

Imagining Post-Baath Syria: Stability or Chaos?

Written by Nuri Salik

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NURI SALIK, MAY 7 2013

When the Arab Spring reached Syria in mid-March 2011, nobody in Turkey expected the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime for a long time in front of the strong wind of change in the Middle East. However, the course of developments showed us that Syria and its 40-year-old Baath regime have different characteristics in comparison with Ben Ali's Tunisia, Qaddafi's Libya and Mubarak's Egypt. Today, the early hopes for the demise of the al-Assad regime have waned and transitional government including the ruling Baath Party seems to be the best choice for the end of the crisis. It is obvious that the Syrian crisis is much more complicated than its beginning due to the emergence of radical groups in the opposition, the role of competing regional countries and the fixed position of the USA and Russia as to the crisis.

This article aims to evaluate the conflict between the Baath regime and the opposition groups from a historical sociological perspective by using the concept of 'path dependence,' which states "that what has happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time".[1] Within this conceptual framework, the article attempts to show that Hafez al-Assad put Syria on a path in history and created a stable but oppressive iron-fisted structure, which affected the course of events in following years. In this regard, Hafez's decisions and policies directly influenced and limited Bashar al-Assad's choices after his ascent to the presidency in 2000. In the article, it is argued that the path of the Baath collapsed with the advent of the Arab Spring and today post-Baath Syria is in the making. By looking at historical experiences, the article explains that post-Baath Syria will most likely be characterized by instability and chaos rather than stability.

Syria before Hafez al-Assad: Stability of Instability

Before Hafez al-Assad's coming to power, Syria was "the world's most unstable country between 1949 and 1970" as rightly expressed by Barry Rubin.[2] In the wake of its independence in 1946, Syria emerged as a weak state owing to the partition of the Greater Syrian territories into four parts: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine during the mandate period, lack of state formation, factionalism among Syrian politicians and the absence of an upper identity over conflicting sub-state identities of different Syrian ethnic and religious communities.[3]

Despite having emerged as a democratic country (not as a kingdom or a dictatorship) after independence, governmental inability of the ruling party of the landowning class (the National Party) and the defeat in Palestine against the nascent Israeli state forced the army, which was supported by rising middle and lower class parties (the Baath Party, the SSNP and the Youth Party of Akram al-Hawrani), to intervene in politics.[4] Between 1949 and 1970, political instability and turmoil in Syrian politics were evident by the several coup d'états and abortive coup attempts which were organized by Syrian civilian and military factions in line with external allies against their domestic rivals. The struggle for power among civilian and military factions was so fierce that Syria sacrificed its sovereignty to Gamal Abd el Nasser of Egypt in 1958. The experience of United Arab Republic (UAR) did not last long and the democratic phase in Syrian history reopened with the dismantling of the UAR in 1961. However, the post-UAR period witnessed extreme political instability, fierce political factionalism and army tutelage in Syrian politics. The era of political turmoil in the post-UAR period finally culminated in the ascendance of the Baath Party in March 1963 through a coup d'état.

Even though the Baath Party dominated Syrian politics after 1963, this dominance did not end instability and political

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turmoil and even added a new dimension to factionalism among rival groups, i.e. sectarianism. Although there was no sectarian tendency among Syrian rival factions before the 1963 coup, with the ascendance of Alawites, who were the leading force in the army and the Baath Party behind the 1963 coup[5]; sectarianism became a dynamic force in shaping Syrian politics. After the 1963 coup, Syria once again plunged into political turmoil, in which different factions in the Baath Party struggled for power. The rivalry between Sunni Amin al-Hafez and Alawite Salah al-Jadid culminated in the ascendance of Alawite officers in Syrian politics through an Alawite-organized coup in 1966 under the leadership of al-Jadid. After the coup, many Sunnis were purged including the founders of the party, Michel al-Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. However, even the purge of traditional leadership did not bring tranquility to Syria and the Baath Party and the final factionalist game was played between two Alawites, Salah al-Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, between 1966 and 1970.[6] This rivalry ended with al-Assad's bloodless coup against his old comrade in 1970, which marked the opening of Hafez al-Assad's era in Syrian history.

Legacy of Hafez al-Assad's Path: Syria as a Stable Country

Hafez al-Assad[7], who came to power after a long power struggle within the Baath Party, had directly experienced the chaotic phases in Syrian politics. He was well aware of the political instability during the multi-party periods between 1946-1949, 1954-1958 and 1961-1963. When Hafez al-Assad decided to build up a strong but authoritarian-totalitarian regime around his Alawite sect (it was just an option at that time) instead of choosing other options, he put Syria in a path in history. Al-Assad's contingent decision at that time was so critical that the sequence of events during the formation of his regime, especially during troubled times, made this path irreversible and created a structure covering all aspects of Syrian politics that still impacts the present state of affairs in the Syrian crisis.

First and foremost, achieving stability in a coup-prone country was the main goal of Hafez al-Assad. Behind his pan-Arab and anti-Israeli rhetoric, al-Assad began to create an authoritarian-totalitarian regime, which was inspired by the experience of the Soviet Communist Party.[8] At the top of the new regime, President al-Assad stood and he tightly controlled the Baath Party, the government, the army and the intelligence services. Al-Assad's dominance in the system was rightly defined as a "Presidential Monarchy" by Raymond Hinnebusch.[9] Al-Assad institutionalized his regime by establishing the National Progressive Front (NPF) including several leftist parties under the leadership of the Baath Party in 1972. In the 1973 Constitution, article 8 clearly stated that "the Arab Socialist Baath party leads the state and society". In addition to these political arrangements, al-Assad established civil society organizations such as General Federation of Peasants, Baath Pioneers, the Revolutionary Youth Union, the National Union of Syrian Students and the General Union of Women to strengthen the power base of his regime among different segments of the society. These policies were clear indications of al-Assad's intention to cover all aspects of Syrian politics and society so as to prevent the emergence of any opposition movement which would threaten al-Assad and the stability of the country.

Above all, at the core of al-Assad's totalitarian-authoritarian regime and his stabilization program, the key was the dominance of Alawites from his family, tribe and community. Al-Assad brought members of the Alawite community, 12 percent of the Syrian population, to high positions especially in the army and in various intelligence services. For al-Assad, the implementation of the Alawites in the civilian and military bureaucracy was a crucial aspect of sustaining political stability in Syria. The promotion of the Alawites through the al-Assad regime meant "the amalgamation of the sect and the state" in Syria. Then, any threat toward the state was perceived as a threat against the Alawite sect or vice versa.[10]

As mentioned above, al-Assad put Syria in a path in history through his successful but oppressive and autocratic policies. During his thirty-year-rule in Damascus, al-Assad was suspicious about peaceful democratic demands of his people. He sent many dissident figures to jail and banned newspapers. During al-Assad's regime, human rights violations increased dramatically and *al-mukhabarat* and other intelligence forces strictly controlled daily activities of citizens and suppressed dissident voices against the regime. Therefore, the al-Assad regime came to be known as "the regime of fear" among Syrians.

When the brutal war broke out between the Baath regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1976 and 1982, al-Assad completely depended on his Alawite sect to crack down on the opposition, which resulted in the army storming

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the city of Hama in 1982 and killing thousands of Sunni residents. The choices of the al-Assad regime during the time of conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood made the path of the Baath irreversible in Syria. Even though al-Assad made small attempts during the course of 1990s to decrease tension between the opposition and the regime, the efforts did not bring structural reforms to the country.

Bashar al-Assad's Path Dependence

When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000 and his 34-year-old son Bashar al-Assad became new president of Syria, many people were optimistic about him. It was thought that young Bashar was well aware of the course of global developments and would lead the Baath regime toward democracy. Indeed, Bashar had a historical chance to change his father's policies in the wake of his rise to power and implement a set of reforms to transform the regime, which would bring long-awaited freedoms and democracy to the country. In 2000, Syria was on the threshold of a new era under young Bashar's leadership.

When Bashar al-Assad addressed his inaugural speech before the People's Assembly on July 17, 2000, the principles of openness, transparency, pluralism and democracy were the main themes of his speech. Believing in Bashar's opening of a new era in Syrian history, many civil organizations began to mushroom across the country in the second half of 2000. In September 2000, 99 intellectuals signed the "Manifesto of the 99" and called the regime to cancel the state of emergency being applied since 1963, to release all political prisoners, to allow the return of all exiled politicians and to guarantee freedoms and political pluralism in the country. The manifesto was followed by the Muslim Brotherhood's draft of the "Covenant of National Honor for Political Activity" in May 2001 and the "Petition of the One Thousand" signed by 1,000 intellectuals in January 2001.[11] The activities of these civil organizations were called the Damascus Spring, which aimed to encourage the regime toward freedoms and democracy in peaceful ways.

On the other hand, Bashar al-Assad feared the openness policy as it directly challenged the legitimacy of the regime and gave it a sense of weakness before the opposition groups. Against harsh criticisms of the opposition figures against the regime and his father, in an interview with al-Sharq al-Awsat, Bashar reminded the opposition of "instability" in pre-Baath Syria as follows: *"It seems that there are people who think that the period of the mandate or of the repeated revolutions (the 1940s and 1950s) was preferable to the period of stability that began in 1963 and was strengthened in 1970."*[12] In my opinion, Bashar's emphasis on stability was quite important as it was a direct indication of his dependence on Hafez's path rather than the principles of openness, transparency and democracy.

Within the framework of his expression, Bashar launched a ruthless policy against the opposition figures, many of whom were imprisoned and the Damascus Spring turned into the Damascus Winter in 2001. However, the impact of the Damascus Spring continued and main opposition groups (including the Muslim Brotherhood, secular groups and the Kurds) launched a new civil and peaceful initiative to push the Baath regime toward gradual reform which was named the Damascus Declaration in October 2005. The Baath regime again responded with prison sentences to the reformist camp including Riyad al-Sayf and Michel Kilo. Whether encouraged by the old-guards of the regime or not, Bashar's choices were obviously limited by the past choices of his father as he thought that the openness policy would end the iron-fisted regime of the Baath Party in Syria.

The Arab Spring and Beyond

The Arab Spring was a historic moment in the Middle East which swept away authoritarian regimes of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. When the Arab Spring reached Syria in mid-March 2011, the Syrian people and opposition groups peacefully demanded democracy once again and gave Bashar the third and the last chance to implement reforms in the country. Bashar had to make a decision either to follow the path of his father or to bring democracy to the country. Again, Bashar chose the former and resorted to violence and oppression against his own citizens. However, Bashar's brutal crackdown of protesters by using the army and *al-mukhabarat*, as well as his miscalculation of the impact of the Arab Spring, transformed demonstrations into a nation-wide uprising across the country against the Baathist regime.

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Even though Bashar made small concessions to the opposition by cancelling the emergency law of 1963 and granting citizenship rights to the Kurds after the spread of popular demonstrations, he still thought that the military methods of his father would put down uprisings in the country similar to the period between 1976 and 1982. In this regard, the army and intelligence agencies responded to civilian protesters by firing live ammunition and shelling several towns. The immediate impact of Bashar's crackdown on civilian protestors resulted in a change in the discourse of popular demonstrations from democratic reforms to the removal of the Baathist regime. When demonstrations spread to several towns and cities including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Latakia and Tartus, al-Assad responded to civilian demonstrations by deploying army units and referred to them as terrorists attacking the stability of the country.[13] While the Baathist regime was continuing its massacres and tortures through the use of its security forces and the *shabiha*, a notorious Alawite paramilitary organization, soldiers from different ranks rejected opening fire on civilian protesters and defected from the army. Defected soldiers established the Free Syrian Army (FSA) headquartered in Turkey in July 2011. Military defections were accompanied by civilian defections including Prime Minister Riad al-Hijab and Menaf Tlass, who was a close friend of al-Assad. Concurrently, civilian opposition groups began to organize, which culminated in the establishment of the Syrian National Council in August 2011, which was subsequently rebirthed as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November 2012. The Syrian National Coalition was recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League on 26 March 2013.[14] Syrian civilian and military opposition groups were backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey both economically and militarily, which was severely criticized by Bashar al-Assad. He accused these countries of supporting the various armed terrorist groups operating in the country.

In the second year of the crisis, the Syrian civil war transformed into sectarian conflict as expressed by the UNHRC report.[15] Even though there are small exceptions, the majority of the Sunni population supported the opposition groups. On the other hand, the Alawites, Christians and other minority groups sided with the Baath regime. While armed-conflict continued between the Syrian army and the rebel forces, participation of al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliated organization, in the Syrian civil war further complicated the situation in the country. During the course of 2012 and early 2013, the clashes between the regime and the opposition escalated across the country and many towns, especially in northern and eastern Syria, were captured either by the FSA, al-Nusra Front or Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). However, some argue that the rebel forces are far from toppling the al-Assad regime, which still holds strategic territory in several cities including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Idlib. These cities, where clashes are remain ongoing, are divided between the Syrian army and the opposition groups and there is no end in sight to the conflict as at least one-third of the Syrian army, composed of mostly Alawites, is still loyal to the al-Assad regime. Besides, al-Assad has been constantly backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah militarily and economically.

In my opinion, the most significant aspect of Syria's Arab Spring is the collapse of the path of the Baathist regime. However, the stalemate shows us that Syria is divided between the regime and the opposition groups; neither al-Assad nor the fractured opposition groups is capable of controlling the whole country. It is clear that reconciliation between the regime and the opposition is impossible due to the reemergence of bitter sectarian hostilities coupled with the rise of the death toll to more than 70,000. It is highly likely that the al-Assad regime will survive in the near future if external intervention, which has been vetoed by Russia and China on the UN Security Council, does not take place.

In the event that al-Assad falls, it can be assumed that post-Baath Syria will experience pre-1970 instability and chaos for several reasons. First of all, the Syrian civil war damaged social harmony between the Sunnis and different ethnic and religious minority groups, especially the Alawites. They fear the revenge of radical elements after the fall of al-Assad and for such reason, they still support him. Secondly, it seems impossible to liquidate the Baath Party with all of its branches and cells. Therefore, it will be difficult to incorporate the Alawite army units and Baathist government officials into the new regime after such bloodshed. Thirdly, al-Nusra Front and other armed radical groups, who have different political agendas for a post-Assad period, will create problems for the moderate opposition groups in the Syrian National Coalition as to the nature of a new regime. In addition, a possible Kurdish demand for autonomy with the end of the conflict will most likely create problems for a new regime in Damascus. Besides, building a new infrastructure across the entire country and compensating for the losses of refugees and displaced people (almost 4 million people) constitutes a major economic burden.

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Lastly but most significantly, I would like to stress that as we learn from historical experiences, it is very difficult to reconcile the clashing interests of different Syrian factions. If divergences between the military and civilian wings of the opposition increase after al-Assad (as in the case of the appointment of Ghassan Hito as the prime minister of the National Coalition, who was rejected by the FSA), the Syrian National Coalition, which is a loose umbrella organization of different factions, will be hard-pressed to avoid imploding. If the National Coalition crumbles, this will mean the reemergence of the factionalist game among rival groups in line with their external regional allies similar to the instability period before 1970. To sum up, today's post-Baath Syria is in the making; however, its commencement on a new democratic and peaceful path will obviously take a long time.

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