MIDEAST MONITOR

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Hell No, I Won't Go

THE SYRIAN UPRISING against Bashar Assad and his Baath regime is over 10 months old, and there is no end in sight. With the reported death toll now having passed 5,000 and climbing steadily, the uprising is inexorably pushing its way onto the international agenda.

For the first time, an Arab head of state, Qatar's Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, has suggested that troops from Arab countries be dispatched to quell the violence, this after a month-long Arab League monitoring mission to Syria became embroiled in controversy and utterly failed to staunch the bloodshed. With the Libyan example in mind, speculation has increased regarding a possible NATO-led military intervention, perhaps to establish a "humanitarian corridor" adjacent to Turkey.

Indeed, some of Syria's opposition groups are openly calling for it, although the circumstances are not yet ripe, and may never be: unlike with Libya, the divided Syrian opposition does not control a contiguous piece of territory, nor is there an Arab League resolution sanctioning intervention, humanitarian or otherwise. Moreover, Russia and China remain determined to block any UN Security Council resolution on the matter, leaving Western governments, which have openly called for President Bashar Assad to step down, unsure of how to proceed.

Neighboring Turkey – a NATO member – had avidly cultivated its relationship with Assad in recent years. However, as the uprising unfolded, the Erdogan government in Ankara executed a seamless flip-flop: it now plays host to a portion of the Syrian opposition, including the "Free Syrian Army," as well as thousands of Syrian refugees, and thus figures prominently in all intervention scenarios.

The preferred outcome

At this point, regime change is the openly preferred outcome for Western governments, Turkey, a majority of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other small Gulf Arab states, and Israel. Notwithstanding the possibility that Syria will deteriorate into a bloody sectarian conflict, as happened in neighboring Lebanon in the 1970s and Iraq in recent years, they are tantalized by the distinct possibility of delivering a significant strategic blow to Iran, Syria's primary ally in the region for more than three decades, by replacing Assad's Alawite-dominated Baath regime with one which derives its support from the country's large Sunni Arab population.

It was largely thanks to the Tehran-Damascus alliance, which grew ever tighter under Bashar Assad during the last decade, that Iran was able to project power into the eastern Mediterranean region – in Lebanon, in the Damascus-based Palestinian organizations, and in the Egyptian Sinai. Iran recognizes what is at stake as well. The recent visit of an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander to Damascus confirms that Iran is providing military aid to Syria to help suppress the uprising. Hizballah, Iran's main client in the region, is undoubtedly involved in the effort as well.

How does the Syrian leadership view the situation? On January 15, Assad delivered his first extended speech to the Syrian public in more than six months. The next day, he did something even more unusual: he greeted the public, outside, in downtown Damascus, accompanied by his glamorous wife Asma and two of their children. It was a rare appearance by his British-born and educated wife, who had been lauded by the Western press, including the stylish "Vogue" magazine, as the face of the new Syria but had largely dropped from sight since the uprising began. Did these two events constitute a show of confidence and self-assuredness, or was he whistling in the dark?

In any event, Assad's 90-minute address offered nothing new, neither regarding his understanding of the crisis nor his proffered solutions. Rather, he reiterated a litany of time-worn themes, focusing on Syria's "resistance," "rejection of submissiveness," and insistence on "dignity," all of which ring increasingly hollow. Syria, he insisted, is the victim of an international conspiracy hatched by regional and global powers who, as in the past, want to destabilize the country and advance their interests. What passes for the international community, he declared, "is a group of big colonial countries, which view the whole world as an arena full of slaves who serve their interests." With their "schemes" having failed to fracture the country's unity, he said, they then turned to violence and terrorism.

Assad's heroes

While admitting that individuals may have made some mistakes, the overall behavior of the security forces in combating the "terrorist" threat had been nothing less than heroic, he insisted. Moreover, he declared, defeating terrorism was a prerequisite for undertaking the long-promised political reforms to which, he insisted, he had always been firmly committed. In conjunction with the battle for survival, the formulation of a new constitution, the legalization of political parties, the easing of restrictions on the media and the passage of a new law to fight corruption would all be undertaken in the coming months. Tolerance would be shown to "those who have gone astray," but there would be no compromise with "those who terrorize civilians or conspire with foreigners against their country and against their people." And those who stand in the middle are "traitors" as well, he declared, for there is no middle

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ground in national struggles for survival.

Assad reserved particular scorn for his critics in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf. Much more than them, he said, it was Syria which represented Arab identity and had advanced Arab interests – politically and culturally. Suspending Syria from the Arab League simply meant that the League had suspended its Arabness.

David Lesch, an American scholar on Syria who was given unprecedented access to Assad in the last decade to research the book "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria," believes that Assad had genuinely desired to introduce meaningful reforms when he assumed power. However, in Lesch's view, by 2007, he had begun to equate his own personal well-being with that of the country as a whole, a failing common to most rulers of authoritarian states.

Even as Assad insists that he is only serving according to the will of the people, his actions seem more geared to buying time in the hope that his security forces will crush the opposition than to seeking a way to promote a genuine path towards national reconciliation. Whether or not the security establishment's inner circle – include his younger brother Maher and brother-in-law Assaf Shawkat – is entirely like-minded regarding this strategy cannot be ascertained. But it would seem that Assad's regime does not believe that a tipping point has been reached, and that it can weather the storm. Its opponents, and their supporters abroad, will be challenged to prove otherwise. •

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