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Business As Usual in Syria?

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Over a year after Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father as president of Syria, the Ba'thist regime has proven once again that it can best operate as a closed system. The reversals of political and economic liberalization in February and March of 2001 are not the only indicators. Just yesterday, Riad Saif, a two-time independent parliament member and industrialist, was arrested after being "invited" to the ministry of the interior. Long considered one of the most outspoken critics of the Syrian regime, Saif had resumed hosting prohibited civil society forums at his residence the day before. Speaking to the Beirut-based Arabic daily al-Hayat the day before he was arrested, Saif said, "I am practicing my natural right, and providing a service by restoring the democratic spirit and eliminating fear." On September 1, communist leader Riad al-Turk was also arrested, presumably for writing an article critical of the Ba'thist legacy, including the late President Hafiz al-Asad. Despite the apparent promise of a new, younger leadership, the Syrian political and economic spheres seem little changed. More Syrians are becoming more aware of their rights, less fearful and more visibly frustrated and outspoken, but overall it seems to be business as usual in Syria.

With the exception of a freer, though still circumscribed, press, talk of change has not borne much fruit. For example, moves to establish private banking and private universities were announced, but have not yet moved forward. Most such measures, it seems, have been temporarily frozen. Or they await what are called "directives for implementation (ta'limat tanfidhiyya)," a phrase that raises red flags for Syrians since such

Further Info

Riad al-Turk's offending articles (in Arabic) are accessible online at <http://alhayat.sitecopy.com/pages/08/08-09/09P08.pdf> and <http://alhayat.sitecopy.com/pages/08/08-10/10P08.pdf>.

Riad Saif's comments (in Arabic) are accessible online at <http://alhayat.sitecopy.com/pages/09/09-06/06P03.pdf>.

In the fall 2001 issue of Middle East Report, "Shaky Foundations: The US in the Middle East," coming soon, Volker Perthes examines the shifts in Syria's regional policy under Bashar al-Asad.

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"directives" have historically emptied out the reformist content of legislation. Or, as the mantra goes these days: "all depends on the imminent cabinet reshuffle" or "the upcoming Ba'thist National Command Convention," both of which are expected this fall. More discouraging is the fact that any new large-scale economic opportunity -- the cell phone market, for example -- is hijacked by, or handed to, a few people belonging to the age-old regime-business networks.

Syrians may simply smile if asked why reform has been suspended, as if the question is silly. Rivalries between modernizers and conservatives preoccupied the regime even before Hafiz al-Asad's death. The administrative task at hand is enormous, and the government has few skilled cadres to carry it out. Others closer to the regime blame civil society advocates for having overplayed their hand in 2000, and provoking a crackdown. One thing is certain: hope in rapid or fundamental change has visibly diminished among most Syrians. Why did the "modernization project" stall in February 2001? Why is change so difficult for the Syrian regime?

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

A dark cloud obscures internal developments in Syria today. Judging from inconsistent decision-making, alliances and recruitment patterns, several heads of security branches and top army officers -- arguably among the strongest dozen men in Syria -- are themselves at times ambivalent as to which direction they ought to adopt. Recently, the default option has been to shut the doors to liberalization. Syrians tend to attribute more consistency to the modernizing intentions of the President, so they are at a loss to explain his unfriendly words regarding civil society advocates and intellectuals in a February 2001 interview with the Saudi daily al-Sharq al-Awsat. Bashar's words then did not represent the line that he has adopted since August 2000.

Insiders say that six months of positive change after Bashar's takeover was halted by the coercive security apparatus in February. Advocates of reform, they argue, cut too close to the bone for the regime's comfort. The Committees of Civil Society - - which came to spearhead Syria's civil society resurgence -- spoke ill of the previous "stage" (the Hafiz al-Asad era), going so far as to hint at some sort of national betrayal in the deterioration of economic, political and social standards over the past "several decades." Merely a month after the regime granted permission for the first public forum in Damascus in September 2000, dozens of them sprouted up across the country. A subversive civil society resurgence, akin to Latin America's in the early 1980s or Eastern Europe's in the late 1980s, seemed imminent.

But in early 2001, say authoritative sources, a near consensus began to brew among security heads and army generals that the "modernization" project launched after the elder Asad's death

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could be dangerous. The regime began cracking down on civil society forums in February. Thereafter, to hold a forum or a public lecture at one's home, one had to get security clearance. Even the Economic Sciences Association lectures, which have taken place nearly every spring since 1986 and in which economists and intellectuals have criticized and sometimes condemned ministers and high-ranking (non-security) officials, took on a somber and constricted tone this year. The honeymoon seemed to be over.

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS

Every now and then there is a breakthrough, such as the recent remarks of journalist Nizar Nayyoub on the bold Qatari al-Jazeera network. Speaking from Paris, Nayyoub labeled the late Asad as a dictator, and openly accused current top government, army and security officials of corruption, including being paid to allow toxic waste dumping in Syria. A more compelling dissident is Riad al-Turk, whose biting critique of the regime was recently published in al-Hayat.

Al-Turk ran through the gamut of Ba'thist rule's shortcomings: the cult of personality associated with the late president, the security services' role in purging the ruling party of progressive voices, the "mistaken" entry into Lebanon in 1976, the regime's looting of public resources for three decades, stagnation in the name of stability, and hereditary succession. To break what he described as the current "balance of weakness" between state and opposition, al-Turk called for the incorporation of other social forces as opposed to relying on the failed approach of "revolution from above." He wondered why it is that forces within the regime are not able to achieve the reforms they desire: "Can we say that the president assumed a position, but not authority?" Al-Turk's salvo was quite a shock, even to other outspoken critics. Regime "tolerance" of this dissent lasted three weeks. Al-Turk, previously imprisoned for 17 years, was rearrested September 1 on charges of defaming the late president and the regime. An arrest warrant charging Nayyoub with inciting sectarian tensions is awaiting him, if he returns from Paris. Nayyoub, released in May after spending nine years in prison, wisely postponed his trip back to Damascus. These arrests highlight the two most sensitive red lines in Syria's contemporary history: sect and president. Al-Turk is awaiting trial "according to the constitution."

Absent a broader opening for free expression that is consistently backed by the government, Syrians describe similar "outbursts" as inconsequential. The immediate arrest of MP Ma'moun al-Homsi, who went on hunger strike in early August in his downtown Damascus office to demand the return of civil liberties and other rights, is more like the treatment that one gets for raising one's voice at present. Despite the tax fraud charges

against al-Homsi, to arrest a parliamentarian without due process speaks louder than the words that daily affirm the regime's professed commitment to reform.

STABILITY OR STAGNATION?

Syria is a changed place today, compared to just a few years ago. Exposure of Syrians to the outside world through satellite dishes, even in the most remote of towns, and to new patterns of consumption have raised their expectations of what the government ought to provide. An all-time high unemployment rate (between 20 and 25 percent depending on the source) only reinforces these expectations. The entire middle class, shrunken as it may be, and the disenfranchised Syrian working classes outside the public sector, including peasants, are feeling the strain of the current economic and political circumstances. But the Syrian regime, as in the past, is content to enjoy nominal macroeconomic stability, thanks to increasing revenue from oil, which constitutes nearly 70 percent of Syria's exports and nearly 50 percent of total state revenue. New gas finds, which offer the prospect of substituting gas for oil for running local industries, freeing up oil for export, are another source of reassurance for regime hard-liners.

What has been taking place in Syria's economy cannot yet be termed reform, in the substantive meaning of the word. Select sectors -- information technology and communication -- are being developed, but there is no comprehensive reform strategy for the country's crippling regulatory and legal environments. The reason for that is itself a problem: such a strategy would have to elaborate an economic vision which, presumably, would depart from Syria's current centrally planned system. Such a move, necessary as it may be, would spell trouble for a regime so dependent on the public sector.

The result is what Syrian economist Nabil Sukkar calls "hesitant reform." The government does not show any sign of abandoning the public sector. Sukkar points to a new \$1 billion government program aimed at reducing "unemployment through the introduction of new public sector projects." By the same token, privatization of state-owned enterprises, as many neoliberal critics have proposed, is not the answer. Serious reform measures and privatization schemes that are not preceded by steps to improve the productive base of the economy would prove detrimental. Expansion of the productive base, in turn, requires better incentives and a hospitable climate for investors. Hence the need for political will and consensus at the top. Both, it seems, have regressed since February: once more, the regime's elite thinks about reform as a zero-sum game.

ONE STEP FORWARD . . .

Regime and near-regime circles repeat two gloomy scenarios for

the future. There are those who repeat that "if we do not open up, the regime will collapse," and there are those who repeat that "if we do not maintain the status quo, we will drift toward civil war." No force within the regime disagrees with the need for change, in principle. But another logic overpowers the need for change -- the necessity of regime survival. Outsiders may be surprised that the tough Syrian regime feels threatened by a few voices here and there, but all indicators point to such a fear. "We are approaching four decades of doing things a certain way: through concealment," says one outspoken Syrian personality. "The regime is not used to working under the sun." This is both the regime's strength and its weakness. Long ago, it buried the tools for compelling collective mobilization, the kind of administrative and motivational tools which take a long time and more risk to rebuild. Today, in order to survive, the Syrian regime needs to expose itself to high risks in order to reestablish legitimacy. The present gridlock, and inconsistent reforms, are only natural.

For its part, after nearly two decades of being silenced, the burst of civil society activity has recently dissolved into internal squabbles. Syrian advocates of democracy are accustomed to working alone, writing alone and criticizing alone. Joint action will have to overcome the habits of atomization in an unfriendly environment. This "art of association" is another dimension of reform that requires more time and practice before it becomes effective. Still, advocates of civil society resurgence -- many of whom are fiercely courageous and highly principled -- refuse to swallow the regime's choice of two scenarios: either the status quo or chaos/civil war. They also reject the use of the confrontation with Israel as an excuse for domestic repression and belt-tightening. "Why do most Syrians have to tighten their belts while a handful are accumulating unspeakable wealth through the control of public resources?" asked one reformer. Another candid figure simply remarked: "We have not fired one shot across the Golan for decades...where is the confrontation?" The nationalist prestige accruing to Syria from its state of confrontation with Israel may reflect the weakness and helplessness of other Arab regimes more than Syria's combative stance. Nonetheless, Syrians rightly pride themselves on not having submitted to an unjust peace.

Some radical Syrian intellectuals believe Syria needs to be beaten clean like a carpet, both the state and society. They view the present quagmire, ironically, as healthy. Meanwhile, Syria observers and outwardly oriented regime officials are looking at one factor that may tip the balance in favor of reforms in the near future: the incorporation of Syria into the global economy through membership in the WTO or through the Euro-Med Partnership Scheme. For the time being, it is likely that conservative statist logic will prevail, even among the most enthusiastic regime reformers. The mere fact that the new Asad

regime admitted to a social and economic crisis, and is devoting executive attention to internal affairs, is a step forward in a very long and arduous journey back from stagnation.

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