Repression Is ‘Not a Stupid Thing’: The Syrian Regime's Response to the Uprising

Reinoud Leenders

4 December 2012

A common perception of the Syrian regime’s response to the uprising has been to stress that it, and Bashar al-Assad especially, has been ‘out of touch’ with the rapidly changing realities since the Arab Spring struck Syria in March 2011. The image of Bashar and his wife surfing the internet, downloading i-Tunes songs and enjoying their virtual shopping sprees, has evoked the impression of a pitiful dictator locked up in his own palace without appreciating the formidable and urgent challenges against his regime. Typically, a journalist of The Guardian, that last March published leaked emails of Bashar, his wife and their aides, said: “You do get a sense from a lot of the emails of a life in a gilded cocoon extraordinarily insulated from [...] the horrors going on in the rest of the country.” (Al-Jazeera 15 March 2012)² Writing for the Saudi daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat (13 October 2012), commentator Tareq al-Humayid also claimed that Bashar “is completely detached from reality [...] . He is committed to continuing the killing until the bitter end.”³ Syrian activists evoked similar imagery, perhaps most vividly so the satirical puppet theatre group Masasit Mati who consistently staged their main presidential character ‘Bashu’ as a lonesome individual, being mesmerized by the tumult around his palace, and with few people left to converse with except ‘Shabih’ and, speaking from hell, his late father Hafez.⁴ To underscore this image and complicating it, some Syrian activists highlighted regime incumbents’ rural backgrounds, in addition to their supposed inferiority complexes with regards to ‘modernity’ more generally, and resultant bad or crude manners. (author’s conversations, March 2011 – November 2012) These qualities are brought to bear for the argument that the regime has had no idea how to

¹ Reinoud Leenders is assistant professor in political science at the University of Amsterdam. He will soon move to King’s College, London, where he has been appointed reader in international relations with a focus on Middle East studies in the Department of War Studies. He authored Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon (Cornell University Press 2012) and co-edited Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran (Stanford University Press 2012). This paper was made possible thanks to the support of the Dutch NGO Hivos. Contact at reinoudleenders@yahoo.com

² For a similar view expressed by a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, see http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/assad-interview-state-department-reacts-15106238

³ For a similar view expressed in Arab media, see editorial in Khaleej Times, 28 September 2011 and Abdel Bari ‘Atwan in Al-Quds al-'Arabi, 1 August 2011.

respond to the unprecedented uprising except by what it knows best; by way of senseless violence and repression. Likewise, and with regime violence against protestors and rebels reaching apocalyptic dimensions, the regime and its incumbents have been depicted as ‘irrational’, incompetent, and lacking the finesse to save their own skin.

The ways in which the Syrian regime has been portrayed are reminiscent of the common tendency to view violence generally as deeply irrational, and – from ill-defined but morally unwavering liberal perspectives— as always counterproductive, destructive and self-defeating. Indeed, the more violence the Syrian regime used, the more it came to be portrayed as inherently inadequate and senseless. In his questioning of the irrational qualities habitually attributed to armed conflict and violence generally, one scholar, Christopher Cramer (2006), gave his book the title “civil war is not a stupid thing”. Similarly, but with far more modest objectives, I would here like to present my argument that, during the uprising in Syria, authoritarian governance and repression has not been a ‘stupid thing’ either; on the contrary, and moral considerations and judgments set aside, the Syrian regime’s responses to the uprising suggest that it is ‘in-touch’, calculative, ‘rational’, and learning –if by trial and error, and surely without necessarily quelling the uprising. After substantiating this argument I will discuss what these qualities may imply for the Syrian crisis in the nearby future, what we can expect from regime incumbents, and how the latter are to be approached in any attempt to contain, sideline or defeat them.

**Blind to Unrest?**

The regime’s alleged inanity, and it being out of touch with the dramatic changes sweeping through the region since the Arab Spring, first appeared to be underscored by Bashar’s interview to the Wall Street Journal, on 31 January 2011. Here he infamously declared that Syria was to be immune to the wave of protests in the Arab world due to its presumed ‘exceptionalism’ in connection with the regime’s adaptability and the popularity of its foreign policies. Bashar claimed that the regime was constantly in tune with popular sentiments and “upgrading” to prevent the challenges faced by the likes of Mubarak and Ben Ali. Of course, he was wrong. But so were most pundits and, indeed, widely accepted theories on popular mobilization and revolutions. The latter stress that people mobilize when they see ‘structural opportunities’. A glance at social movement theory works on the subject reveals that such opportunities are viewed as mostly originating in changes at a regime- or state level: state
elite divisions, coups, defeat in war or any other development pointing up to sudden cracks within the ruling elite are believed to prompt mass mobilization. (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) Yet on the eve of the uprising the Syrian regime did not experience any of this, and hence felt confident that it could weather the storm. Thus, if Bashar and the regime’s arrogance on the eve of the uprising is to be dismissed as ‘irrational’ and proof of them being ‘out of touch’, we have to likewise categorize the analytical perspectives of most Middle East pundits, Syria watchers and social movement theorists together. Bashar and the regime were not the only ones to have missed a development wherein not sudden regime weaknesses prompted mobilization but widely shared perceptions among regime critics and discontented citizens that the protest movement was strong enough to take to the streets and pose a real challenge worth joining. (Leenders forthcoming a)

**Ill-advised Repression in Dar’a?**

This brings me to the --once again alleged-- stupidity of the regime in responding to the early risers in Dar’a at the end of March 2011. A common argument in this context has been: ‘If the regime hadn’t responded with so much brutal force to relatively small scale protests informed by initially modest demands for reform, it wouldn’t have brought on itself the ordeal that ensued.’ Indeed, regime repression turned out to ignite and radicalize further protests. But even those studying the nexus between repression and mobilization (Davenport, Johnston and Mueller 2004, Koopmans 2007, Earl 2011, Pierskalla 2010) have rarely produced a clear-cut and persuasive explanation why and how, and under what conditions, repression kills mobilization and when it inflames or intensifies mobilization. As it turned out, the people of Dar’a framed regime violence as adding insult to the injury suffered by the arrest of two women and 15 school children earlier, which caused them to discount fears over repression by attempts to restore their dignity. (Leenders forthcoming b) That could hardly have been foreseen by anyone; not by those studying the effects of repression on mobilization, and not by the regime.

What is more, and as game theorists tell us (Kricheli, Livne and Magaloni 2011), mobilization in heavily repressive environments is rare, primarily so because activists have no clue about the preferences of others and because they have no information about the level of shared willingness to take significant risks by going into the streets. Yet when mobilization under these conditions does somehow occur, these theorists argue, it sends important signals and
information to others in their decision to join the movement. Thus, mobilization in strictly authoritarian contexts is rare, but when it does occur it is much more likely to spread and multiply – it quickly gains critical mass. From this perspective, it made perfect sense to ruthlessly clamp down on the early protests. That this policy of repression did not have the desired result has more to do with the remarkable and networked resources and capabilities of the protestors than with a presumed miscalculation of the regime.

**Countering Protest Diffusion**

The regime then stood accused of having no coherent response to the rapidly spreading protests and of being captured by its tunnel vision and its track record of naked --indeed stupid-- repression. But until the siege of Dar’a in April, and given Syria’s fragmented landscape of prevailing local, regional and transnational identities, chances were that events in Dar’a were going to be perceived as an ultimately local affair of limited nation-wide significance. Indeed, even elite activists in Damascus initially were doubtful whether Dar’a could be a sufficient trigger for nation-wide mobilization. The regime clearly hoped to capitalize on this. It portrayed the protests as expressing merely local grievances, allowed MPs from the area to in Parliament underscore protestors’ Hawrani identity, and it initiated a “national dialogue” at municipal level (SANA 21 September 2011), culminating in proposed reforms of local governance and, in December 2011, local elections. (Syria Report 28 November 2011) Meanwhile the regime erected checkpoints throughout the country, as if to physically underscore the nation’s fragmentation and to cripple mobilization. From this perspective, the regime came across as responsive, in its own and insufficient ways. Evidently, the regime’s attempt to contain the protests locally failed; but not because it was unresponsive. It failed because protestors turned sustained geographical cross-referencing into a major tool of mobilization, which quickly lifted Dar’a out of its perceived marginality to the country as a whole. (Leenders forthcoming a)

From a regime’s perspective brutal force against protestors while mobilization spread throughout the country may even be argued to have paid off. It failed to fully crush protest diffusion but it certainly contributed to the militarization of anti-regime mobilization, markedly so since the summer of 2011. The regime in this context may have reasoned that

---

5 See: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7VPxcgR_zE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7VPxcgR_zE)

this, in turn, would transform the confrontation between the regime and protestors to a game wherein the regime stands better chances to win or survive. Indeed, the military standoff that ensued, and which lasts until today, seems to contain much less prospects for regime change than the peaceful and popularly driven protests that challenged the regime in the first few months of the uprising. This is especially so because, to date, no significant foreign support materialized that could have tipped the balance in the rebels’ favour. Predictably, the more militarized the Syrian uprising became, the more prominence was gained by Jihadist fighters, if only because they were fully motivated and better equipped to engage the regime militarily.

Of course, this was exactly the kind of opposition that the regime had imagined to be countering in its justifications for stamping out overwhelmingly peaceful mobilization at the onset of the uprising.

**Taking on Illusive Networks of Protest**

Very quickly the regime seems to have figured out that protestors proved to be illusive and persistent largely because they drew on clan-based or tribal solidarity networks. (Leenders forthcoming b, O’Leary and Heras 2012) In many ways that proved to be a serious obstacle for security forces and the Mukhabarat in quelling the protests, if only because their intelligence on such clan-based networks appeared limited. Hence security forces arrested en masse members of the Abu Zeid clan in Dar’a instead of taking out the more active or key mobilizers among them. (Al-Hayat 16 August 2011) The regime then responded by courting leaders and heads of clans and tribes throughout the country. (SANA 24 August 2011, al-Manar 28 September 2011) This approach ultimately had only limited success, but it suggests that the regime was reading the uprising correctly, and it reacted accordingly. Similarly, the regime appears to have understood that the illusive networks enabling and fuelling mobilization to an important degree centred around crossborder movements and (petty) crime, as the latter provided the opposition with key resources and social capital to withstand the regime’s onslaught. (Leenders forthcoming b) In view of that, the regime launched a campaign branding protestors as “smugglers” (Tishrin, 8 April 2011), sending its own unsavoury characters to infiltrate these networks (likely former inmates who were conditionally released), and shutting the borders for weeks on end. These efforts did not put an end to the protests, but the regime largely managed to prevent that a clear and strong leadership emerged from these loose networks that could have translated mass mobilization into irresistible pressures on the regime to resign to a transition process out of power. That, in
turn, prompted a lasting rift between, on the one hand, local protestors and activists and, on the other hand, expatriate Syrians who scrambled to claim ownership of the ‘revolution’, such as via the ill-fated Syrian National Council (SNC) established in October 2011. In an ironic twist of logic, it is against this background that the SNC eventually stood accused of being ‘out of touch’ with events and actors on the ground as foreign powers, including the U.S., looked in vain for more effective and authentic partners among Syria’s revolutionaries.7

Socio-Economic Response

Syria watchers commonly blame the uprising on the regime having abandoned its populist social contract whose former beneficiaries – and hence regime constituencies – felt increasingly marginalized by warped or selective economic reforms and the rampant cronyism that accompanied them. (Hinnebusch 2012, Donati 2012, Yazji 2012) With increased poverty and socio-economic inequality, “something had to give” – as one scholar (Haddad 2012) put it. That may or may not turn out to be a persuasive or sufficient explanation, but an impressive array of regime measures throughout the uprising suggests that its own analysis is close to this academic consensus. Since the beginning of the uprising the following measures have been taken in this respect: salaries of public servants were raised, irregular staff at public institutions were given a fixed contract, a large number of young Syrians were given public service employment, cuts in subsidies on fuel were reversed, consumer taxes were lowered, farmers’ and manufacturers state debts were waived, cotton growers received higher prices for their produce, and the amount of money needed to buy oneself out of military service was lowered. (Syria Report various issues) In addition, monetary policies aimed at containing inflation and a collapse of the Syrian Pound, while cuts in taxes and fees – in addition to a temporary ban on sheep exports – kept food prices from rising excessively. Indeed, as if the regime has been reading Asef Bayat’s book (2010) on “non-movements” sprawling in “informal communities” or slums as proto-mobilizers, the Syrian regime started surveying slums, or “irregular neighbourhoods”, while releasing funds and issuing tenders to ‘rebuild’ or ‘improve’ – and hence control – them. The regime also announced plans to build 50,000 low-cost housing units in a bid to allow for affordable

7 “This cannot be an opposition represented by people who have many good attributes, but have in many instances not been in Syria for 20, 30 or 40 years. [...] There has to be a representation of those who are on the front lines fighting and dying today.” U.S. Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton at a press conference, cited by CNN 31 October 2012.
housing (SANA 18 July 2011); access to which undoubtedly will be premised on regime loyalty, if indeed these plans ever materialize.

**Media Policies**

The regime’s media policies have equally been written off as a dismal failure, and have been viewed as more proof of its inertia and lack of ingenuity. Certainly, the regime’s media outlets, whether state-owned media outlets or its ‘private’ mouthpieces such as ad-Dunya television and the daily newspaper al-Watan, have been no match to the increasingly sophisticated use by protestors of social media and the astounding proliferation of ‘citizen’s journalism’ ever since the first days of the uprising. At times the regime’s media reporting bordered on the ridiculous and can be safely assumed to even have undermined its cause. For instance, ad-Dunya TV (9 September 2011) alleged that foreign media erected replicas of Syrian cities and towns in Qatar, home of Al-Jazeera, to stage demonstrations that, it claimed, never occurred. Yet otherwise the regime’s efforts to counter or dilute the reach and impact of protestors’ media campaigns are tangible, and from a regime’s perspective have had some success. The establishment of the Syrian “Electronic Army” is only the best known regime answer to social media activism. Hailed by Bashar in a speech in June 2011, it specializes in eavesdropping social media, hacking and phishing. Yet perhaps more importantly, stirring doubt about the authenticity and reliability of protestors’ reports has been key to the regime’s media response. Thus, the regime was quick to launch a weekly television series, “Lies of the Opposition”, to claim in often excruciating detail that opposition activists, in collaboration with international and Arab media outlets, doctored and manipulated YouTube footage to falsely back their circumspect agendas and conceal their violent methods. In addition, security forces uploaded their own footage, for instance following their attack on Dara’s ‘Umari mosque in April 2011, perhaps to parade their trophies, to show ‘evidence’ of activists’ arms storages, or to deter activists hoping to follow Dara’s example of protest. On other occasions, Syrian state television even appeared to deliberately mimic the often-poor quality of activists’ YouTube footage, for instance by in August 2011 broadcasting clips from Hama that, from shaky and upside down angles, showed alleged terrorists emptying their firearms

---

8 The item was uploaded here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=0xO-qhB1uzg
9 Speech by Bashar al-Assad at Damascus University, 20 June 2011. At http://www.presidentassad.net/SPEECHES/Al_Assad_Speeches_2011/Bashar_Al_Assad_2011_Damascus_University_Speech.htm
10 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4qk3GCOUYo
on civilians. On top of this, the Syrian regime was the source of clearly doctored footage uploaded in order to stir doubts about the authenticity of the opposition’s digitalized media campaign. (Author’s interview with staff member of BBC-User Generated Content Unit, 6 October 2011) Muddling the situation even further, Syrian army soldiers were alleged to have staged their own (faked) atrocities in order to sell their clips to mainly Arab satellite television stations that pay for exclusive footage. (Ibid., author’s interview with Syrian human rights activist Rami Abdul-Rahman, 7 October 2011) All these practices, next to the regime’s refusal to allow international journalists to report freely from the country, have undermined the ability of mobilizers to effectively transmit their messages to foreign audiences as doubts set in about the authenticity and reliability of their social media messages. Most international media outlets responded by adding disclaimers when airing Syrian activists’ footage, stressing that these could not be independently verified. Meanwhile, some ‘embedded’ foreign journalists, including Rainer Hermann of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (7 and 13 June 2012) and Robert Fisk of the UK Independent newspaper (26 August 2012), produced stories that appear to back the regime’s narrative on the uprising as, respectively, driven by sectarian zeal, armed to the teeth from the onset, and dominated by terrorist jihadists. The upshot has been that most international media --always searching for ‘balanced’ reporting even if an equilibrium is in short supply-- became suspicious of protestors’ stories coming from the uprising while some settled for a narrative of Syria as “a land of confusion, where the truth is elusive, undefined, impossible to verify, and impossible to know.” (Hanano 2011) The regime, in short, made some important progress in creating a virtual version of the proverbial fog of war.

Toward domestic audiences the regime also appeared to display some degree of tactical ingenuity, even when its official media failed to convince. Following a few public responses to the uprising, Bashar turned silent, no longer or much less frequently addressing the nation – a trend more or less upheld until today. To some activists this signified his being ‘out of touch’ with developments. Yet speaking in public contains some real risks for an authoritarian leader, not in the least because the very event and contents of what is being uttered can be used against him, quite literally. Thus, whenever Bashar spoke, protestors rallied in response and thereby addressed an otherwise challenging coordination problem in getting a critical

---

11 YouTube footage of this Syrian news item was uploaded at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzqboPoxq5A&feature=player_embedded#t=1s but no longer appears to be available.
mass onto the streets; they simply had to mobilize when the regime spoke, and be assured that others joined them. When Bashar soon largely refrained from holding public speeches or giving lengthy comments on the uprising, mobilizers were left to themselves to find alternative ways of coordination amidst security forces’ onslaught.

Sowing Sectarian and Ethnic Divisions

The regime managed to help bring about or even engineer, in social movement theory parlance, a “frame transformation” (Noakes and Johnston 2005: 12) of the mobilizers. Its tactics in this context included violence, at times of atrocious levels, but they stand out for their clever play on perceptions and raw fears. Many protestors had painstaking strived to ensure that their uprising and demands were divorced from sectarian and ethnic considerations while proclaiming a new and unified Syria. Yet the regime invented, built, encouraged and manipulated sectarian and ethnic divisions that dramatically changed the uprising’s dynamics. The regime’s narrative of a ‘terrorist ‘jihadist’ plot may initially have lacked credibility, it did point up to the fact that those mobilizing were predominantly Sunni Muslim. Sectarian sentiments flared up further as the regime resorted to increasingly violent methods. For instance, pro-regime militias, together with the Syrian armed forces, engaged in sectarian-motivated killings, including the Hula and Qubayr massacre in May and June 2012. (UN Human Rights Council 16 August 2012, BBC 9 June 2012) This heightened sectarian insecurities on all sides and solicited defensive communal reactions. Meanwhile, the regime made concessions to the Kurdish community, first by granting citizenship to stateless Kurds, and then by allowing the PKK-aligned PYD party to effectively control parts of Kurdish-majority areas in the northeast of the country. (Sidki 2012) The outcome of all these steps has been to tie minority groups to the regime, to further undermine and discredit attempts to form an effective revolutionary leadership representative of all communities, to sever ties between the Kurdish community and the uprising, and to install fears among many Syrians for their fates in a post-regime era.

‘Learning’ From Friend and Foe

By closely watching regional and international politics involving the varying fates of the Arab uprisings elsewhere, the regime appears to have furthered its capacity to learn from and adapt to the rapidly emerging challenges that the mass uprising posed for regime survival. This top
down process of authoritarian learning and adaptation has been visible in the way the Syrian regime watched how uprisings unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, took stock of international reactions to these events and, in response, developed strategies that it perceived, whether rightly or wrongly, to maximize its probabilities of surviving this wave of popular mobilization and living to rule another day. Strikingly, all these developments abroad received close attention from the regime’s media outlets, thereby suggesting a keen interest among regime supporters in the implications and lessons of regional events for Syria. For instance, the regime took measures to prevent a “Benghazi scenario” in Syria, whereby an enclave in the country near international borders serves as a launching pad and logistical hub for the opposition. The regime also prevented undue international media attention to protestors seizing and occupying cities’ public squares as occurred in Egypt. Indeed, Syrian activists complained that their inability to meet the aesthetic standards of their Egyptian counterparts in this respect caused them to receive much less attention internationally. (Al Attar 2011) Even more important was the Syrian regime’s resorting to a remarkable gradual dosing of lethal violence and repression, as if to figure out the impact it may have on outsiders’ tolerance levels that, if overstepped, may have given a momentum to those pressing for international intervention, as happened in the case of Libya in March 2011. For example, only when the Arab League and its observers had plainly illustrated the difficulties any attempt at international intervention would face, the regime began using its air force; unlike Qadhafi who from the beginning employed his entire military force against his uprising, thereby giving credence to arguments for NATO to take out his regime. 12 When the Arab League pulled out its observers in Syria in January 2012, the estimated daily death toll caused by regime violence rose considerably, quickly exceeding 100. 13 This scenario was repeated in August 2012 when Kofi Annan resigned after his unsuccessful efforts to mediate for the UN in the Syrian conflict. The daily death toll rose to over 200. Meanwhile the regime gave in no inch with regard to suggestions for its negotiated exit, as if it had closely studied the fate of Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah al-Saleh. The latter had engaged in such a process in the apparent hope to capitalize on the dampening effect on revolutionary energies, to recalibrate his position, and prolong his stay in power. (International Crisis Group 2011: 2, Durac 2012: 166) The Syrian regime’s refusal to engage in any real dialogue aimed at a similar transition may

12 Riyad Hijab, the Syrian prime minister who defected in August 2012, put it as follows: “Bashar used to be scared of the international community – he was really worried that they would impose a no-fly zone over Syria. […] But then he tested the waters, and pushed and pushed and nothing happened. Now he can run air strikes and drop cluster bombs on his own population. (The Telegraph 8 November 2012)

also have helped in preventing mass defections of high regime officials and senior officers from exceeding critical levels, as the impression prevailed that Bashar would not abandon his agents of repression.\(^\text{14}\)

Regime ‘learning’ also occurred as it received advice from its allies, primarily Iran and Hizbullah, on how to deal with the uprising and the insurgency. The head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad-Ali Jafari, acknowledged that his force was “giving intellectual and advisory help and exchanging experiences” with the Syrian regime. (Financial Times 16 September 2012) It is unclear what this advice exactly consisted of. Yet next to offering expertise on Iran’s military hardware supplies to Syria (UN Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1929 (2010) 12 June 2012), Iran may have introduced improvised and highly lethal weaponry to the Syrian regime, including the notorious ‘barrel bomb’, thrown indiscriminately onto residential areas from helicopters and first used in August 2012, and so-called ‘improved rocket-assisted munition’ (IRAM), or ‘lob bombs’. The Iran-supported Kata’ib Hizbullah, an Iraqi Shiite fighting group, is known to have perfected and used IRAMs, and may have initiated them to Syria.\(^\text{15}\) One may also speculate that the Iranian regime’s suppression of the Green Movement was the main “experience” Jafari said he had shared with his Syrian counterparts. Although no evidence exists of direct links, there are some striking echoes in Syrian regime tactics of some of the methods used by the Iranian regime against protestors in 2009. The Syrian regime’s use of para- or non-statal militias, or Shabiha, in infiltrating and obstructing demonstrations, shows some similarities with the tactics used by the Iranian Basij militia. Syria’s “Electronic Army” is likely to have been modeled on Iran’s “Web Crime Unit” set up in 2009 to counter Iranian internet activists. (The Guardian 15 November 2011) The Syrian regime’s courting of Christian community leaders and its implicit deal-making with Kurdish groups resemble the Iranian regime’s advantage in 2009 from a disconnect between minority groups, including the Kurds, in the provinces and the Green Movement. (Tezcür 2012) However, it may equally pay off to learn from less friendly sources, or even one’s enemies. Syrian regime agents reportedly flushed the country’s black arms markets with cheap but manipulated ammunition that explodes in a

\(^{14}\) On reported regime defections see: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections/2012730840348158.html

\(^{15}\) The possibility of copycat effects without Iran’s or others’ involvement can, of course, not be ruled out. “At War” blog New York Times 18 October 2012. http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/18/syrian-forces-improvised-arms-desperate-measures-or-deliberate-aid/
gunman’s hands when fired; a tactic also used by U.S. forces in counter-insurgency operations in Iraq.\textsuperscript{16}

The Regime’s ‘Regional Card’

Despite the ruthlessness the regime exposed otherwise, it is noteworthy that thus far it has refrained from actively and aggressively using its ‘regional card’ in promoting or facilitating a spillover of the Syrian conflict to neighbouring countries as the ultimate price for its downfall. One could view such relative restraint as once more pointing up to a degree of savviness on the Syrian regime’s part that is rarely acknowledged by its opponents. There have been ample reminders that a regional spillover is conceivable, as Lebanese critics of the Syrian regime were assassinated, pro-regime combatants clashed with anti-regime forces primarily in Tripoli, and regime agents reportedly infiltrated Syrian refugees arriving in Jordan. More generally, the regime’s sectarian tactics coincide with and deepen perceived regional fold lines between Sunnis and Shiites. Against this background, the Syrian crisis inexorably gains regional dimensions; a perspective readily embraced by Iraqi, Saudi and Bahraini leaders. To those still not getting the message, Bashar said that Western action against his regime would “cause an earthquake” that would “burn the whole region”. (Daily Telegraph 29 October 2011) Yet the much feared regional war over Syria is still to commence. It is as if the regime realized that when or if the regional fallout materializes unambiguously it will loose its effect of deterrence and, hence, stop to impose the relative restraint on those considering to step up their support to the rebels or intervene otherwise. A similar mechanism of deterring ambiguity is at play when it comes to the regime’s arsenal of chemical weapons. It only took the regime one press conference to deny that it would use such weapons “against the Syrian people” to have the issue back on the mental maps of those external powers pondering about their next steps. (New York Times 23 July 2012) Meanwhile, rapidly increasing numbers of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, and the burden they place on local economies and host countries’ stability, form a reminder of the regional costs of the regime’s endgame, would indeed the conflict ever reach that stage.

Syria’s Counter Revolution: Lessons and Implications

Counter revolutionary repression in Syria, in the shape of the regime’s diverse responses and adaptations to the uprising, has not been a stupid thing. Analyses portraying the regime as an anachronistic, disconnected and brainless entity that is bound to whither under the many pressures it is facing are inadequate. This certainly is not to suggest that the regime has not suffered major setbacks and losses of which some could have been prevented or lessened if its responses had been different. Among these serious setbacks feature significant loss of territory to rebel forces, the estrangement of many among its former domestic constituencies and its key ally Hamas, embarrassing defections of government officials and officers, and the rupture in ties with most Arab countries and its former ally Turkey, and --judging from a damning UN General Assembly resolution in August 2012— a degree of international isolation surpassing that of South Africa during apartheid. Neither are the regime’s counter revolutionary tactics to be viewed as originating from a master plan drawn up at the onset of the uprising and purposively implemented.\(^{17}\) Trial and error better describes the regime’s responses and how these came about. Without denying ultimate culpability of Syria’s top leadership, much of the regime’s responses and policies appear to have originated in varied and often contradictory impulses and actions of multiple regime incumbents, even when the uprising seems to have narrowed their circles. This suggests a degree of collectively generated ad hoc adaptiveness that is less susceptible to the risks of tunnel-vision and fatal miscalculations typically associated with autocratic discretion. (Sassoon 2012)

The Syrian regime’s response to the uprising relied heavily on violence, and in that way seems to vindicate renewed assessments that coercion is pivotal to understanding the durability of Arab authoritarianism. (Bellin 2012) Yet it should be stressed that the regime’s use of violence is far from ‘irrational’ or necessarily counterproductive or self-defeating, even if it contributed to the onset of anti-regime mobilization. Steadily growing and now steep regime violence generated at least two for the regime favourable effects. It has effectively removed hopes for a negotiated exit of the regime, and hence increased its chances for survival. Increased regime violence also helped boost Jihadist fighters and, albeit to a much more modest extent, al-Qaeda. This fed into the regime’s rhetoric of the uprising being a ‘terrorist plot’; a narrative that not so long ago sounded laughingly inadequate. Nonetheless,

\(^{17}\) A suggestion to this effect was made in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Siyyasa (17 June 2011) as it published what it claimed were leaked Syrian Mukhabarat documents revealing a grand plan to suppress the uprising. The documents are unlikely to be authentic even if they demonstrated foresight. See http://www.alseyassah.com/AtricleView/tabid/59/smid/438/ArticleID/144503/reftab/36/Default.aspx
the regime’s responses to the uprising cannot be equaled with mere violence. Non-coercive responses were as numerous and articulated, and suggest that the regime read the uprising correctly. Regime violence was also made to serve goals other than mere subjugation, as was shown with regard to the regime’s successful campaign to place sectarianism at the heart of the conflict and cause a transformation of the opposition’s framing. The regime’s policies in this respect may have had mixed results. Yet they do testify for its responsiveness and adaptiveness. This, in turn, suggests that approaches to Middle East regime resilience, ‘authoritarian upgrading’ and –learning\textsuperscript{18} --a literature reaching its height just prior to the Arab Spring-- have been written off far too soon. (Hudson 2011, Gregory Gause III 2011a & b)

Analytical appreciation of the regime’s responsiveness and its adaptations to the uprising clearly has implications for what can be expected next, and what space for manoeuvre is left to engage the regime for it to leave and/or stop its onslaught against its own population. The regime’s adaptability, and its keen efforts to ‘learn’, by trial and error, in addition to its willingness to unleash massive violence all suggest that it is not contemplating a future for Syria wherein it no longer plays a dominant role. Even if it would come to a scenario of state collapse (rendered, for example, by fiscal insolvency), regime incumbents and their agents of repression will remain determined to hang on, and are likely to adapt and bank on their comparative advantage in violence. With the Shabiha phenomenon, they would not even have to depend on the state to pursue such a strategy.\textsuperscript{19} Such a scenario would transform Syria’s current condition, which can be characterized as lingering somewhere between a situation of “state-led massacres” and “civil war”, decisively into that of an “intercommunal war” wherein regime incumbents will be a potent force but among others, and likely reach neighbouring countries.\textsuperscript{20} In short, and when push comes to shove, regime incumbents’ motto would not be one of ‘after me the deluge’ but rather ‘with me the deluge’.

Until very recently international initiatives vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis –imposing sanctions, providing ‘non-lethal aid’ to the rebels, and the cease-fire/ transition approaches by the Arab


\textsuperscript{19} On the Shabiha’s extra-state generation of revenues, see Friberg Lyme (2012).

\textsuperscript{20} On the distinction between “state-led massacres” (disproportionate violence by the state against non-state actors), “civil war” (armed conflict between state and non-state forces) and “intercommunal war” (combat between / among two or more non-state entities) see Correlates of War Codebook at http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/WarData_NEW/Intra-StateWars_Codebook.pdf
League and the UN—have been premised on two highly questionable assumptions: that the regime would eventually succumb to pressures or collapse by itself, and; that it can be pushed into cooperation in a process aimed at its own exit. Yet the regimes’ record of defiant adaptation, determination to survive, and its willingness to apply brutal force is entirely at odds with such suppositions. The regime, in fact, stands to gain from an unrelenting approach, especially the one pursued by UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, wherein regime compliance is sought by persuasion and impartiality. As Bashar himself described his approach to the UN, “It’s a game you play. [...] It doesn’t mean you believe in it.” (ABC News 7 December 2011)

The regime in this respect appears to believe that it will have a longer breath than any outsider and outlive the barrage of pressures and sanctions currently imposed on it. That belief is not without good reason, as the regime experienced mounting and then waning foreign pressures ever since, in May 2003, former U.S Secretary of State Colin Powel went to Damascus to present his long list of demands. What is still missing today is a credible threat that could make diplomacy effective: an armed opposition, acting under civilian control, with accountability and a command structure appropriate to an insurgency. It will have to be via managing militarization (Heydemann 2012, Heydemann and Leenders 2012b), and hence by supporting armed groups; not by putting one's faith in a negotiated settlement unlikely to be reached, even less likely to hold, and certain to allow the Syrian regime to survive and continue its massacres. With the establishment in November 2012 of the new Syrian National Coalition, this inescapable conclusion may finally have found a platform that, at least hypothetically, could carry this process. One can only hope that it will not be too late, as Jihadist fighters enjoyed a head start –making the management of militarization more difficult-- and as the regime braces itself for yet another round of defiant adaptation now grounded in ample experience.

References


Pratt, Nicola Christine. 2007. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World.* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers)


