

ASSAD'S FUTURE AND SYRIA'S OPPOSITION GROUPS

By Majid Rafizadeh

There are more reasons to believe that Assad's regime will survive the current wave of sanctions and uprisings than to expect that it will be ousted. Among these are the lack of cohesion and the disorganization which characterize opposition groups marching in the streets. Lack of coordination on the part of opposition demonstrators in Syria directly contributes to Assad's ability to continue to hold on to power despite international pressure and sanctions. Syrian opposition groups are neither as alike nor as coordinated as the ones operating in Libya, Egypt, or Tunisia.

The opposition in Syria can be classified into five major groups. Three operate according to strong ideological principles while two do not. The first group is the socialist and communist party, which is highly critical of the deep inequalities in Syrian society as well as the steps taken by Bashar Al-Assad to gradually open the market. The second group, the Muslim Brotherhood, views the ruling Alawites as infidels and aims to establish a government that complies with its own view of Islam. The third group is the secular-capitalists, largely composed of Western-educated individuals, who view the socialist elements in Assad's regime as the reasons behind Syria's current societal problems. They strongly believe in increased economic liberalization and a society based on individual values. The fourth group consists of the minorities, mainly Kurds and Christians, who are generally concentrated in urban areas in or around Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, or Latakia. They are struggling to ensure that their civil rights are secured after Assad's fall. Finally, the last group is the one that comprises the majority of people protesting in the streets today. These protesters mainly come from the Syrian working classes and suffer from widespread unemployment, poverty, and corruption. To put things in perspective, a United Nations Human Development study of poverty in Syria found that 2.4 million of Syria's 21 million people live in extreme poverty at below US\$2 per capita per day, while 35 percent of the population are able to cover only a "reasonable amount" of their basic needs. Corruption, similarly widespread, exists at almost every level of government.

While the various opposition groups have attempted to unite under the Syrian National Council against Assad, Syrian opposition continues to remain divided and uncoordinated. In fact, any opposition group attempting to take a stronger leadership role is attacked by other groups suspicious of its ideology and vision for Syria. Bourhan Ghalioun, a

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prominent secular dissident, was widely criticized by other opposition groups after a recent anti-Assad speech in Istanbul. This disunity does not help the opposition's cause at home or abroad. The Syrian masses have so far been unable to unite under a common goal, when such unity was crucial to the successful overthrow of Mubarak and Ben Ali in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively. Foreign actors, too, have expressed a general lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the new opposition movement, and have been reluctant to recognize it as an alternative to the incumbent regime. This is because the Syrian opposition remains divided and uncoordinated, so its chances of achieving political, economic, or social aims are very slim. The Syrian National Council does receive backing from the Democratic Alliance for Egypt—a coalition of Egyptian activists—and the National Transitional Council in Libya. Yet Egypt's military government does not recognize the legitimacy of Syria's opposition groups.

Also, while the European Union extended support to Syria's opposition council and welcomed its formation, a European diplomat anonymously stated that it was merely to "counter the regime's bid to create puppet groups." The Syrian authorities, predictably, have also attempted to deter foreign countries from recognizing these opposition groups, with the Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem warning that his government "will take strong measures against any country that recognizes the opposition council formed in Turkey."

The West has largely responded to unrest in Syria by imposing sanctions. But these can only be effective if they are accompanied by the rise of opposition groups united by a common vision for Syria's future. As a result of the sanctions, the International Monetary Fund expects Syria's economy to shrink by at least two percent this year. They also expect the Syrian government to severely weaken as a result.

The ability of Syria's international allies—particularly Russia, Iran, and China—to stymie efforts to push out the Assad regime should not be underestimated. Syria, after all, is Russia's strongest ally in the Arab Middle East. They share high-level exchanges and trade ties, and Syria is renovating the Mediterranean Sea port of Tartous to provide a permanent facility for the Russian navy, giving Moscow a key military foothold in the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, while the Syrian regime is secular and the Iranian one theocratic, Syria is Iran's most important regional proxy, and disorder in Syria would throw into disarray all the pieces on Iran's strategic game board, namely Hezbollah and Hamas. Such an outcome will decrease Iran's regional and international geopolitical leverage.

Undeniably, international pressure and condemnation contributed to the successful overthrow of autocratic dictators in both Egypt and Tunisia. The efforts of opposition activists, however, would have been in vain were it not for their ability to put aside their ideological differences in a timely manner. Likewise, economic sanctions and international pressure will weaken Assad's regime. But they will not be enough to end the era of Assad as long as Assad maintains his regional and international allies while opposition revolutionaries remain divided and unfocused. ■

– Adeel Ishtiaq served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.