimed reformer of 2000 seemed to be replaced by a triumphant and truculent survivor in the later years of his first decade in power.

The system triumphant

This sense of triumphant self-confidence characterized Assad's response to popular political agitation and the events of 2011. Early that year, as protests in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt began, Syria's president and state media noted with self-satisfaction the evident illegitimacy and missteps of neighboring dictators. Assad spoke to the *Wall Street Journal* in January.

> We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that 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 between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening. (Assad, 2011a)

A state newspaper, *al-Watan*, argued in an editorial that the governments challenged by popular protest in January 2011 had forfeited their legitimacy by serving the interests of Washington before those of their people. Events in Tunisia were "a lesson that no Arab regime should ignore especially those following Tunisia's political approach of relying on 'friends' to protect them" (quoted in "Tunisia's protests," 2011). President Assad, Syrian government officials, and many observers expected Assad's popularity and Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist credentials to insulate the Syrian state from serious protest.

Syrian state elites were willfully oblivious to the grievances and tactics of other popular protests. President Assad and other observers noted that Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia had lost their legitimacy to rule by running governments bought and paid for by the U.S. State and Defense Departments. Lost in this otherwise accurate analysis, was the central complaint of the protesters over the issue of hereditary succession. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, all of them republics, presidents were preparing to hand over power to their sons, as if they were monarchies. Citizens recoiled from the prospect that their Arab nationalist, military-officer presidential-republican-dictators would hand power to their unqualified, civilian, entitled, capitalist, and playboy sons. The prospect of Arab republican-monarchies

was one of the issues that brought people out in the street. In Syria, such a succession had already happened.

Syria's most committed intellectuals felt that the right to air grievances and demand rights as citizens was a matter of self-respect and dignity. Veteran activists and younger people alike noted that if Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and Yemenis could rise up to demand their rights, surely Syrians could do the same. Suhayr al-Atāsī, veteran activist of the Damascus Spring and organizer of the most prominent forum, planned a protest in early February, but few people took notice.

A week later, a demonstration erupted in the old Damascus market to protest an abusive policeman. As the policeman struck a motorist with his stick, a group of bystanders and shopkeepers gathered around and began to denounce the police, first chanting, "criminals, criminals." The protest grew to 1,500 people who eventually chanted "The Syrian people will not be humiliated" (*Al-Quds al-Arabī*, 18 February 2011). In a pattern soon to be repeated countless times, government employees arrived, portraits of the president in hand, and began a counterprotest, chanting their determination to sacrifice for the president in the familiar invocation known to all Syrians.

The chief of the local police station arrived and attempted to calm the growing crowd. When his efforts failed, the chief of the Damascus police arrived and promised to hear grievances and punish abusers. This measure, too, failed to satisfy the protesters. The protesters finally dispersed when the interior minister, General Sa'īd Sumūr, appeared and publicly promised the man whose beating started the protest that his abuser would be punished. The people who had protested remained angry, but the government seemed to have handled their demonstration satisfactorily.

A few days later, a smaller group staged an organized protest outside the Libyan embassy in a modern quarter of Damascus to demonstrate solidarity with the Libyan opposition. Damascus was alive with rumors that Syrian security and military personnel were supporting the Libyan regime. Some claimed Syrian pilots had flown the Libyan jets bombing rebel positions. Uniformed police and plain-clothes state security personnel outnumbered the embassy protesters and eventually broke up the demonstration, arresting and beating several people in the small crowd.

By the end of the month, the government had announced that taxes on a variety of food staples would be sharply reduced, leading to lower food prices for items such as sugar, flour, tea, and cooking oil. The government further announced that cash payments to the poorest Syrians would be provided from a special government fund set aside to help ease poverty. The previous month, January, Syria's coldest month, the government had cut a subsidy on kerosene heating oil, also used as diesel fuel, raising

prices by 72% (*The National*, 20 February 2011). The subsidy on heating oil helped poor Syrians heat their houses during cold winters, but it also cost the Syrian government billions annually and served as a direct subsidy to the Turkish long-distance trucking industry. Turkish freight trucks, taking advantage of the free trade agreement between Turkey and Syria to cross the border, filled up their huge tanks with cheap Syrian diesel and returned across the border to Turkey where diesel fuel cost three times as much.

Repression trumps conciliation

On the morning of 6 March 2011, state security agents in the southern agricultural border town of Dar'a arrested 15 elementary and middle school boys for writing graffiti on the wall of their school. The boys had written the familiar protest slogan: "*al-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*" (the people want the fall of the system). Later reports claimed they had added the words, "your turn, Doctor." The children were transported to Damascus where they were interrogated and detained. At some point, a delegation of mothers traveled to Damascus to visit their sons and protest their detention. They were refused both an audience with the security authorities and visits with their children (*Al-Watan*, 31 March 2011).[1]

On 16 March, 150 people, led by prominent Damascus women, gathered in front of the Ottoman-era Ministry of the Interior on Merja Square. The protesters planned to sit silently holding photographs of relatives in official detention. Security forces broke up the protest before it began and hauled scores of demonstrators off to jail. Hundreds of pro-government counterprotestors arrived, with state TV cameras in tow, to chant their loyalty to the president.

Two days later, on Friday 18 March, protesters, led by the extended families of the imprisoned boys, demonstrated in front of the 1,400-year-old al-'Umarī Mosque in Dar'a. For reasons that will probably never be clear, government security forces, which had acted with restraint and some conciliation in Damascus, reacted to the large protests in Dar'a with live ammunition and ferocious repression. At the end of the day, at least five protesters had been killed, and many more had been wounded and arrested.

The following day, funeral processions for the dead of Dar'a became protests involving thousands. Security forces, certainly under clearer orders from Damascus, restrained themselves from using live fire and allowed the marchers to proceed. Protesters presented a list of demands to authorities including the dismissal of the governor, prosecution of security personnel, and release of prisoners, including the 15 boys ("Syrian mourners," 2011). Smaller protests occurred in rural and provincial regions in the following days. Authorities claimed they would conduct a thorough and transparent investigation of events in Dar'a.

Such promises failed to stop demonstrations over the next days. Thousands marched each day chanting calls for justice, freedom, God, and Syria and proclaiming their peaceful intent. The al-'Umarī Mosque became a kind of demonstration headquarters and was open and occupied around the clock, sheltering demonstrators from truncheon-bearing security personnel and periodic barrages of tear gas. Protesters set up a first aid clinic inside the mosque.

At 2:00 a.m., Wednesday 23 March, security forces stormed the al-'Umarī mosque in Dar'a and killed 15 people. Security forces had sealed the city, and cell phone and land telephone lines were severed. In a claim that would become familiar, government press statements blamed "armed gangs" (*al-'iṣābāt al-musallaḥ*) for stockpiling weapons and fighters inside the mosque and for the requisite suppression and bloodshed. State TV broadcast a weapons cache supposedly found inside the mosque. Kidnapped children, presumably among the dead, had been used as human shields by the gangs, the statements claimed.

The government approach to protests in Dar'a set a pattern, endlessly repeated throughout the country: legitimate protests had been highjacked by armed, Islamist criminals, inspired, armed, and paid for by shadowy foreign conspiracies. The state could only meet such criminal elements with military force. Such claims were without foundation, but served to frighten uncommitted Syrians into supporting the government, turn against protesters, and justify armed suppression of citizen protest.

The next day, 24 March, while news from Dar'a was absent from state media, presidential communications advisor Bouthaina Shaaban made a live TV appearance. Shaaban announced a series of governmental reforms and an upcoming televised presidential address to the Syrian parliament. She conveyed presidential condolences to the people of Dar'a, and noted that all issues were on the table for discussion, including the demands raised by protesters. Additionally, the salaries of state employees would be raised 30%, freedom of the press would be enacted immediately, and the courts would be granted more independent power. Shaaban claimed that she had witnessed President Assad give an explicit order to his security chiefs that not one shot was to be fired at protesters. She reported that lifting the 48-year-old Emergency Law might be enacted in the near future.

The announcements were greeted with optimism and relief in Damascus and other parts of Syria besides Dar'a. While protests continued, many

Syrians not actively protesting were relieved that the president would respond wisely and responsively to events in the country. Shaaban suggested the president would announce the lifting of the Emergency Law and other reforms in his speech, expected to take place one week later.

State security expelled the few foreign journalists in Dar'a, and blocked all roads and communications into the region. Many Syrians considered Dar'a a backward and unenlightened part of the country, and there appeared to be little sympathy among urban Syrians for the people of the region of Ḥawrān and its besieged provincial capital. Sealing troubled rural areas during suppressive operations was a time-honored Syrian government tactic, and Syrian citizens were unsurprised to find state media silent about the details of events and phone lines to the region dead.

On 29 March, the government organized a huge rally in support of the president in Damascus and other major cities. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, marched through central squares. Unlike Bashar al-Assad's arrival a decade earlier, the rally featured a fierce return to sycophantic displays of undying loyalty, love, and sacrifice for the president. Giant posters had returned. Schools and government offices were closed to give citizens the more-or-less compulsory opportunity to demonstrate their continual obedience to the Assad state entering its fifth decade of rule.

The next day, the president addressed parliament in a speech widely described as the most important of his political life. In the speech, President Bashar al-Assad made jokes and appeared to embody both awkwardness and an oddly cocky light-heartedness. In marked and unfavorable contrast to his father, his demeanor conveyed neither command nor seriousness. Assad expressed some sorrow at the bloodshed, but blamed demonstrations on foreign conspiracies and outsiders. He noted that not all demonstrators were seditious conspirators, but the protests began with sedition and conspiracy, and those who were seduced by such calls had to be expelled by patriotic Syrians. He noted that recent reforms and changes had been decided in 2005, but delayed by other crises. He proclaimed that he would not reform under pressure or bow to changes coming from the outside. He noted that outsiders sometimes called him a reformer restrained by old guard elements, but, in reality, he and he alone was in charge. No one told him what to do, and by their slogans and chants, the Syrians had proven their love and trust for him. He quoted the Quran: "Sedition is worse than killing," and, thus, concluded his speech implying a promise to kill those he defined as seditious (Assad, 2011b). The speech provoked dismay among many, including friends of the Syrian government in Lebanon and Turkey.

The speech failed to satisfy protesters and was understood as a declaration of war against all opposition. But who, Syrians asked, were the opposition? If one replied that they were seditious conspirators, the president's call for repression was appropriate. But what of the millions of people who had not protested and had no plans to protest, but felt even the smallest amount of sympathy for the grievances of those who had protested? The president, perhaps keeping his own counsel and believing his courtiers, calculated that forcing Syrians into two categories, conspirators and supporters, would permit the state to marginalize and crush its opponents and critics. Instead, it seemed that by defining all opposition as sedition, the president had managed to undermine his popular legitimacy among many segments of Syrian society. To witness a popular political leader so gravely miscalculate and publicly destroy his legitimacy to rule was an unbelievable spectacle.

Syrian embassies in Europe and the Americas became focal points of protest following the events in Dar'a and the speech. In Berlin, protesting Syrians had surrounded the embassy by 9:00 the morning after the speech of 30 March. Quickly, however, as German police arrived, embassy employees were herded out of the building, presidential portraits in hand, to shout down the angry protesters with their familiar call to sacrifice their souls and blood for the president. Those embassy employees, their families, and those working for Syrian Air and other Syrian agencies in Berlin, looked forlorn and miserable as they faced their angry fellow citizens, but they remained obedient and listlessly proclaimed their undying loyalty to the president and the system he represented. Neither those newly committed to challenging the system nor those valued and chosen for their loyalty to the system could back down. Clearly, if there had been a chance for reconciliation and a wise reformulation of the relationship between state, regime, and citizens, it was squandered and lost in the last two weeks of March 2011.

Conclusions

Syria is in its second year of popular upheaval. Twelve years ago, Bashar al-Assad succeeded the 30-year rule of his father. The younger Assad promised both continuity and change from the past. For continuity, the state promised its citizens stability, safety, security, and Arab nationalist dignity. Alone among the Arab states, Syria remained rhetorically unbowed to Israeli and American power and to neocolonial aggression. For change, and in contrast from the past, the president promised careful, deliberate reform. Immediate change in tone won some popularity for the new president, but within a short period, it became clear that change would focus on freeing capital and making it easier for state elites to extract profits.

Sectors such as luxury auto import concessions, cell phones, communications, electronics, and duty-free imports became the exclusive preserve of the Assad family and those close to the centers of power. Less easily exploited sectors, such as agriculture and small manufacturing, withered, as the state retreated from the socialist import substitution polices of the past. State investment in education and services in rural areas contracted noticeably. Population growth swelled, and unemployment and underemployment increased yearly. By contrast, the visible wealth of state elites exceeded anything seen in Syria in the previous decades.

In February and March 2011, protests emerged calling for justice, the release of prisoners, reform of the system, and the institution of legal guarantees already present in the Syrian constitution. After halting conciliation, the state responded with systematic violence and repression. Protesters were resolutely nonviolent and, with few exceptions, respectful of sectarian difference. The Sunni Muslim majority was overrepresented, especially in the countryside, but all sectarian communities were present. Top level state elites realized immediately that a broad-based, nonviolent protest movement calling for rule of law, an end to official corruption, and equal representation was a mortal threat to the state and its system, and they resolved immediately to redefine the opposition as a dangerous threat to the stability of Syria that only President Assad could protect. This narrative of "us or chaos" was also effectively presented to international powers.

The state claimed that the opposition was made up of armed and violent Sunni Islamist fanatic criminals inspired, paid, and armed by shadowy foreign elements. For months, the state enjoyed a nearly total monopoly on the use of violence, but the message of chaotic armed elements was repeated endlessly and succeeded in terrorizing the sectarian minorities, including the Christians and Alawi. Eventually, defections from the conscript military came to constitute a lightly armed and unorganized force, but these groups seemed likely only to succeed in justifying even more ferocious military repression. They were unlikely ever to pose a military threat to the state, but they have had the regrettable effect of shifting some rhetorical ground away from the nonviolent opposition and in favor of the state.

The Syrian government enjoys the committed support of Russia and Iran. Neither state will abandon its strategic commitment to Syria, and both alliances have been operative and close for many decades. Other regional powers, including the Gulf states and Israel, claim to be opposed to the Syrian government, but it is not clear if this is actually the case. Israel certainly has discovered that the status quo guaranteed by the Syrian state since 1973 is far preferable to an uncertain future. Distant Gulf monarchies

may be sincere in their sometimes religiously inspired, distaste for the Syrian regime and its ties to Iran, but they seem unlikely to pose much threat. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan feels personally betrayed by the Syrian president, with whom he was previously friendly. Injuried egos aside, Turkey fears an ungoverned Syria as much as anyone and is unlikely to contribute to an armed conflict in Syria.

The gravest threat to the Syrian state of Bashar al-Assad remains the courageous and focused citizen-activists who began marching in the streets of Syria's cities, towns, and villages in early 2011. If they can continue to win and keep the allegiance and support of their fellow citizens, no amount of state repression and international apathy can preserve the Assad State.

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NOTE

1. The *Syria Comment Blog*, http://www.joshualandis.com, by Joshua Landis, is an indispensable guide to Syria and the uprising. See the various reprinted Arabic Facebook postings at http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8655&cp=all - comments.

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