

# The Real Test in Syria Is Whether Fear Is at an End

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## The true measure of progress in Syria and, perhaps, the Middle East is whether the revolution undermines the use of fear as a tool of governance.

**T**he proposition tested by the Arab uprisings was never really whether democracy's moment had come in the Middle East. It was whether Arab dictators could continue to oppress, torture and kill their citizens to keep power.

These used to be the standard tactics for the region's despots. But the case can be made that Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Muammer Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and now, perhaps, Bashar al-Assad in Syria all sealed their fate when they turned their forces against their own citizens.

Of course, progress has hardly been uniform and may be reversible. But the upheavals have at least created the opportunity to advance a new regional principle: that a leader who threatens his own people risks losing the legitimacy to govern.

Nowhere in the region has this proposition been more tested than in Syria. For as long as Mr Assad's regime held on to power -- using the same techniques his father employed -- the lesson was that tyranny pays. Now that his hold appears finally to be slipping, the authority of that lesson is dealt a serious blow.

It may, however, not be a decisive one. If Syria disintegrates into sectarian war; if Sunnis take revenge on Alawites; if all that changes is the identity of the oppressor, not the nature of the oppression; the savage tools of the past will retain their appeal. Dictators and extremists may conclude that the only mistake Mr Mubarak or Mr Assad made was not to be brutal enough. While the moral and strategic case for Mr Assad's departure is compelling, it remains to be seen whether this would bring more or less security in the near term. The belief is that the regime's fall would be a serious setback for Iran and Hezbollah and a net gain for more moderate (or pragmatic) forces. But when it comes to realpolitik, this conclusion may be temporary.

Sectarian warfare and chaos bring their own problems. The spectre of Mr Assad's non-conventional arsenal falling

into extremist hands is a frightening one. Syria's fracture could produce the kind of volatility across Syria's borders that Israel has experienced across the Lebanese one. Iran could prove more adept at exerting its influence, and protecting its links with Hezbollah, in a Syria torn by sectarian strife, than many are yet willing to concede. And who can know what threat the forces that emerge in Damascus may pose to regional stability?

For all the importance of removing the brutal Assad regime, the risks associated with its demise are significant and must be mitigated. His removal, for example, should probably not include the wholesale dismissal of state officials or the dismantling of state institutions, allowing for the kind of chaos the de-Ba'athification of Iraq produced. Similarly, decisively weakening Iran will be important to limit its reach into a post-Assad Syria. Also crucial are efforts to build an inclusive constitutional and governing structure that might hold Syria together and prevent retaliation against Alawite communities or cross-border provocations.

These measures and others are vital to ensure a smoother transition to a post-Assad Syria, but they are also important for the region. Proving the oppression of one's fellow citizens to be a bad idea would be a critical development by Middle Eastern standards. Good governance begins with a commitment to the inalienable rights and basic humanity of the governed. If the example of Mr Assad's fall, and of the Arab uprisings, can help strengthen this commitment among ruling elites, even out of self-interest, it will be a real advance. If those who oust a dictator know that only by good governance and respect for their citizens can they retain power and earn international legitimacy, the Middle East will be moving in a better direction. It may not yet be democracy, but it is an indispensable milestone on the path to it.

All revolutions against dictatorial regimes are, at some level, about the transfer of fear. Populations afraid of regimes shift to regimes afraid of populations. The true test of progress, however, is whether the revolution undermines the use of fear as a tool of governance. This is the real test in Syria. It does not end with the removal of the Assad regime - it begins there. The hope for a patient transition to greater democracy in the Middle East may well hinge on passing it.

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