

NOTE

The Syrian Impasse

Immanuel Wallerstein writes :

BACHAR AL-ASSAD HAS RISEN to the heights of being one of the least popular men in the world. He is denounced as a tyrant, indeed a very bloody tyrant, by almost everyone. Even those governments that refuse to denounce him seem to be counseling him to curb his repressive ways and to make some sort of political concessions to his internal opponents.

So, how is it that he ignores all this advice and proceeds to continue to use maximum force to continue political control of Syria? Why is there no outside intervention to force his removal from office? To answer these questions, let us start with assessing his strengths. To start with, he has a reasonably strong army, and up to now, with a few exceptions, the army and other structures of force in the country have stayed loyal to the regime. Secondly, he still seems to command the support of at least half of the population in what is increasingly being described as a civil war.

The key government posts and the officer corps are in the hands of the Alawi, a branch of Shi'a Islam. The Alawi are a minority of the population and certainly fear what would happen to them if the opposition forces, largely Sunni, were to come to power. In addition, the other significant minority forces—the Christians, the Druze, and the Kurds—seem to be equally wary of a Sunni government. Finally, the large merchant bourgeoisie have yet to turn against Assad and the Baath regime.

But is this really enough? If this were all, I doubt that Assad could really hold out much longer. The regime is being squeezed economically. The opposition Free Syrian Army is being fed arms by Iraqi Sunnis and probably Qatar. And the chorus of denunciations in the world press and by politicians of all stripes grows louder by the day.

Yet, nobody thinks that, a year or two from now, Assad is gone or the regime basically changed. The reason is that those who are denouncing him the loudest do not really want him to go.

Saudi Arabia: The Foreign Minister told the *New York Times* that "violence had to be stopped and the Syrian government not given any more chances." This sounds really strong until one notices that he added that "international intervention had to be ruled out." The fact is that Saudi Arabia wants the credit of opposing Assad but is very afraid of a successor government. It knows that in a post-Assad (probably fairly anarchic) Syria, al-Qaeda would find a base. And the Saudis know that al-Qaeda's number one objective is to overthrow the Saudi regime. Ergo, "no international intervention."

Israel: Yes, the Israelis continue to obsess about Iran. And yes, Baathist Syria continues to be an Iran-friendly power. But when all is said and done, Syria has been a relatively quiet Arab neighbor, an island of stability for the Israelis. Yes, the Syrians aid Hezbollah, but Hezbollah too has been relatively quiet. Why would the Israelis really want to take the risk of a turbulent post-Baathist Syria? Who would then wield power, and might they not have to improve their credentials by expanding jihad against Israel? And wouldn't the fall of Assad lead to upsetting the relative quiet and stability that Lebanon now seems to enjoy, and might this not end up with the further strengthening and renewed radicalism of Hezbollah? Israel has a lot to lose, and not too much to gain, if Assad falls.

The United States: The US government talks a good line. But how wary it is in practice? *The Washington Post* headlined an article on Feb. 11, "As carnage builds, US sees 'no good options' on Syria." The story points out that the US government has "no appetite for a military intervention." No appetite, despite the pressure of neocon intellectuals like Charles Krauthammer who is honest enough to admit "it's not just about freedom." It's really, he says, about undoing the regime in Iran.

But isn't that exactly why Obama and his advisors see no good options? They were pressured into the Libyan operation. The US didn't lose many lives, but did they really gain geopolitical advantage as a result? Is the new Libyan regime, if one can say there is a new Libyan regime, something better? Or is this the beginning of a long internal instability, as Iraq has turned out to be?

So, when Russia vetoed the UN resolution on Syria, one can imagine a sigh of relief in Washington. The pressure to up the ante and begin a Libyan-style intervention was lifted. Obama was protected against Republican harassment on Syria by the Russian veto. And Susan Rice, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, could shift all blame to the Russians. They were "disgusting," she said, oh so diplomatically.

France: Always nostalgic for their once-dominant role in Syria, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé shouts and denounces. But troops? You've got to be kidding. There's an election coming up, and sending troops would not be at all popular, especially since this would be no piece of cake, as was Libya.

Turkey: Turkey has improved its relations with the Arab world incredibly in the last decade. It's definitely unhappy about the civil war on its borders. It would love to see some kind of political compromise. But Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu is quoted as guaranteeing that "Turkey is not providing arms or support to army defectors." Turkey wants essentially to be friends to all sides. And besides, Turkey has its own Kurdish question, and Syria might offer active support, which hitherto it has refrained from doing.

So, who wants to intervene in Syria? Perhaps Qatar. But Qatar, however wealthy it is, is scarcely a major military power. The bottom line is that, however loud the rhetoric and however

ugly the civil war, no one really, really wants Assad to go. So, in all probability, he will stay.
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