

Sin of Omission

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Articles & Testimony

President Bashar al Assad of Syria has lately seemed to be doing everything possible to make himself an ex-dictator—and this week he took yet another step in that direction. Ironically, his latest mistake was not some egregious act of oppression or deceit—though he has in the past been guilty of both. This week, Assad's mistake was doing nothing at all.

On Monday, Assad delivered the keynote address to the tenth meeting of Syria's Baath Party Congress. This was just the second time his ruling party had met in the five years since he succeeded his late father. During those years, expectations have frequently run high that Bashar was a closet reformer, the man who would drag Syria from its closed, proto-Stalinist past into an era of Arab glasnost and perestroika. Assad, however, has always failed to deliver, and Syria's politics and economy have remained stagnant.

But more puzzling than Assad's missed opportunities to reform have been his strategic mistakes. Whereas his father, Hafez, mesmerized American presidents with his cunning, guile, and tenacity, Bashar's equivocation on Iraq, support for Hezbollah and Palestinian terror groups, and barely visible aid in the battle against Al Qaeda have earned only contempt from the White House's current inhabitant. Recently, Assad's blunders have seemed to intensify. In a truly stunning display of diplomatic ineptitude, Assad strong-armed Lebanon to accept a second term for a quisling president and, by all accounts, arranged the daylight assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri. This had the result of reviving U.S.-French relations from their Iraq-war nadir by giving the two countries a common purpose: evicting Syria from Lebanon. In the months that followed, Assad brought ignominy to his army, which was compelled—without a single bullet being fired—to beat a hasty retreat from a country it had dominated for a generation. He also triggered the expulsion of probably a quarter-million or more Syrian workers from Lebanon—nobody knows for sure how many—which swelled the ranks of Syria's unemployed overnight. To paraphrase the courageous Syrian reformer Ammar Abdulhamid, if the Assads were the modern-day Corleones, Hafez dreamed of having Michael succeed him but was stuck with Fredo.

This week's Baath Party Congress was supposed to give Bashar the opportunity to make a fresh start. Rumors were rampant that the young leader would finally announce real change. By various accounts, this was to include the sacking of his father's old-guard cronies, the suspension of suffocating emergency laws (in place since 1963), the release of all political prisoners, an end to state monopolies and other restraints on free enterprise, and perhaps even

the repeal of an infamous article in the Syrian constitution that enshrines the Baath Party as vanguard of the nation and repository of all political power.

But Assad, a world-class underachiever, fooled us again. He announced no personnel changes, no legislative initiatives, no prison releases, no economic stimulus packages, no constitutional reforms. He didn't mention Iraq or Israel or Palestine or Lebanon or America. He did nothing.

Well, not quite. This man of the twenty-first century—an ophthalmologist by training and one-time head of the Syria Computer Society—did focus his venom on a particularly pernicious enemy of the Syrian people: globalization. He attacked the "information-technology revolution," which he said is leading to the "cultural, political, and moral collapse of the Arab individual and his ultimate defeat even without a fight." Assad's prescription: "As members of the Baath Party, we should first of all redouble our intellectual efforts and political and cultural effectiveness in order to strengthen our national existence, and protect our cultural identity. ... The Baath Party, as should be clear to every one of us, is a cause before it is a political organization, and a civilizing mission before it is a party in power."

So there it was: Assad's answer to calls for reform was not less Baathism, but more. In offering a ringing defense of an ideology whose only other champion these days is a jailed Saddam Hussein, Assad once again showed that his regime is one in whose survival the United States—and the West, more generally—simply has no interest.

For Syria, it is clear that change is coming. A few meek reforms and forced retirements may eventually emerge from Damascus—already a 72-year-old vice president has announced his resignation—but these will be too little, too late. Events could take any number of routes: The elders of Assad's minority Alawite sect, aghast at how Bashar has placed Syria in the international crosshairs, may decide to replace him with a more efficient Alawite; some brigadier general, outraged at the embarrassment of Syria's forced departure from Lebanon, may try to move against his corrupt superiors; angry Syrian workers, having been expelled by Lebanese patriots, may vent their frustration in anti-regime riots.

Meanwhile, Assad has been so offensive that usually restrained observers have begun calling for more assertive measures to isolate the regime and trigger change. This week, for example, The Financial Times of London editorialized that Syria is caught in a "time warp, ostensibly oblivious to the consequences of its own behavior." It suggested tightening the noose on Assad and his cronies through targeted sanctions, to be implemented by the U.N. Security Council, that would restrict the ability of this small group to travel or to transfer and access their assets.

Washington should embrace these ideas and push for more. For decades, America has been reluctant to classify Syria as a full-blown rogue regime because of its potential role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. That policy should be jettisoned. In its place, Washington should search for a third way between the bad option of a more effective Baathist dictatorship and the worse option of helping to empower Syria's radical Sunni Islamist militants. This will mean publicly encouraging the small, hardy band of domestic liberals that is routinely hounded by the regime and thrown in jail. Today, this group has little popularity, poor visibility, and virtually no organization; but if it becomes clear that the West will no longer throw lifelines to the Assad regime, the ranks and confidence of reformers may grow. Given how brittle Assad's government has become, Syria is one country in which a battle of ideas may itself be enough to trigger fundamental change. If so, Fredo Corleone's days in power are numbered.

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