



# The Damascus puzzle



has been the scourge of Lebanon and Iraq, two of Syria's neighbors. This is exactly what the bulk of Syria's minority communities – Druze, Kurds, Christians and, of course, Assad's own Alawites – fear.

The Muslim Brotherhood is aware of the concerns among both Syrian minorities and the international community over the possible consequences of a post-Assad Sunni Muslim Brotherhood-led regime. The Brotherhood's leadership has issued a "national covenant" proclaiming its commitment to a "modern civil state," based on the principles of pluralism, democracy and equality before the law. It also protects the rights of minorities and women.

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The Obama Administration has become an advocate of regime change. The reasons are both ideological (support for popular movements against dictatorial regimes) and realpolitik/strategic (it would deal a major blow to Iran, Syria's ally and patron).

A recent analysis by the Washington-based Brookings Institute lays out the dangers to US interests inherent in both Assad's survival and in Syria's collapse. It offers a number of options for removing Assad, ranging from diplomacy and coercive sanctions, to arming the Syrian opposition, undertaking a bombing campaign or even an Iraq-style ground invasion, either unilaterally or at the head of a NATO operation. All of them come with considerable cost and risks.

But so does the status quo, which is inherently unstable. One growing concern is that the longer the violent stalemate continues, the greater the likelihood that Salafi-jihadi elements will grow in strength and contribute to Syria's descent into a maelstrom with profound implications for the whole region.

Regionally, Assad's opponents in the Arab world, and particularly the Gulf, want other countries to do the heavy lifting. Israel is eager to see the strategic blow to Iran that Assad's fall would entail, but is reduced to being a watchful spectator. Turkey, on the other hand, which houses both the Syrian opposition and thousands of Syrian refugees, would be central to any military action, or even the creation of safe havens and a humanitarian supply corridor. For now, however, Turkey is reluctant to play such a role.

Predictions are a dime a dozen. But perhaps that of Patrick Seale, the longtime Syria watcher and biographer of Bashar's father, Hafez, is worth noting. Both father and son used brute force to enforce their rule, he notes. But the "more fallible, enigmatic and perplexing" Bashar is not likely to equal his father's record of 30 years in power. ●

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**T**HE SYRIAN UPRISING AGAINST BASHAR ASSAD'S regime is now one year old, and predictions of Assad's imminent fall, à la Tunisia's Ben-Ali, Egypt's Mubarak and Libya's Gaddafi, turned out to be premature.

For the time being, Assad's forces have the upper hand, militarily, while being emboldened by the diplomatic backing of Russia and China. The Syrian opposition is both fractured and badly outgunned. Some members of the Turkey-based Syria National Council even resigned recently, charging that the long-exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was inordinately dominating the council's actions.

The broad international and regional support for forcing Bashar Assad to resign has not been translated into effective action. Russia and China have vetoed Security Council resolutions calling for Assad to step down, and diplomatic efforts to bring about an end to violence in Syria have been watered down. The plan proposed by special UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan and endorsed by the Security Council, no longer places exclusive responsibility on the regime for the bloodshed, saying the opposition is also responsible.

Meanwhile, the core of the Assad regime, militarily and politically, has remained intact. The bloody conflict (9,000 fatalities and steadily climbing) more and more resembles the kind of sectarian strife, which