A Moment of Truth for Syria

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

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During the nearly thirty-year rule of Hafiz al-Asad, Syria came to control Lebanon and used terrorist groups -- Hizballah, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine -- to exert pressure (and at times reduce it) on others in the region. His son, Bashar, who has been the Syrian president for the past five years, seems to lack his father's guile and understanding of limits that need to be respected.

As a result, Syria is completely isolated both within the Middle East and outside it. Even Algeria, the Arab country represented on the United Nations Security Council, joined in the unanimous vote October 31 demanding Syrian cooperation in the international investigation of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

Is President Bashar al-Asad's regime on its last legs? If it cannot survive, what are the alternatives to it, and are those alternatives likely to trigger even greater instability and problems for us in an already volatile region?

Pressure Has Been Building

Clearly, the Syrian regime is under tremendous pressure. Detlev Mehlis, a former German prosecutor charged with investigating the assassination for the UN, has issued a preliminary report implicating the Syrian security forces in the plot to kill Hariri. While Mehlis does not officially allege that members of the Asad family were part of the plot, the names of Assef Shawkat and Maher al-Asad -- President Asad's brother-in-law (the head of Syrian intelligence) and brother (the head of the presidential guard) -- were excised from the published version of the report but appeared in a draft that news organizations were able to read.

There is little doubt that they are now suspects in the investigation, and this creates a fundamental problem for the regime. The Security Council resolution mandates cooperation -- including the arrest and, if requested, transfer out

of the country for questioning of possible suspects. So Asad might soon be called on to turn his relatives over for questioning or worse. If Mehlis concludes that Shawkat and Maher Asad are responsible for the assassination, the president will face an international demand to turn his brother and brother-in-law over to a non-Syrian court for trial.

Before the issuance of Mehlis's preliminary findings, many international news reports indicated that the Asad regime was putting out feelers to the Bush administration to do a "Libyan-type" Pan Am Flight 103 deal. Under that deal, security operatives were turned over for trial, and Libya assumed liability for the downing of the aircraft. In this connection, the "suicide" of Ghazi Kanaan, the Syrian minister of interior, on the eve of the Mehlis report was probably part of a planned response.

If the leading elements of the Syrian regime needed a Syrian scapegoat in order to save themselves, Kanaan -- who had basically run Lebanon as the leading Syrian general there -- would have been highly believable. But Mehlis never even mentioned Kanaan in the conspiracy, thus Asad's quandary.

If he fails to cooperate, the president knows Syria will probably face UN-imposed sanctions, a worrisome prospect given its already failing economy. Yet his only alternative might be to force his brother and brother-in-law to stand trial, something he would see as a threat to his own survival.

So what does he do?

Fear as a Strategy

Asad will probably try to muddle through with a strategy based on the fear of the alternative to his regime -- the radical Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which appears to be the only organized group outside the regime. The Brotherhood is likely to scare secular Syrians, others in the region, and the international community alike.

Should the Muslim Brotherhood come to power, it would certainly support the insurgency in Iraq as well as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other rejectionists in acts of terror against Israel. But how different would that be from the current policy of the Asad regime?

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared after the Security Council vote that Syria was isolated and needed to change its posture on Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. Indeed, her message implied that the regime could save itself if it was ready to stop backing the insurgency in Iraq, its continuing efforts to destabilize Lebanon, and its support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad terror in Israel.

Perhaps Asad will see this as a lifeline and realize that he must carry out a strategic shift to survive. Nothing he has done to date, however, would indicate either a capability or a willingness to transform Syrian behavior in such a dramatic fashion. Moreover, as desirable as such a change might be for the region, will the international community

drop the demand for accountability for Hariri's assassination in return for such a shift?

Ironically, the threat to the regime today might come more from those within Syria who feel that to forestall international sanctions, the regime must be removed. The fear of the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely to deter a military-led coup, particularly because the military (which is essentially secular) might see itself as the protector of Syria against the Brotherhood. As such, the alternative to President Asad's Alawi faction might not be the Muslim Brotherhood but a military-led Sunni-Alawi dominated regime. It wouldn't be democratic, but it would seek to reduce Syria's isolation.

In the end, Asad can save himself only by acting out of character and turning on his family and against the very terror groups he has supported. Would the Middle East be more secure if he did this? Absolutely, but don't bet on it; a better bet is that his days are probably numbered, and the outlook in Syria is likely to remain unclear for some time to come.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute, author of The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace, and was U.S. envoy to the Middle East under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush.

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