

Alone at the Top: Bashar al-Assad and the Struggle for Syria

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Introduction

On March 18, 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria. Overnight, the nation was engulfed in flames heralding the outbreak of the Syrian revolution destined – so it seemed at the time – to topple the Syrian regime within the next few days, or at most, weeks. But what seemed to present as a “lightning revolution” soon turned into a prolonged, blood-soaked, and above all inconclusive war. Faced with a challenge to its stability and very existence, the Baathist regime headed by Bashar al-Assad has demonstrated unity and strength that have surprised the many who thought it was in its final throes. This unity and strength are evidence of the robust nature of the regime and its pillars of support, namely, the party and the army, as well as the regime’s base of support among different segments of Syrian society, especially its minorities – Alawites, Druze, and Christians – and the Sunni middle class in the large cities.¹

But above and beyond this, the fact that the Syrian regime has managed to stay on its feet for the last two and a half years testifies to the personal strength of Bashar al-Assad, who stands alone at the apex of the regime. Bashar’s conduct in August 2013 vis-à-vis the United States in the crisis resulting from the regime’s use of chemical weapons against the rebels is a fine example of the regime’s art of survival: using an iron fist domestically while showing restraint to the world – even a certain acknowledgement of guilt – as long as this serves the viability of the regime in Damascus. Bashar has managed to survive despite the many premature eulogies for him, to the point where many are now starting

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to wonder if he will not emerge victorious from this fight to the death after all.

Over the war's many long months, Bashar proved fairly surprising, not only among those who followed him and his regime blindly and chose to see him as a Westerner, or at most, an enlightened despot determined to bring progress and prosperity to his backward nation. Before their eyes, an ostensibly refined man of the West turned into a mass murderer, turning his military, armed with chemical weapons and surface-to-surface missiles, on his own people. Rather, the real surprise was Bashar's personal show of determination and strength when challenged, and above all, his decision to fight for his life and the life of his regime.

Thus Bashar emerges from the quagmire of Syria's civil war as the man who carries the entire weight of the Syrian regime on his back, who stands starkly alone at the top, and who makes fateful decisions affecting him and Syria by himself. Bashar is surrounded mostly by army and security personnel whom he promoted to their current positions against the backdrop of the upheaval; they consequently depend on him and derive their power and status from him alone. It seems that never before has the identification of the Syrian regime with its leader been as pronounced as it is today. Bashar is responsible for dragging Syria into this devastating civil war, but he may well be the one who will also drag it out – or as much of it as possible – if he manages to defeat his opponents.

Bashar's Rise to Power

There was nothing in Bashar al-Assad's training as a political leader that could have prepared him for the challenge he would face when the Syrian riots broke out in March 2011. In fact, there was nothing in Bashar's upbringing and education that prepared him for the job of president he assumed upon his father's death in June 2000. Until then he had dedicated the better part of his life to ophthalmology, the profession of his dreams. He attended medical school at Damascus University for four years, followed by a year-long ophthalmology internship at the Western Eye Hospital in London.²

It seems that in thinking about the battlefield against the rebels, Bashar brought something of his medical studies, though not necessarily from ophthalmology, rather from the field of surgery. In his speech to the Syrian parliament on June 4, 2012, he justified his use of force against the rebels by saying, "What sane person likes bloodshed? No one, obviously.

But when a surgeon goes into the operating room, he is often forced to open a bleeding wound, even amputate, cut, or extract an organ from the body. In those cases, do we claim the surgeon's hands are stained with blood? Or do we congratulate him on having saved the patient's life?"³

In his first years as president, Bashar was seen as an amorphous leader, almost a puppet: a wan, spineless figure lacking a powerbase and support, totally at the mercy of the regime's strongmen – the old guard left over from the regime of his father, Hafez al-Assad. Furthermore, Bashar found himself in a frontal confrontation with the American administration and isolated regionally and internationally because of his country's alliances with Iran and Hizbollah. Over the years, however, he managed to consolidate his standing, both domestically and internationally. In the summer of 2010, before the outbreak of the revolt, it seemed that Bashar had matured and amassed not only knowledge and experience but also political clout. His position and the status of his regime seemed to be at their peak.⁴

A look at the people at the top before the unrest started and a review of Bashar's conduct in the first decade of his tenure show that the upper Syrian echelon was composed of people reflecting the nature and essence of the Syrian regime, i.e., the personal, family, tribal, and communal-based regime that relied on the support of the Baath Party and especially on the army and security forces. Over the course of Bashar's first decade as president, however, the old guard that controlled Syria when he first assumed the position completely vanished, including Vice President Abed al-Halim Haddam and perpetual Defense Minister Mustafa Tallas. Replacing the old guard were power groups and people promoted or appointed by Bashar out of the blue and therefore perforce deriving their power and authority solely from him, among them: Abdullah al-Dardari, deputy prime minister for economic matters, who has dominated the management of the country's social and economic issues; Vice President Farouq al-Shara and Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem who have squabbled over the management of Syria's foreign affairs; and a long line of military personnel holding key positions in the army and security establishment.⁵

Also noteworthy is the restraint Bashar exhibited vis-à-vis Israel, for example after the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. His conduct earned him much credit in Israel and the West, and many analysts hurried to laud him as a mature, responsible leader, possessing

self-control and judiciousness not shared by many of the region's other leaders. This represented an about-face in the attitude of regional leaders toward Bashar, whom they had viewed as a young, inexperienced, often impulsive leader who acted without due calculation or judgment when he assumed the presidency.⁶

All this changed when the war broke out, which came as a surprise to Bashar, mostly because he was not aware of the vast gap between the regime and its former supportive masses based chiefly in the rural periphery. But despite the surprise at the riots, Bashar displayed steely resolve and embarked on an all-out war against his opponents, refusing to consider any compromise or concession liable to send him down the slippery slope to his regime's collapse. His determination has been distinguished by several features.

First, Bashar has repeatedly insisted that the majority of the Syrian people are squarely behind him and that his opponents are an insignificant minority without any real presence in the population at large. He has chosen to see the revolution as a conspiracy hatched by foreign interests, the result of a desire of America, Israel's lackey, to splinter the unity of the Arab world. This conspiracy has been helped by radical Islam in Syria and elsewhere – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – which has always viewed the secularism represented by the Baath Party as an abomination.⁷

Second, Bashar has viewed force as the only way to overcome the crisis and calm the nation. This outlook is presumably part of his father's heritage, seeing the conflict as a new version of the 1976-82 war against the regime, then launched as an Islamic rebellion. But the use of force has only escalated the crisis and caused ever-worsening brutality among the opposition and among the regime, which has in practice embarked on a war of eradication of the rebels.

Third, Bashar has tried to evade personal responsibility for events in Syria. At least at the start of the unrest, he frequently denied the claim that the repression and killing of demonstrators were the result of a decision of the upper political echelon, and he insisted that they were certainly not his own orders, rather a function of the inexperience and incompetence of the security forces and the police. He subsequently denied the massacres and the regime's use of chemical weapons.

An excellent example was the December 7, 2011 interview with Barbara Walters of ABC. Walters tried to corner Bashar with difficult detailed

questions about acts of repression and killings reported by Western media, but the President was steadfast in his answers. In response to Walters' question, "Do you think that your forces cracked down too hard?" Bashar answered: "They are not my forces, they are military forces [that] belong to the government...there is a difference between having [a] policy to crack down and between having some mistakes committed by some officials, there is a big difference." Walters' rejoinder "OK, but you are the government" was rebuffed with: "I don't own them. I am [the] president. I don't own the country, so they are not my forces." Walters persisted: "No, but you have to give the order." Bashar responded: "We don't kill our people, nobody kill[s]. No government in the world kill[s] its people, unless it's led by [a] crazy person."⁸

Initially Bashar's claims of innocence were accepted. When the riots broke out, a common assumption was that Bashar was different from the other Arab leaders because his goal was to introduce reforms and change a complex, sensitive reality, and that furthermore Bashar was not personally responsible for the repression because he wasn't a detail-oriented person and/or was unable to control his family members and close allies. Consider, for example, then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's statement that senators returning from a visit to Syria believed Bashar was a reformer.⁹ In June 2011, before the volte-face in his policy, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that the root of evil in Syria was Bashar's brother Maher rather than the Syrian President himself.¹⁰ Yet as the crisis deepened, it became increasingly impossible to separate Bashar from his allies and subordinates and, as was the case in similar situations in the first decade of his presidency in a variety of areas, it became progressively clearer that the Syrian President was directly responsible for the use of brutal force against his opponents. He was nothing like the detached spectator he purported to be or a reformer hijacked by his closest associates. In this sense, the Syrian Spring has removed the mask from Bashar's face and revealed his true nature – a fitting son following in the footsteps of his father.

Bashar's Fight for Survival

From the moment the revolution began, Bashar became the cement holding the Syrian regime together and the symbol of his regime's fight to survive. The blows inflicted on the regime, such as the elimination of the top army brass in a terrorist attack in Damascus on July 18, 2011,

removed the protective layers enveloping him, and hence the reason for attributing such great importance to Bashar personally. All at once, he became the keystone supporting the entire structure of the regime and linking together the heads of the regime's institutions: the army, the security services, and the senior members of the party.

The changes in the composition and conduct of the Syrian leadership under Assad since the start of the unrest are significant. First of all, the top civilian leadership that rose to prominence during Bashar's first decade as president lost its stature. It remains in the regime's official showcase and no one questions its importance in terms of managing the socioeconomic affairs still functioning in those parts of Syria that are under the regime's control. But its importance to the survival of the regime at a time of a life-or-death fight is minimal. This leadership came from the rural Sunni population, a sector that in the past was one of the regime's fundamental sources of support but ultimately was responsible for taking up the rebel flag. This was true of Adel Safar, prime minister from April 2011 until June 2012, a native of the rural area on the outskirts of Damascus; Riad Hijab, a native of Dir al-Zor, who became the next prime minister and defected in 2012; and Wa'eel Halaki, the prime minister since September 2012, a native of the town Jassam in the Daraa province. They have mostly remained loyal to the Syrian regime. This is also true of Hilal Hilal from Aleppo, who was appointed as deputy secretary general of the Baath Party in June 2013, and Information Minister Omran al-Zouabi, likewise a native of the Daraa province.¹¹

Second, members of the military and security establishment rose to prominence again, starting with Assef Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law, who served as deputy defense minister and was responsible for security in the regime, and after the July 18, 2012 attack, a new top tier emerged, headed by Ali Mamlouk, an Alawite, who heads the National Security Bureau and is in charge of Syria's security services. In the past, the heads of the different security services competed fiercely for prestige and proximity to the President, but they are now firmly under Mamlouk's control. They include Abdel Fattah Qudsieh, Mamlouk's deputy; Rastom Ghazaleh, a Sunni from the Daraa province, head of the political security administration; Mohammad Dib Zeytoun, the head of the general security administration; Rafik Shahada, the head of the army security department; and Jamil Hassan, the head of the air force security administration.¹²

When the riots broke out, the military establishment was headed by Defense Minister Ali Habib, an Alawite born in 1939 in Safita, in the Tartus province. For reasons of health and age, he was replaced in August 2011 by Daoud Rajha, a member of the Greek Orthodox community, born in Damascus in 1947. Rajha was one of the victims of the July 18, 2012 attack, along with fellow members of the crisis management team meeting at the National Security Center. Among the dead, along with Assef Shawkat, were the head of the crisis management team, Hassan Turkmani; and the head of the national security bureau, Hisham Ahtiyar. Interior Minister Muhammad Sha'ar was the only one to survive the blast. After the attack, Chief of Staff Imad Fahd Ghassam Farij, a Sunni born in 1950 in the village of Rahjan in Hama, was promoted to defense minister. His job as chief of staff was assumed by Ali Ayoub, an Alawite from the Latakia province, born in 1952.¹³

Thus, it is this group of generals, headed by Ali Mamlouk, and Defense Minister Fahd Farij, in charge of the army, that is leading the fight over Syria for Bashar. But it is equally clear that this group was appointed by, and therefore draws its power from, Bashar al-Assad himself. In addition, as a complement to the regular army and its elite spearheading forces (such as the Republican Guard division, where Bashar's brother Maher commands one of the brigades, or the Commando Units), the regime has also formed militias, some of which consist entirely of Alawites. The militias, officially known as the Popular Committees or National Defense Forces but also called *shabiha*, are supposed to bolster the military units alongside the combatants sent by Hizbollah and Iraqi volunteers coming at Iran's urging to help Bashar.¹⁴

Third, while Assad family members are not absent from the Bashar's close circle, they do not – just as was the case with Hafez – stand out. Notable exceptions are Maher al-Assad; Rami Makhoul, a cousin and wealthy businessman who helps the regime in the economic sector; and Rami's brother Hafez, an officer in one of the security services.¹⁵

Internal Resolve, External Restraint

Throughout the long crisis, Bashar has demonstrated restraint with regard to his neighbors – Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, which is credited with a host of attacks in Syria. But domestically Bashar has shown forceful resolve. Perhaps unconsciously or unintentionally, and rather the result of the brutalization of the battles, he has turned the war he is waging on

his enemies into a war of extermination, designed to annihilate or exile the rebels and their supporters. It is otherwise impossible to explain the massive use of deadly force – concentrated aerial bombings, concentrated artillery fire, surface-to-surface missile barrages, and use of chemical weapons – against regions populated by rebel supporters or under rebel control. The result of Bashar’s campaign is that four to six million Syrians have become refugees, some of them beyond Syria’s borders. This represents 20-30 percent of the population, comprising Sunnis from the periphery which was the home of the rebels and their primary support base. Bashar might thus win the war over Syria by simply eliminating all the rebels and their supporters.

The crisis that erupted in the summer of 2013 over the use of chemical weapons against regime opponents on August 21 is a good illustration of this dynamic. For a brief moment it seemed that Bashar’s fate was sealed and Washington was determined to act, perhaps even to topple him. But a compromise proposed by Russia and accepted by Bashar rescued him, albeit at the loss of some prestige and worse, the loss of his strategic assets, i.e., the chemical weapons caches. But Bashar, like his father before him, differs from Saddam Hussein who placed an all-or-nothing bet in order to avoid losing face. Thus, Bashar has, at least for now, saved his skin and bought valuable time for his real fight: not against the United States or Israel but against his enemies at home.

Conclusion

The Syrian regime’s success in surviving the revolution is also – and especially – the personal success of Bashar al-Assad. The man is alone at the top of the Syrian regime, with underlings subordinate to him alone. They are not friends or ideological partners of the kind enjoyed by his father; they are simply military functionaries promoted not necessarily by virtue of personal connection or friendship but thanks to having risen through the ranks. Most have no independent source of power, and certainly do not represent a cohesive group. Bashar has shown resilience and personal fortitude as well as lasting power not many believed he possessed. After all, when he assumed the presidency the assertion often made was that he lacked the killer instinct, a necessity for anyone trying to rule Syria. But Bashar has emerged as an icy dictator willing to sacrifice an entire nation for the sake of his own survival.

Notes

- 1 For background on the Syrian revolution, see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2012); David W. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 2 See Eyal Zisser, *Bashar al-Assad: Early Years in Power* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), pp. 13-55.
- 3 For the transcript of Bashar al-Assad's speech, see *al-Thawra*, June 5, 2012. See also the President's website at SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), <http://www.presidentassad.net>.
- 4 See studies written in those years about the Syrian regime, e.g., Fred H. Lawson, ed., *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi, 2009); and Carsten Wieland, *Syria in Bay, Secularism, Islamism and 'Pax Americana'* (London: Hurst, 2008).
- 5 See Zisser, *Bashar al-Assad: Early Years in Power*, pp. 75-80.
- 6 See, e.g., Eyal Zisser, "An Israeli Watershed: Strike on Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2008): 57-62.
- 7 See, e.g., Bashar al-Assad's speeches to the Syrian parliament on March 30, 2011 and June 4, 2012, as well as the interview to the Hizbollah TV network, al-Manar, on March 30, 2013. For the transcripts of the interviews, see the President's website at SANA.
- 8 See interview with Barbara Walters for ABC television, December 7, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/story?id=15099152&singlePage=true>.
- 9 For more on Clinton's statements, see "Interview with Bob Schieffer" on CBS's *Face the Nation*, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/03/159210.htm>, March 27, 2011.
- 10 For more on Erdogan's statements, see Cem Ertur, "Turkey Final Warning to Syria: Tomorrow May be Too Late for reforms," *Zaman*, June 18, 2011.
- 11 The biographies of the Syrian regime's leaders were published by SANA soon after their appointment. See the SANA website, April 2, 2011; June 5, 2012; September 9, 2012; June 3, 2013, www.rtv.gov.sy. For more, see Eyal Zisser, "Can Assad's Syria Survive Revolution?" *Middle East Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2013): 13-21.
- 12 See, e.g., Reuters, "Assad Names New Security Chief after Bombing," July 24, 2012; Ennahar Online, "List of Syrian Officials Affected by Arab Sanctions," December 4, 2011, <http://www.ennaharonline.com/en/international/7826.html>.
- 13 See SANA website, August 5, 2011, and July 19, 2012. See also *al-Jazeera*, July 18 and 19, 2012.
- 14 See more in the survey "Hizbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorist Information Center, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20521/H_062_13_1715496127.pdf. See also "Armed Militias of Alawites Emerging in Syria," September 6, 2012, http://www.albawaba.com/blog_roundup/alawi-militia-syria-440999.
- 15 For more on the Assad family, see "An Update on the Assads' Inner Circle," *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/12/25/world/middleeast.