

THE SYRIAN CRISIS: THE MOMENT OF TRUTH FOR BASHAR EL-ASSAD AND FOR THE OPPOSITION

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Introduction

Over the past few years, Syrian President Bashar el-Assad tried to reposition Syria on the international stage and he achieved a certain success. The general insurrection which began in March has considerably changed the political situation. The political capital which was gained during the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon was squandered in a few weeks of bloody repression.

Bashar el-Assad came to power in the absence of a legitimate successor following the death of his father. He initiated changes for a number of years. Definitively – and we underscore this dimension of the problem – it was only when he was constrained, forced to end the occupation of Lebanon that the young Syrian president became for the European countries an acceptable person to meet with. And yet the Syrian republic did not experience any notable progress in human rights and good governance. The fundamental rights of its citizens were already quite fragile before; since the start of the popular uprising, they have deteriorated still further. The regime reached an impasse when the revolt – exacerbated by the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan examples – continued to spread despite ferocious repression. Now it is the survival of the regime and of its entourage which is in play.

How has the opposition been organised? Did the Antalya conference make it possible to unite the opposition? What is the role of the Islamist opposition and particularly of the Muslim Brotherhood? At the moment when the Damascus regime is perhaps playing its final cards, let us look at the Syrian revolt.

A brief historical note

Ever since the accession to power of Hafez el-Assad in 1971, Syria has been ruled with an iron fist by its Alawite minority (minority Shiite community). Hafez el-Assad governed in a brutal manner and relied on denunciations and on the secret police. However, his secularism brought him favourable status among the religious minorities, particularly the Christians and, to a certain extent, the Druze community, as well as clear support from his own community, the Alawites.

Beginning in 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood began to position itself as the spearhead of challenge. The regime of Hafez el- Assad was detested by the *Brotherhood* because it was both secular and in the hands of Muslims who were considered to be heretics (the Alawites). The Muslim Brotherhood was brought to heel pitilessly and this was achieved, temporarily, in 1982, when the Syrian authorities had the Army raze the city of Hama, the Syrian stronghold of the brotherhood. The result of this operation is estimated to have been around 20,000 civilian victims. Beginning from this time, the Muslim Brotherhood was temporarily absent from the Syrian political stage and its leaders took refuge in Jordan, in Iraq, in the United Kingdom and in some other European countries like Germany.

Following the death of Hafez el-Assad in 2000, his younger son Bashar succeeded him (the heir apparent, Basel, the elder son of the Ruler, died in a highway accident in 1994). The timid reforms which he undertook did not last long. The regime showed its true colours by continuing to systematically resist all attempts at democratic opposition by kidnapping, torture and arbitrary imprisonment.

For some years, Bashar el-Assad had the reputation of being a young progressive leader amidst an Arab world controlled by aging dictators. The present crisis which the Syrian regime is undergoing as it faces a massive and determined popular challenge could have provided an opportunity for the Syrian president to prove that he was capable of envisioning deep reforms, what his father never wanted or was able to do.

Bashar el-Assad tried to deliver change during his first years at the head of the State by freeing some political prisoners and by allowing, for a very brief time, intellectual discussions in the few privileged salons of Damascus and Aleppo as well as by initiating some timid economic reforms. But the "*Damascus Spring*" did not last long. Beginning in 2005, the "*Declaration of Damascus*"¹ prompted a new series of arrests. In 2007, a new wave of repression against the opposition reduced still further what remained of the liberty accorded before 2005. Repression quickly won out over an ever more lively challenge which was probably orchestrated by the leaders of the *Muslim Brotherhood* who gradually returned from exile at the start of the new millennium. They were also very likely the authors of a bloody attack against a Shiite mosque carried out in 2008².

Nevertheless, one must concede that both Hafez el- Assad and Bashar el-Assad were forced to maintain a peaceful inter-religious coexistence within Syria. On the other hand, outside its borders, they both used and abused the rivalries between religious groups to establish their authority over Lebanon and more generally to strengthen the Syrian political status on the regional scene. The most flagrant example was no doubt their use of the *Muslim Brotherhood of Hamas*, supported at arm's length, to undermine the *Fatah* of Yasser Arafat and more broadly to take control of the Palestinian movement. We also must keep in mind how they shamelessly took advantage of the Iraqi conflict. On the occasion of a raid on the city of Sinjar at the Syrian-Iraqi border in October 2007, American forces discovered a series of documents establishing in detail the comings and goings of Jihadists transiting via Syria before perpetrating their misdeeds in Iraq. Analysis of these documents by the "*Combating Terrorism Center*"³ of the West Point Military Academy³ has indisputably demonstrated that

¹ In October 2005, various Arab and Kurdish parties and personalities from different political persuasions joined around a platform entitled the 'Declaration of Damascus for Democratic National Change,' having as its objective to achieve regime change and establish the 'rule of law.' Ultimately joined by the *Muslim Brotherhood*, the signatories intended to establish: '*peacefully, gradually, by dialogue, with understanding and recognition of each other, a democratic regime (...)*'. This initiative resulted in the formation of a National Council in February 2006, but after this date, apart from several meetings and declarations, the Declaration of Damascus, did not succeed in meeting its objectives and many of its leaders were imprisoned.

² The Daily Telegraph, 24 March 2011.

³ in <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/>

hundreds of fighters used the Syrian network to get to Iraq between September 2006 and September 2007. The *Abu Ghadiyah network*, named after its leader, controlled the entire chain sending terrorists to Iraq: the flows of financial funds, trafficking in arms and explosives, making available forged documents and hideouts, etc..

At the same time, though it had officially withdrawn from Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, Syria, via surreptitious means – and by using essentially its extensive intelligence services and *Hezbollah* continued to weigh heavily on the political life of Beirut.

It is obviously very regrettable in this context that the Western powers, with the United States and France in the lead, deemed it good to legitimise the regime in place by encouraging Syria's 'reintegration in the international community.'

The insurrection and its consequences: *the moment of truth for Bashar el-Assad*

In keeping with the extent of the intensification of the popular revolt and its repression by the security apparatus controlled directly by the presidential palace and the clan of its henchmen, whether it so wishes or not international opinion is obliged to condemn the regime of Bashar el-Assad more and more severely. One may fear that the present violence is just a foretaste of a situation which risks tipping into a total civil war and of ending in widespread chaos. Various sources already report that the Alawite cadres of the Army and of the intelligence services have taken the precaution of placing their families out of harm's way in Alawite areas or even abroad.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, guest professor at Columbia University and expert on Syria, explained the situation several weeks ago: *'this is the moment of truth for Bashar el- Assad; he has the opportunity to impose reforms within the Baath party, but does he want to do that?'*⁴

Until recently, Bashar el-Assad was often perceived as being an 'outsider.' His years spent in London and the fact that he was not educated as the putative prince and successor of his father can explain this rather common perception, notably in diplomatic circles. Nonetheless, today the Syrian president is totally responsible for the terrible crisis which the country is undergoing. Contrary to what Jean-Pierre Filiu suggested, it is ever less likely that the Syrian president is still able to calm down the situation by proposing reforms. It is more and more obvious that the Syrian revolt will end either in the fall of the regime followed by a wave of violence against the Alawite minority or in a bloodbath which will make possible the survival of the system.

Furthermore, we should bear in mind that the family clan of the Assads, which is broadly involved in the state apparatus, will not make things any easier. Maher el- Assad, the president's brother who commands the 4th Tank Division, and his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, who directs the intelligence services, are known for their quasi-pathological propensity to suppress without any pity any vague desire of the opposition. The el-Assad family and those close to it are locked into a fight to the end position which leaves little hope for a negotiated settlement.

Moreover, the options of Bashar el-Assad are limited by ethnic logic. His family, which has ruled Syria without sharing power since 1971, belongs to the Alawite minority which represents only 12% of the 23 million Syrians. This domination by a minority is one of the essential sources of the profound resentment of the Sunni majority. The violence of these past few weeks can only reinforce the latent but explosive conflict which has prevailed for a

⁴ The New York Times, 24 April 2011.

long time between the two religious groups. This is such an issue that in his fear of mutinies within the Army, Bashar el-Assad has relied almost exclusively on Alawite units or units commanded by members of the minority, such as the division commanded by his brother, to crush the uprising in bloodshed.

In the view of Joshua Landis, a specialist on the Middle East and teacher at the University of Oklahoma: *'Bashar knows that his regime is based on 2 pillars: fear and nepotism. And fear has now disappeared (...)*.⁵ Bashar el-Assad could perhaps still avoid the worst, namely total civil war, by dismantling the control of the Baath party over society (as he timidly suggested during his speech of 20 June) or by announcing elections. But it must be said that his attempts at conciliation were rejected by Syrian public opinion, which has been exhausted by decades of violence, lies and dictatorship.

Until now, according to the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, 1,100 persons have lost their lives in the repression (1,300 according to other sources) while nearly 10,000 have been arrested and more than 10,000 (according to the latest figures available) have fled to neighbouring Turkey.

- *A profound impact on the geopolitics of the Middle East*

The condemnations issued by the United States, Europe and certain regional powers like Turkey are more and more severe. After the period of the start of normalisation of diplomatic relations during the past few years with the West and with Lebanon in particular, the regime in Damascus is once again banished from the international community except by its two closest allies: Iran and Russia. If the regime of Bashar el-Assad were to fall, this would undoubtedly be a major setback for Iranian diplomacy, which uses Syria in its policy of destabilising Lebanon via *Hezbollah*, as well as in its striving to influence the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via Hamas, whose political leader, Khaled Meshaal found asylum in Damascus.

In Tripoli (Lebanon), fighting between the adversaries of Bashar el-Assad and Alawite militia have caused many deaths these past few days. These clashes are directly linked to the Syrian crisis and very likely have been encouraged by the new pro-Syrian Lebanese government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

Turkey, which is forced to deal with an unprecedented influx of refugees, is more and more openly hostile to the regime of Bashar el-Assad. So many have crossed over that Syria has just deployed troops along the border at the risk of poisoning the situation still more.

If the regime of Bashar el-Assad survives this crisis, the uprising will very likely have long-term repercussions on regional politics. The principles of European and American diplomacy with regard to Syria will have to be re-examined. As Andrew Tabler, an analyst in the Washington Institute for Near East Policy explains: *'these past few years our policy has had as its objective to bring Syria to the negotiating table; now Bashar accuses Israel and the USA of fomenting the disturbances in the country and it will be very difficult for him to negotiate with them.'*

- *What are the prospects?*

For Joshua Landis: *'the Muslim Brotherhood is the only one who can have a role in the militarisation of the opposition, because the regional powers do not act in this sense.'*⁶ No

⁵ Assad's Crackdown Could Drive Syrian Opposition to Armed Revolt, The World Politics Review, 25 April 2011.

⁶ Assad's Crackdown Could Drive Syrian Opposition to Armed Revolt, The World Politics Review, 25 April 2011.

country of the region, not even Israel, shows enthusiasm for the idea of the precipitate fall of the Syrian regime. Such a hypothesis suggests a rise in power of the Sunni Islamists with consequences no one can foretell.

The probability of a direct intervention by the Western powers, whether that be Europe or the United States, is weak if not zero. Not very confident in the possibilities of the advent of a democratic regime in Syria, these powers fear the risk of a civil war in a complex, multi-religion country (Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and Druzes) that is also multi-ethnic (Arabs and Kurds). In the case of Europe, there is the fear of additional inflows of Arab refugees into the European Union, which has barely managed the flow coming from the southern shores of the Mediterranean.⁷

The ever more obvious role of the religious authorities in the conflict is also disturbing. The international union of Muslim ulemas has in a recent communique called upon: '*all the Muslim peoples to demonstrate massively on 24 June, after praying in their respective countries to express their support for the peaceful Syrian revolution.*' Many associations of ulemas – of which the principal ones are the Coordination of Ulemas of the Gulf, the Coordination of Syrian Ulemas Abroad, the Coordination of Sunni Ulemas and the Union of Islamic Organisations in Europe⁸ - have also joined in this appeal.

- ***A fragmented and weakened political opposition***

The meeting of the Syrian opposition which took place from 31 May to 2 June in Antalya, Turkey did not have a great impact on the organisation of the challenge. This is mainly because important leaders of the anti-Assad camp, as well as most of the Kurdish parties, turned down the invitation for tactical or strategic reasons.

The objective of this conference was to coordinate demonstrations in front of Syrian diplomatic representations abroad, to speak with one voice during contacts with the great Western powers and, above all, to provide visibility to the opposition in exile vis-à-vis the Syrians inside the country while the *black out* of information and expulsion of foreign journalists has locked up information within the country.

The Antalya conference was marked by a struggle for influence between the secular camp and the Islamist camp. The latter agreed in extremis to the demand of the secular leaders to put in place a secular regime after the expected fall of Bashar el- Assad. But there is no certainty that this acceptance is anything other than a tactical and media-oriented pose which will not be respected in case the regime falls.

At the end of the conference, an *executive board* of 31 persons, including 9 working full time, was elected and an appeal to reject all foreign intervention in Syrian affairs and to maintain the territorial integrity of the country was ratified. Moreover, guarantees in favour of the protection of the Alawites – who are more and more threatened – were publicly promised.⁹

- ***Principal actors of the Syrian opposition***

- **Michel Kilo:** describes himself as an adherent of democratic Arabism of the Left. Kilo was behind the Declaration of Damascus which, in 2005, called for the liberalisation of the regime, considering the government of Bashar el- Assad to be "authoritarian, totalitarian and riddled with nepotism." He was condemned to a 3 year prison term in 2006 for having signed the 'Beirut-Damascus' Declaration which called for a normalisation of relations between Lebanon and Syria. He was up till then

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Aljazeera, 21 June 2011.

⁹ Syrian Opposition Meeting in Antalya: Day Two in <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10053>

a partisan of a *mild transition* but his message has recently become radicalised when faced with the brutality of the repression.

- **Riad Seif:** a businessman and former member of Parliament, he distanced himself vis-à-vis the regime when he considered the impossibility of reforming it from within. In his view, *'the corruption [of the regime] is the natural result of tyranny and is its legitimate result.'* He was one of the actors of the ephemeral Damascus Spring and, for this reason, has spent time in and out of prison over the past few years. He has been accused by the regime of *'an attempt to modify the constitution by illegal means'* and *'of inciting racial and inter-community hatred.'* He lives presently in Damascus.
- **Abdul Halim Khaddam:** ex-Vice President, architect of the Syrian presence in Lebanon during the 1990s and ally of the late Rafic Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister who was assassinated very likely by the Syrian regime. He fell into disgrace after 2005 and fled to Paris after having resigned from all his official posts. Since then, he tried without success to unite the Syrian opposition from France. He was associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2006. This alliance ended in 2009. This setback was probably due to the fact that one part of the regime's opponents link him with it and consider that his opposition to Bashar el-Assad is more a manifestation of his personal ambition than of a real desire to liberalise the institutions. The regime tries to discredit Khaddam, a Sunni, by describing him as a traitor in the pay of foreigners and by accusing his son of having received 400,000 dollars from Saudi Prince Turki bin Abdul Aziz.¹⁰ We note that he was not invited to the Antalya conference.
- **The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood** may no longer be as powerful as it was in 1982, but it has joined the challenge to the regime. Their former leader, Ali al Bayanouni, who lives in exile in London, published an article in the Guardian¹¹ in April 2011 in which he speaks of Bashar el-Assad as a 'dictator' and says that the *Muslim Brotherhood* was not responsible for the uprising. The Brotherhood is convinced that *'Islam is the solution.'* It calls for the establishment of a religious state and for the rejection of all form of secularism even as it calls in its speeches for the formation of a democratic state. The ultimate goal of the Brotherhood is to set up a Sunni and Arab Islamic state which will exclude all other ethnic groups and religious minorities. We note that the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood is known for the radicalism of its positions.

It is also appropriate to highlight the support of Turkey, the former ally of the existing regime in Damascus, for the action of the Syrian *Muslim Brotherhood*. The General Secretary of the movement, Riad al-Shaqfa, and its political boss, Mohamed Tayfur, held a press conference in Istanbul at the start of April 2011 during which they encouraged the demonstrators to oppose Bashar el-Assad. We note in regard to the gratitude of the various minorities present in Syria, the reaction of Turkish President Abdullah Gul, who said about the speech of 20 June by President Bashar that: *'these reforms were not sufficient.'*

Finally, according to a recent report of the German intelligence services, many dozen members of the *Muslim Brotherhood* are participating actively and militarily in the insurrection in various cities around the country, whereas they still declared on 7

¹⁰ Knowing that Saudi Arabia is often presented as the regional power protecting the Sunnis.

¹¹ No one owns the Syria's uprising, The Guardian, 16 April 2011.

June: *'We assure international, Arab and national public opinion that the Syrian revolution is peaceful (...)*¹²

- **The Kurds** represent another category of the population which wants the fall of the regime. The Kurds of Syria, who account for 10% of the population, have always been marginalised by the regime and one of the first concessions of Bashar el-Assad to the demonstrators was to grant Syrian nationality to 300,000 Kurdish stateless persons on 7 April. But it appears here as well that this attempt at conciliation was perceived as too little, too late.¹³
- **Nasser al Hariri and Kalil al Rifae** are also 2 names to watch: these two members of the Syrian Parliament representing the city of Deraa resigned on 23 April to protest against the violent repression of the demonstrations.¹⁴
- ***Will Bashar el- Assad fall tomorrow?***

Both analysts and diplomats are beginning to envisage a Syria after the Assad dynasty. One must say that various sources believe that the present regime no longer has more than a few months worth of military resources (munitions) and financial resources, at least if the present situation persists. One can legitimately question this type of prospective analysis, but it is nonetheless true that the situation of the presidential clan will be more and more difficult to hold steady. And since, notwithstanding the continuation of arrests, torture and shootings, the protests continue, there is no reason to wager on a return to calm. There is a great risk of seeing, following the example of the situation which is prevailing in Libya, that the regime will fight on to the end, with as its sole strategy the intensification of the repression and an increase in the number of civilian victims. As a corollary, the opposition will harden and the clashes will be transformed into a genuine war.

Conclusion

It is impossible to predict the future of Syria. All observers are obliged to deal with multiple scenarios.

The present regime can survive but that will be at the price of a terrible bloodbath and above all its survival will most likely be only temporary.

At the present moment, the hypothesis of a military coup d'état cannot be excluded. Such a scenario would maintain the status quo temporarily. However, everything indicates that it would only be a postponement and that the challenge and its procession of victims would quickly resume.

At a time when the Damascus regime is perhaps living its final hours, it also is appropriate for the international community and the European Union in particular to envisage the consequences of a takeover of power by the Muslim Brotherhood, the sole force capable of effectively organising itself in a context of high intensity armed conflict. The risk of witnessing a 'Lebanisation' of Syria is not negligible. The Kurdish and Alawite minorities will never accept such a situation.

¹² L'Orient-Le Jour, 7 June 2011.

¹³ Who's Who in the Syrian opposition, Foreign Policy, 29 April 2011. *in* http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/29/who_s_who_in_the_syrian_opposition?page=0,5

¹⁴ These last few weeks, nearly 200 persons have also resigned from the Baath party in this region.

The most realistic solution may consist of the international community's identifying a new democratic and credible leadership. Without that, it will take a lot to avoid the present humanitarian disaster from continuing against a background of destabilisation which is extremely dangerous for the region, the Middle East, which is already considered to be like a powder keg.

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