**MIDEAST MONITOR:** Bruce Maddy-Weitzmann

# Preparing for the Post-Assad Era

NINE MONTHS AFTER SYRIA'S PRESIDENT Bashar Assad confidently told a Western journalist that his country was immune to the region's political upheavals, he must be wondering what hit him. After more than 4,000 fatalities, along with looming sectarian strife, his abandonment by Turkey, suspension from the Arab League, the threat of international sanctions and even the specter of foreign intervention, the 41-year-old Assad dynasty and attendant Baath regime may be on its last legs.

Some historical perspective may be instructive. Geopolitically, Syria occupies a pivotal position in the Near East-Fertile Crescent region, ensconced between five neighbors. During its first 25 years of independence (1945-1970), Syria was a weak state that suffered from chronic political instability, internal schisms and lack of cohesion. As such, it was the object of rival regional and international ambitions which, in turn, further destabilized domestic political life. This weakness contrasted with Syria's claim to regional leadership as "the beating heart of Arabism," which was used by Syrian leaders as a legitimating tool vis-a-vis both domestic and regional rivals.

The outcome of this explosive cocktail was the 1967 Six Day War with Israel, the final blow to the dream of radical pan-Arabists.

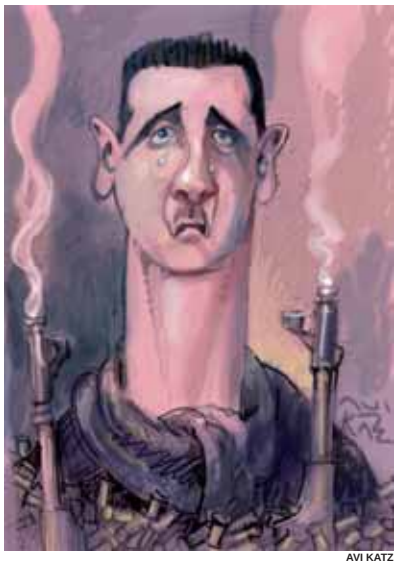
The ascent of Bashar's father, Hafez Assad, to power in 1970 inaugurated a new era. Syria became a brutal, albeit stable, *dawlat mukhabarat* ("intelligence and security services state"), its leaders pampered and all opposition crushed. Systematic repression was accompanied by alliances between the Alawite core of the regime with Sunni merchant classes and mostly Christian religious minorities, who valued the stability the regime provided.

Regionally, Syria became a full-fledged actor, incorporating Lebanon into its sphere of influence and seeking to do the same with the Palestinians and Jordan, and maintaining a hard-line position towards Israel. While it did not abandon its declared adherence to the principles of Arab nationalism, Syria's alliance with non-Arab, revolutionary Islamic Iran, which began in 1979, placed Damascus in an awkward, minority position in the constellation of Arab states.

Throughout his life, Hafez maneuvered adroitly in the face of competing pressures and needs. Bashar, by contrast, has been less cautious and more caustic, embracing Iran and its Lebanese Shi'ite Hizballah client more fully, initiating a clandestine nuclear weapons program, and openly scorning pro-Western Arab leaders as "half-men."

His unbridled cockiness led him to misread the new situation. While brute force had been previously successful in dealing with dissent, in the wake of the Arab Spring it has had the opposite effect. Moreover, his conservative Arab rivals, particularly the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies, who keep an eye on Iran's looming shadow across the Persian Gulf, have decided to assert their own brand of leadership, and not only in Bahrain and Yemen.

In an unprecedented move, the six GCC states, together with the new Egyptian government, activated the moribund and much-maligned Arab League against Syria's sometime ally, the mercurial Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. His government was suspended from League membership and, more importantly, the League provided vital legitimacy to NATO's intervention (on ostensibly humanitarian grounds). This first-time intervention by the League in the internal affairs of a member state was opposed by Syria and Algeria, but to no avail.



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A precedent had been set and now it has been activated again, this time against Assad.

Two contrary factors have helped to bring the Arab League mechanism into the center of regional diplomacy. The first is the dynamic of popular protest; the second is geopolitical opportunity. An additional, third factor, is the preference of Western powers to stay in the background and let Syria's neighbors take the lead.

The success of mass uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya has created new benchmarks for the region, providing encouragement and legitimacy for opposition movements elsewhere. Indeed, conservative Gulf monarchies, as well as Jordan and Morocco, facing their own restless populations, find it useful to identify with the Syrian opposition. Even more importantly, they recognize that the fall of the House of Assad would be of a different order of magnitude than that of Gaddafi.

Having failed for three decades to pry Syria loose from the Iranian embrace, the prospect of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus, one more attuned to Saudi, Turkish, Egyptian (and Western) sensibilities and interests than to Tehran's nuclear-aspiring mullahs outweighs, in their minds, the very real risk of chaos in Syria.

Hence, nearly the whole League membership was mobilized: 18 states voted to suspend Syria, with only Lebanon and Yemen opposing, and Iraq abstaining. The League has offered an "Arab solution" to the crisis – an end to violence and killing, release of prisoners, withdrawal of the army from the cities, and dialogue with the opposition under League auspices.

But the Damascus regime isn't buying. Assad continued to exude confidence in a recent rare video interview, but in private he must be wondering why his and his father's methods are no longer sufficient.

With even the Arab League now engaged in Syria's internal affairs, and apparently preparing for the post-Assad era, Bashar may just remember former US vice president Spiro Agnew's comment on being forced to resign after his practices of bribe taking and kickbacks were revealed: "The bastards went and changed the rules." •

**The author is the Marcia Israel Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.**