

Syria: The Case for "The Devil We Don't Know"

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration's announcement yesterday specifically sanctioning Syrian President Bashar al-Asad begins to clear the fog that has clouded policy toward this pivotal country since the outbreak of mass protests weeks ago. As U.S. and international leaders have grappled with popular uprisings across the Middle East, the tension between moral values and strategic interests has often complicated decisionmaking, and until yesterday, this appears to have been the case with regard to Syria. But now that the administration has adopted a policy of "reform or go" -- i.e., calling on the Syrian president either to begin an improbable transformation of his family-led dictatorship into an accountable, rights-respecting democracy or step aside from his leadership of the country -- Washington may finally have shed its reluctance to adopt measures that could bring about the demise of the al-Asad regime. In other words, President Obama now at least entertains the idea that the "devil we don't know" in Syria -- an alternative to Asad -- is preferable to the one we do.

Context

The phrase "no size fits all" applies to the current situation in the Middle East. Each country presents a unique case, due to the complexity of the various factors at play and the need to assess what sort of outcome a given policy will foster down the road. In Egypt, for example, U.S. decisionmaking vis-a-vis the fate of Hosni Mubarak had to resolve the clash between, on the one hand, loyalty to a long-time ally and a desire to maintain the stability and peace his governance provided and, on the other, respect for the will of the Egyptian people and the deeply ingrained values of democracy, freedom, and human rights at the heart of the American experience. The choice was not easy, but the Obama administration ultimately made a decision that reflected the weight of the ethical, human, and political factors. In policy terms, the risks of change were deemed acceptable enough to justify that values-based decision. In other cases, U.S. and Western policy has been shaped by differing assessments of the strategic stakes, the ethical and moral imperatives, and the size and composition of the local rebellion. The result is the wide variety of diplomacy and military mixtures employed in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain.

The Syrian Exception

Surprisingly, the uprising against the Asad regime has triggered profound soul-searching in Washington and among Western powers about the precise mix of tools to use in support of the protesters, despite the fact that Syria does not present a clash of interests versus values. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to identify an Arab state that displays less concern for the core values of human rights, freedom, democracy, or peace. Indeed, Syria has chosen to ally itself with Iran -- the greatest antagonist toward Western interests in the region, a regional power that leads the anti-West, anti-American, anti-peace coalition and exports a destructive terrorist ideology.

Syria's complicity in Iran's strategy is clear. Damascus has willingly played a role in the killing of American soldiers in Iraq and Lebanon, the arming of Hizballah and Hamas, and terrorist operations against Israel, Lebanon, and Western nations. For its own use, the Asad regime continues to develop chemical weapons and would even have had enough fissile material for a nuclear device if its clandestine program had not been stopped in 2007. As recent weeks have shown, Asad is as cruel at home as he is dangerous abroad, authorizing the premeditated murder of unarmed civilians in cities around Syria, killing hundreds and wounding thousands. By any standard, the Asad regime should merit no delicate handling on the part of the international community, against which it has done nothing but offer contempt and violence.

Arguments for "The Devil We Know"

In theory, there are many arguments for adopting a cautious stance toward Asad, some worthy of discussion and others that rest on shaky ground and superficial analysis. Four claims in particular merit scrutiny:

1. Despite his shortcomings, Asad is a known entity and a careful ruler who has, throughout his tenure, ensured a certain sense of stability; any leader who follows him would be a wild card.
2. The most likely alternative to Asad is the reemergence of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which may transform the current secular state into a dangerously fanatical Sunni radical regime.
3. "Apres Asad, le deluge." The demise of the Asad regime would take the lid off Syria's deep sectarian divisions, triggering a post-Asad civil war that has the potential to engulf Syria's neighbors, threaten regional security, and dwarf the violence and horror of the mid-2000s Iraqi civil strife.
4. The chaos of a post-Asad Syria may open the door to a weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) nightmare: either the use of Syria's substantial supply of chemical weapons by rogue remnants of the regime or its even more irresponsible successors, or the transfer of these stocks to Hizballah or other terrorist organizations.

Arguments Against

On careful scrutiny, all four claims are wrong or exaggerated:

- The fallacy of Asad as a force for stability: It is difficult to imagine any conceivable successor to Asad who would pursue more problematic or troublesome policies. Indeed, history shows that post-transition regimes tend to be preoccupied with internal problems and therefore do not pursue aggressive behavior toward their neighbors. The Syrian army under Asad's successor would likewise focus on ensuring domestic security, rather than seeking external ventures for which Syria might pay a heavy price.
- The straw man of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: In a post-Asad world, the ruler of Syria -- "the devil we don't know" -- is likely to be Sunni and, in comparison to Asad, more secular and politically moderate. Whatever his political inclinations, chances are unlikely that a Sunni leader would maintain Asad's close ties with Shiite Iran and Hizballah. Still, even if one assumes, for argument's sake, that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would dominate a new regime, such a government would still likely be less problematic than Asad's. The Brotherhood is a relatively weak movement in Syria -- many of its members have been killed or locked away in Asad's prisons, and the remainder is abroad.

Furthermore, Syria has a secular majority, and a Muslim Brotherhood government would be constrained by that reality. Even in a worse-case scenario of a powerful and effective Sunni fundamentalist regime in Damascus, one should not forget the influence of a strong deterrent, such as Israel has displayed since 2006 toward Hizballah, itself a well-armed, radical Islamist movement.

- The inflated threat of a post-Asad implosion: The argument that "civil war is inevitable" is even less convincing. Syria does not have a history of long periods of civil strife; while there have been numerous coups, they have rarely descended into lengthy periods of sectarian violence. Compared to Iraq, Syria is much less sensitive to ethnic tensions and religious extremism. Indeed, one option to consider is the possibility that a post-Bashar Syria could see the quick stabilization of a Sunni-Alawi alliance without the Asad family. Moreover, Syria's immediate neighborhood is much less threatening than Iraq's. Whereas Iraq had to deal with Iranian and Syrian interference in the form of export of radical ideology, jihadists, and terrorists to its neighbor, Syria's own neighbors -- Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, and even Iraq -- will have no interest in destabilizing Syria. Even Hizballah would feel compelled not to offend a powerful neighbor.
- WMD fear is not a nightmare: While Syria does maintain a worrisome arsenal of chemical weapons, the threat of "loose" WMD in Syria should not be exaggerated. Chemical weapons are surprisingly difficult to use, requiring facilities to mix the chemicals as well as platforms to disperse them effectively. These obstacles make them difficult for terrorist groups to use: it is not surprising that al-Qaeda, despite all its efforts, still has not succeeded in this. Moreover, rogue proliferators of even more serious WMD than chemical weapons -- as Syria's nuclear program shows -- should not be allowed to use WMD possession as an insurance policy. Indeed, the opposite should be the case.

Pressure for Change

This analysis suggests that Western powers should not fear more assertive action in support of anti-regime protestors in Syria. Still, compared to the situation in Egypt or Libya, for example, the international community has found it exceedingly difficult to say even that Asad has lost the moral authority to govern his country. Perhaps governments around the world are wary of taking on another political campaign because they worry that it may become a slippery slope: despite their intentions, the political steps could evolve into a military campaign. Such a campaign would be inappropriate for many reasons, not least of which is that the West lacks the will and resources for a war against a fourth Muslim country. At the same time, it is important to recognize that in the case of Syria, such a campaign may not be necessary to achieve the desired results.

Indeed, Washington and other administrations should not underestimate the power that political statements, moral judgments, economic sanctions, and efforts at diplomatic isolation can have on Asad's hold on power. As is likely to be case with the new U.S. sanctions on Asad, his family, and his closest advisors, such measures can have a powerful impact on the situation inside the country. Much work will be needed in response to Syria's vicious human rights abuses and flagrant violations of international conventions. Unfortunately, Arab states and some European countries are divided on the issue, and this absence of unity makes it difficult to claim full legitimacy for tough measures against Asad.

The key to change lies in the clarity of the message broadcast to Syria. The men around Asad, the officers commanding the army, the Sunni merchant class, and the courageous protestors all need to know that the best choice is that "Asad should go." And international support for taking a chance on the "devil we don't know" will help empower Syrians to make that change.

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