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**REFORM IN
SYRIA:**

**Steering between
the Chinese
Model and
Regime Change**

**Democracy
and Rule of Law
Project**



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THE ISSUE OF POLITICAL REFORM in Syria straddles the line between reform of political institutions and removal from power of a particular regime and entails both domestic and external actors. The regime of Bashar al-Asad is under pressure from Syrian citizens who want a different political system and different leadership. He is also under pressure from the United States, which wants Syria to change its regional policy: stop intruding in Lebanese affairs, reduce support of Palestinian groups, and make a bigger effort to prevent infiltration of radical Islamists into Iraq. As a result, it is impossible to separate completely a domestic process of political reform from the external pressures. The two are entangled to a much greater extent than in any other country in the region except Iraq, and the analysis that follows reflects this entanglement.

Domestically, the issue of political reform has been on the agenda since July 2000, when Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father Hafez. Bashar sought to use reforms to consolidate his political power in the face of economic stagnation, high unemployment and poverty, and social tensions. After 2003 the regime also experienced internal power struggles and quickly deteriorating relations with the United States. Calling on Syria to fall in line with U.S. regional interests, the United States first enacted the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act of 2003 (SALSA) and then fostered UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the end to support of Hizbollah. This external pressure in turn further encouraged Syrian opposition forces to intensify their demands for political reform and to work together to obtain it.

Reforms have been limited, however. The regime has responded to the external pressures by fostering nationalist and anti-Western sentiments, convincing most Syrians that the United States and its allies are interested in control over the Middle East, not in Syrian political evolution. Bashar al-Asad has also slowed down the program of political reform and has increasingly focused on economic reform, arguing that he seeks “Chinese style” reforms, which he defines as slow, gradual economic change implemented while maintaining political stability. The regime has strengthened its stance by narrowing the ruling coalition and repressing the opposition, but has gained some popular support through its anti-Western rhetoric.

The United States and the EU can help reverse this bleak picture of political stagnation, but doing so will require a significant change in existing policies. The West must shift its emphasis from demands for changes in Syria’s regional policies to demands for domestic reform. It must focus also on providing direct support for social and economic development programs that help the population. A Western policy that supports domestic political reform and economic development would help reduce the commonly held view in the country that the United States and the EU disregard Syrians’ interests and are simply concerned with defending their own, even if it means supporting a repressive regime. To avoid exacerbating the widespread frustration and cynicism that Syrians feel toward the West, the United States and the EU should concentrate their efforts on small and achievable steps:

improvements in human rights, the rule of law, and social development, not establishing democracy all at once.

THE SYRIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The current regime in Syria finds its institutional origins in the Baathist coup of 1963, and the 1973 constitution, which confirmed the leading role of the Baath party. But Hafez al-Asad, who rose to power in an internal coup in 1970, soon established a parallel power base for his regime. He first sought to broaden his support by providing space for old business elites and allowing small, weak parties a minor role in the Baath-dominated National Progressive Front (*al-Jabhat al-Taquddumiyya al-Watanniyya*). By the end of his regime, however, he came to rely increasingly on the Alawite minority and a personal network of supporters, undermining state institutions and the Baath party.

The conflict between formal institutions and the regime's personalistic power base was clearly evident when Bashar al-Asad assumed the presidency after his father's death in June 2000. The parliament and Baath party gave him their support, revising the constitution to allow him to assume the office despite his young age; nominating him for the presidency, granting him the highest military rank, and appointing him head of the Baath party. Yet, the most important factor in his rise to power was that he was the former president's son. As one high-ranking member of the Baath Regional Command noted: "Comrade Dr. Bashar Hafiz al-Asad... was born and brought up in the home of the late leader, educated in his school and drank from his overflowing fountain of wisdom, knowledge, morals, faith in the issues of the homeland and people and commitment to the objectives of the nation."¹ In a regime where personal relations and informal power structures were far more important than formal governmental structures or Baath party institutions, Bashar was seen as the person most likely to continue the legacy of his father. The young president's own inexperience and underdeveloped political base were arguably also an advantage for the old guard anxious to retain its influence.

BASHAR AL-ASAD AND THE EXTERNAL-INTERNAL TANGLE

Bashar al-Asad started his presidency under a modicum of good will both domestically and internationally. Within a few years, however, he lost much of the internal support and became entangled in an increasingly hostile relationship with the United States, France, and to a lesser extent other European countries. Syria's descent into international pariah status and domestic stagnation were the result of a mixture of failed policies by the regime and rapidly changing international circumstances.

Domestically, Bashar experienced an initial grace period. He enjoyed the backing of the party and of many from his father's old guard. Syrians outside the corridors of power also offered cautious support in return for the anticipated political liberalization.

And indeed Syria enjoyed a brief political opening, with a flourishing of opposition-led political forums discussing both political and economic reform. The political fervor of the "Damascus Spring" inspired hope that the president could garner sufficient support and enthusiasm to stand up to

hard-line, antireform figures within the regime. By August 2001, the stirrings of the opposition made the old guard within the regime increasingly nervous; at the same time, it was becoming clear that the opposition was ultimately too weak to offer a real counterweight to hard-line forces. Prudently, Bashar moved closer to the positions of the old guard and cut short the “Damascus Spring.”

The international community also initially welcomed Bashar al-Asad’s presidency. The United States sought a chance to improve U.S.-Syrian relations, which had soured during the 1990s as the fitful and unsuccessful Syrian-Israeli negotiations under U.S. tutelage undermined trust between the Syrian and U.S. administrations. The United States’ optimism about the young president appeared vindicated in the initial months after September 11, 2001, when Syria proved ready to cooperate in counterterrorism initiatives. The Europeans, too, demonstrated support for the new president and sought to move forward with the Syrian track of the EU-Mediterranean agreement. The French gave especially strong support to the new government, even sending a team of consultants to provide advice on administrative reforms in 2003.

Changing regional and domestic circumstances eroded the goodwill toward the Syrian regime. Facing domestic tensions and regional crises, Bashar al-Asad assumed a regional leadership position against the West, issuing strident calls opposing the “aggression” of coalition forces against Iraq. U.S.-Syrian relations deteriorated in response. Some Congressional leaders had long sought to put pressure on Syria, but the U.S. administration had refused to follow suit, convincing them to shelve the draft Syrian Accountability Act before bringing it to a vote in 2002. Yet, as regional conditions worsened with increasing trouble in Iraq and a continued *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the George W. Bush administration changed its stance. On March 3, 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell broke with earlier positions to refer to the Syrian troops in Lebanon as an “occupation army,” and later that month he declared that Syria must end “direct support for terrorist groups and the dying regime of Saddam Hussein.”

By fall 2003, the Bush administration supported SALSA, which condemned Syria’s support for terrorism, its occupation of Lebanon, and the development of a weapons of mass destruction program. It also gave President Bush a menu of economic and diplomatic sanctions that he could implement until Syria complied. Three points of this act are significant: First, the pressure leading up to the passage of the act, the text of the law itself, which focused on Syria’s external relations, and the authorization for the U.S. president to provide Syria with assistance requires not only that progress be made on these fronts, but also progress in “negotiations aimed at achieving a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.”² Despite the heightened U.S. rhetoric about promoting democracy in the Middle East, the act made no mention of democracy or human rights in Syria. Second, the economic and diplomatic sanctions on Syria were of limited real effect. Syria has long been listed as a state sponsor of terrorism and both economic and political relations with the U.S. are minimal. Third, the act was nevertheless extremely painful to the regime, which saw SALSA as signaling Syria’s isolation from the broader international community and believed that the act could provide the basis for more serious measures in the future.

They were correct. The United States continued to garner international support in its efforts to pressure the Syrian regime, most notably from France. By September 2, 2004, the United States and France joined forces to endorse UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon, the disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias in Lebanon, and free and fair presidential elections, devoid of foreign (that is, Syrian) interference. Damascus

responded to the resolution by supporting the extension in office of the Syrian-backed Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, effectively thumbing its nose at UN (and U.S.) demands.

The tensions escalated further after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, which Syria was suspected of ordering. The United States and France took advantage of the situation to call on Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, and encouraged anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon to mobilize. Syria withdrew its troops in the shadow of the Cedar Revolution (the civil unrest that followed Hariri's assassination), with its massive anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut. The UN investigation into the assassination and the Syrian government's potential involvement in it, led by Detlev Mehlis, put additional pressure on the regime. On October 20, 2005, the first Mehlis report blamed high level Syrian officials for the assassination, and the October 31 UN Security Council Resolution 1636 established targeted sanctions against individuals suspected in Hariri's assassination. The Syrians feared that sanctions and further retribution would be forthcoming. Tensions subsided only slightly when questions emerged about the reliability of the witnesses cited by the commission and the second UN report, on December 10, failed to be conclusive about Syrian involvement.

The international pressure on Syria exerted by the United States, France, and the United Nations had significant repercussions on socioeconomic conditions in Syria as well as on domestic politics. Domestic conditions deteriorated significantly since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which ended favorable economic arrangements between Syria and Iraq. Popular discontent resulting from economic deterioration led the government to curb domestic debates and to restrict the focus of those that were allowed to continue from broad issues of political reforms to narrower ones of economic policy.

The ultimate outcome of this tangle of foreign and domestic developments has been a narrowing of Bashar's power base. Bashar has removed many individuals who had been prominent during his father's administration. Among the members of the "old guard" sidelined by Bashar and his closest associates, many had positions in the security and intelligence apparatus. Even such major players as the head of intelligence Bahjat Suleiman, head of military intelligence Hassan Khalil, head of political security Adnan Badr Hassan, and Vice President Abdel-Halim Kaddam lost their positions. Old Baath party leaders have also lost ground in recent years. As a result of these and other changes, power has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the so-called triumvirate: Bashar al-Asad, his brother Maher (head of the Republican Guard), and his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat (head of military security). The narrower the coalition has become, however, the wider the base of the opposition.

ASSESSING REFORMS UNDER BASHAR AL-ASAD

Although attention has been focused on the most dramatic recent developments in Syria, particularly its role in Lebanon and the growing tensions with the United States and the international community, both the regime and the opposition have been engaged in a less apparent attempt to bring about some domestic changes. In particular, the regime has increasingly emphasized economic and administrative reforms over political change. Opposition forces have tried to reshape themselves to respond better to the new circumstances.

Neither the steps taken by the regime nor the efforts of the opposition have so far been significant in terms of altering the distribution of power in Syria and making the regime subject to a popular mandate. In general, the reforms introduced by the government in the economic and to a lesser extent political spheres have been more cosmetic than consequential. Particularly given the social tensions within Syria, the minority basis of the regime, and the example of sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq, regime elites—as well as many average Syrians—are reluctant to see reforms move too quickly for fear of destabilization. The sluggish reforms implemented to date are thus not likely to promote a gradual process of democratization from the top, although they might have the unintended consequence of increasing the likelihood of a full breakdown of the Baathist regime. In contrast, the steps taken by the opposition are more likely to strengthen pro-democracy forces. Even these changes, however, should not be overstated, nor should the possibility that a breakdown of the regime would usher in a democratic, pro-Western regime.

Regime Efforts

Economic and Administrative Reforms. Like many other Arab governments at this time, the Syrian regime is not averse to change, particularly concerning the economy and the administrative systems, but it wants these reforms to take place in a slow, steady manner, without loss of political control. Government officials explicitly seek to emulate the Chinese model of reform, where the government promoted economic reform and modernization in many sectors while retaining complete political control. The Syrians are determined to avoid the experiences of Eastern Europe and the former USSR, where modest political openings quickly mushroomed into regime collapse. Syria, they argue, needs to promote economic growth without sacrificing political stability.

The process of economic and administrative reform has been real, even dramatic to some extent. In the last five years, Syria has seen the establishment of private banks and universities, major reductions in customs duties, and the expansion of foreign investment opportunities. Indeed, more than 134 laws and presidential decrees to reform the economic and administrative system were signed in 2005 alone. The president's emphasis on economic reform is illustrated by his personal choice of Abdallah Dardari, first as the head of the independent Syrian Planning Commission and subsequently in the newly created position of Vice Prime Minister for Economic Affairs. Dardari has promoted the private sector over the state sector, a striking change for the socialist-oriented Baathist system. Indeed, the June 2005 Baath Party Congress confirmed that Syria would develop a "Socialist Market Economy," and serious discussions have taken place about the future shrinking of the public sector and the resulting potential for increased unemployment.

These reforms have been somewhat significant in loosening government control over the economy and providing more space for private sector growth. There is no indication, however, that the growth of the private sector has changed the balance of political power in the country, creating new political forces autonomous of the government or stimulating a greater degree of political pluralism. On the contrary, as is often the case in countries seeking to reform socialist economic systems, the revitalized private sector is creating new monopolies controlled by members of the governing elite rather than avenues through which new players can gain wealth and political influence. Furthermore, the economic reforms likely to have the largest effect, such as a significant reduction in the public sector, have not yet been implemented.

Political Reforms. The government has announced numerous political reforms during the last five years, but to the extent to which they have been implemented, such steps have served to reinforce, not undermine, the regime's power. Among the announced reforms were calls to differentiate more clearly the government from the Baath party, and the decision to allow private print media. The government also promised to enact a new law governing political parties but has not yet done so. Nor has it responded to a fundamental demand of the opposition, the lifting of the state of emergency that has been in force since 1963.

The June 2005 Baath Party Congress provides an excellent example of the narrow limits of political reform under Bashar al-Asad. The Congress was held immediately after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and it was preceded by an extraordinary debate between hard-liners and reformers. Many party members objected to the way in which the delegates were elected by the party branches, forcing the Baath's leading organ, the Regional Command, to allow more than one hundred unelected delegates to participate in the Congress. Nevertheless, the results of the Congress were largely disappointing for those seeking reform. President Bashar al-Asad openly stated that major political change would not be forthcoming: there would be no major constitutional reform, no relinquishment of the Baath's leading role in the state, and no real opening to the opposition parties, particularly to the Muslim Brotherhood. As if to emphasize the latter point, the last real remnant of the political opening of the Damascus Spring, the Jamal Atassi forum, saw members of its board arrested for reading a letter from the Muslim Brotherhood shortly before the Congress.

The Congress did promise that work would move forward on a long-expected law governing political parties, but the new draft law has been disappointing. It requires that new parties be "allied to, created by, or friends of the Ba'ath."³ Party founders must be over thirty-five years old, have no criminal record, and be proven supporters of the Baathist March 8 Revolution. This effectively precludes opposition figures from forming new parties. The parties themselves cannot be based on religious, sectarian, or tribal identities and cannot have operated before 1963 (only the Baath Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Communist Party are exempted from the last restriction). This prohibits the legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Kurdish nationalist parties. Party formation is further hindered by the need to have ten founding members, and at least 500 members present at a founding conference. According to the draft law, the decision whether to grant a new party a license will be made by a committee that includes the head of the Shura Council, the ministers of justice and interior, and the minister of state for people's assembly affairs—all of whom are Baathists—and three independent judges. Finally, even legalized parties will be severely disadvantaged vis-à-vis the ruling Baath party: They cannot obtain foreign funds or mobilize support outside the country, even among the Syrian diaspora; they cannot be active in religious places or use the government-owned media for propaganda (although they can publish their own newspapers); and they cannot enlist government employees as members.

Most of the restrictions, of course, do not apply to the Baath party: Civil servants will continue to constitute a large percentage of the 2 million Baath party members, the party will continue using the government media for propaganda, and it will continue drawing on government revenue for resources and on government institutions to mobilize support. It is important to note that the government has not shown any intention to amend Article 8 of the Constitution, which states that the Baath party is "the ruling party of state and society." Rather than weakening the Baath party's role, the new political parties law will reinforce it by making it virtually impossible for opposition

parties to register. As the Baathist Speaker of Parliament Mahmoud al-Abrash explained, “rotation of power is unlikely.”⁴

A Divided Opposition

Opposition forces have also seen important changes in the last five years, above all making a concerted effort to find common ground in order to increase their effectiveness. Even a modicum of coordination—if only for tactical purposes—would be critical in allowing the Syrian opposition to take advantage of the pressures on the Syrian regime to push for change and potentially for democracy. However, despite some progress in achieving coordination, the Syrian opposition remains essentially weak and divided.

The Nature of Syrian Opposition. The Syrian opposition spans a broad and diverse range of socioeconomic and ideological positions. There are three main categories of present or potential opposition forces in Syria. The most moderate opposition consists of the recent defectors (and potential defectors) from the regime: former regime members who had been sidelined, young lower-level Baathists who seek to revitalize the system through strengthening the party, and potentially old business elites, who have found themselves losing ground to “sons of the regime.” They generally hope to see the Baath party remain power but seek greater competition within the regime. Other opposition forces seek the Baathist regime’s demise, and they have a longer history of opposition: secularist intellectuals inside Syria; the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leadership is based in London; and secularist opponents living in Europe (primarily in France) and the United States. These have been weakened by years of repression and have weak ties to the population. A final and less well understood potential source of opposition are local leaders within Syria, likely of an Islamist bent. Such local elites may arguably be the most powerful forces of mobilization should the regime start losing control, yet they remain largely unknown.

The opposition is divided along a number of dimensions. They differ over the extent to which they are willing to rely on external actors, and particularly the United States, in changing the regime. Similarly, they differ in the extent to which they are willing to accept gradual reforms rather than a more dramatic, and risky, regime overthrow. They seek a range of ultimate outcomes—from expressly secularist, democratic regimes to Islamist caliphates. Finally, opponents are fragmented by regional divisions, sectarian splits, and personal animosities.

Bolder Challenges. The opposition has become increasingly bold since 2000. Initially, the non-Islamist opposition within Syria sought limited reforms, signing the Charter of the 99 and the Statement of the 1000, both of which emphasized political liberalization—calling for lifting the 1963 state of emergency, releasing political prisoners, and expanding the freedom of the press and public gathering. The president reportedly encouraged these moves, both by emphasizing democratization in his inaugural speech of July 2000 and by allowing close associates to sign the declarations. Indeed, opposition leaders repeatedly claimed in the early years of Bashar’s presidency that they did not seek the overthrow of the regime but a degree of political liberalization that would make the Syrian regime resemble Mubarak’s Egypt.

In contrast, the Damascus Declaration of October 2005 took a much harsher tone and was signed by a wider range of opposition forces. The declaration blamed the “authorities” for the “rending of the national social fabric of the Syrian people, an economic collapse that poses a threat to the country, and exacerbating crises of every kind, in addition to the stifling isolation which the regime has brought upon the country as a result of its destructive, adventurous, and short-sighted policies on the Arab and regional levels, and especially in Lebanon.” Although stating that change needed to be gradual and based on national dialogue, the document clearly demanded democratization. Unlike the earlier statements, the declaration was not encouraged by the regime.

Weak Coalitions. Syria’s divided opposition forces also attempted to build bridges with one another, but with limited success. The Muslim Brotherhood has had a steep hill to climb in regaining the trust of the Syrian people, and particularly of the secularist opposition forces. A violent conflict with the regime in the early 1980s not only left the Brotherhood largely decimated within Syria, but it also undermined trust between secularist opponents and the Brothers. The Brotherhood has subsequently reached out to secularists and emphasized its desire to build a democratic Syria. The most notable effort was the convening of a conference in August 2002 to discuss a National Charter for Syria, which included respect for human rights and the rejection of violence, and the unveiling of a political program in 2004 that supports a democratic transition. Their efforts have had mixed results, however. Many secularist opponents are eager to work with the Brotherhood, believing that they are an important and powerful part of the Syrian political spectrum. The Brotherhood has reached out to liberal groups and to former members of the regime. For instance, it gained public cooperation from a leader in the opposition-oriented Jamal Atassi forum, who read a statement from the Brotherhood in 2005 and was subsequently arrested for this action. The Brotherhood also coordinated with former Vice President Abdel-Halim Kaddam after he left Syria and denounced the regime on December 31, 2005. However, other opposition forces were less enthusiastic about cooperating with the Brotherhood, including Riad Turk, arguably one of the most legitimate secularist opposition leaders inside Syria.

Reformists within the Baath party have also sought to establish links with opposition figures. The frustration within the Baath party is in some ways not new; it was the voicing of Baathists’ concerns in summer 2001 that most worried hard-liners within the regime and contributed to the end of the Damascus Spring. Ayman Abdel Nour, a Baathist reformist, has also long attempted to promote discussions among various factions through his daily bulletin, All4Syria. More formal efforts have also been made since April 2004, when party reformers reached out to legal opposition parties. In December 2005, efforts were made to bring a somewhat broader spectrum of forces (yet excluding the Muslim Brotherhood) together to sign a statement calling for reform. However, while signatories came from various parties, they signed as individuals, not party representatives. Despite these efforts, bridging the gap between the Baath party reformers and opposition forces is a difficult task. Opposition forces are often skeptical of the intentions of the Baathist reformers and of their effectiveness, and Baathist reformers have legitimate fears of losing their relative privileges should change move too quickly.

Finally, many opposition forces have attempted to build bridges with the United States, but this seems to have limited effect. U.S.-based opponents of the regime such as Farid Ghadhry face problems of legitimacy among Syrians. Others incur both the ire of the regime and the suspicion of other opponents. For example, Kamal Lebwni, a rising opposition leader, was arrested as he

returned to Syria after a visit with U.S. officials in 2005. The arrest, and questions among the public about his ties to the Bush administration, quickly faded his fast-rising star.

PRIORITIES FOR REFORM

There is no mystery about the reforms Syria would need to undertake to start a process of democratic transformation in earnest. Like most other Arab countries, Syria needs to lift the state of emergency, promote rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, amend the elections and party laws, and increase the power of the parliament vis-à-vis the executive. Promoting social and economic development would also be crucial to facilitate a transition. None of these reforms is particularly difficult to envisage. However, all these reforms would entail a loss of power for the regime and thus are unlikely to be implemented unless the regime comes under a great deal of pressure.

Eliminating Martial Law

Perhaps the single most important step toward democracy would be eliminating the martial law in place since 1963. This allows the ruling regime to supersede all constitutional guarantees of basic human rights and to use martial courts, which deny due process. Not surprisingly, an end to the state of emergency has been a long-standing demand of opposition forces.

Promoting the Judiciary and Rule of Law

Judicial reform and promoting the rule of law would also be a critical step toward democracy. The government has taken some steps in this direction, such as the decision to raise the salary and benefits of judges in an attempt to reduce their incentives to engage in corrupt practices, and increased oversight of the judiciary. These reforms may reduce petty corruption, but they will not check major abuse by the regime. As long as judges serve at the will of the executive, they cannot effectively enforce the rule of law.

Eliminating the Baath Party Monopoly

Reforms should also focus on eliminating the primacy of the Baath party. The first step is to remove Article 8 of the Constitution, which ensures that the Baath party is the leading party of government and society. The Baath party may remain dominant for the foreseeable future, but changes in the Constitution, electoral regulations, and party laws can create an open playing field.

Competitive Elections

Eliminating the Baath party's monopoly on power will also allow for democratic elections. For the legislature, this requires eliminating the requirements that reserve two-thirds of seats for the Baathist-dominated parties of the National Progressive Front, with the majority going to the Baath party. For the presidency, it entails replacing the present system in which the Baath party proposes a candidate, the parliament nominates him, and the populace confirms the choice in a referendum. Bashar al-Asad has reportedly favored such reform. Bolstered by the nationalist reaction to U.S. pressure and the

war in Iraq, coupled with weak opposition, he should be able to win handily a competitive election and gain increasing legitimacy as a “reformer.” A democratic election is not likely to undermine the regime, but it would set a precedent, move Syria toward democracy, and help to provide an exit option for current regime elites.

Changing Party Laws

The proposed political party law should provide for an inclusive system that could, in the long run, transform into democracy. The draft Political Parties Law should be revised to eliminate advantages granted the Baath party, to allow for a wider range of political parties, and to reduce the restrictions placed on party founders. In conjunction, Law 49, which stipulates that membership in the Muslim Brotherhood is a capital offense, should be repealed. The Brotherhood must be allowed to operate as a legal political force if Syria is to include all relevant political forces.

Changing Executive-Legislative Balance of Power

Changes in the Political Parties Law will have limited effect, however, if the legislature is not given effective power. The legislature must be given the ability to censure members of government, to approve judicial appointments, to pass legislation in critical areas, and to influence government formation. Until the legislature has power, the parliament will remain heavily dependent on the executive, and individuals will vote for candidates who simply kowtow to the regime.

Moreover, as long as parliamentarians’ legislative powers are limited primarily to acting as a rubber stamp, political parties will remain weak. Political entrepreneurs have little incentive to work within political parties, to develop political platforms, or to join in coalitions. Constituents also have little incentive to join or support political parties. The result is a system of weak parties, unstable legislatures, and a failure to develop alternative centers of power.

Social and Economic Development

Social and economic development is also critical for the promotion of democracy. Syria’s low per capita income would make it hard for Syria to establish and sustain a democratic regime—research has proven conclusively that democratic reform in low income countries tends to be short-lived. In addition, well-designed development projects that seek to incorporate and advantage Syrians without regard to sectarian or regional bases could help to reduce social tensions.

Implementing programs so that they do not advantage the “sons of the regime” is a difficult task. Development programs in Syria often bribe regime supporters—only helping to exacerbate conflicts between Syrians from different sects, families, or regions. This is counterproductive. Only if the current Syrian regime can slowly reduce the sharp inequalities in access to state resources and diminish the salience of social identities in the distribution process can it sustain a gradual, democratic transition.

OBSTACLES TO DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Although the necessary reforms are clear, the obstacles to their implementation are formidable and rest in both the regime and the opposition. The major difficulty facing the ruling coalition is that its basis of support is narrow, which makes reform extremely risky. For the opposition, the problem is its overall weakness: lack of strong leadership; weak ties to the population and above all to organized constituencies; internal divisions based on regionalism, sectarianism, and personal animosities; and scarcity of financial resources, particularly in the absence of strong and sustained support from the business community.

The regime faces a Catch-22: it desperately needs to reform in order to stay in power, and yet any move in that direction threatens its collapse. It is not lost on elites in power that Syria faces severe crises at home and abroad. The deteriorating economic situation, combined with a burgeoning young population, has led to unemployment rates exceeding 22 percent. Official poverty rates stand at 11.4 percent, and a 2005 UNDP study found that more than 30.1 percent of Syrians, or almost 5.3 million individuals, live below the poverty line. As Syrian analyst Samir Aita noted in an April 2006 Arab Reform Brief, the “economic situation has deteriorated to levels dangerous for social stability.”⁵

Indeed, social tensions are high. Although explicitly secular and nonsectarian, the regime has exploited communal ties to shore up its power. Alawites constitute only an estimated 10–15 percent of the Syrian population, but they dominate the regime and provide support for it. This has reinforced the salience of sectarian identities, exacerbating tensions between the various social groups. At present, small altercations quickly take on ethnic and sectarian tones, with emerging strife most notably in Kurdish areas and in a more limited form between Ismailis and Alawites.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to reform lies in the widespread fear of social violence if the regime loses control. Most Alawites seem to fear that heads would indeed roll if the regime falls, and the exploding civil war in Iraq only reinforces these fears. Facing the possibility of costly retribution, regime elites fear reforms that promote democracy, thus giving the majority the upper hand, and seek to foster the fear of sectarian violence among the general population. For instance, a posting on the All4Syria forum in February 2006 reported that the Syrian population is as fragmented as that of Lebanon: 45 percent Sunni, 20 percent Alawite, 15 percent Kurdish, and 12 percent Christian, with a number of smaller minorities. The message was clear: The destruction of the Syrian regime would plunge Syria into a Lebanese-style civil war.

In response, opposition leaders consistently claim that they will not discriminate among Syrians on a sectarian basis, but it is not clear that they are capable of delivering on such promises. The opposition lacks strong leadership, both inside and outside the country, with the internal forces decimated by years of harsh repression and external groups lacking widespread grassroots support. They also have limited organizational resources. The regime controlled most organizations, including trade unions, professional associations, and public mosques, since the late 1970s. Of course, the opposition has more space to organize outside of Syria, with the Muslim Brotherhood being the most important organization; however, distance makes it more difficult to foster local ties and support. Ties to the population are further weakened by significant sectarian, regional, and personal divisions in the ranks of the opposition and among the general population.

Finally, Syrians across the political and social spectrum mistrust the opposition, concerned that it may be no more democratic than the current regime. Some voice skepticism about the

ultimate goals of the secular, Damascus-based, Sunni bourgeoisie, which they believe exploited the Syrian population in the 1940s and 1950s. Many also wonder about the Muslim Brotherhood's commitment to democracy, despite the Brotherhood's consistent attempts to allay these fears. The regime benefits from this belief that Islamist organizations will dominate if the current regime fails, and they encourage the idea. For example, in February 2006 the Syrian authorities were slow in stopping protests against the Danish cartoons caricaturing the prophet Mohammed, allegedly to suggest to both domestic and international audiences that Islamists are strong and most likely to succeed should the regime fall. Whether justified or not, the belief that opposition leaders are not committed to democracy undermines support.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

Quite simply, the high stakes for regime elites combined with the weak opposition make an orderly, peaceful process of democratic transition in Syria unlikely at present. Given the dire prospects that regime elites face if they lose power, they are unlikely to step down without assurances of protection. The opposition may commit to this, but they cannot guarantee that they can deliver on it. Consequently, the most likely scenario is survival of the regime, as it is or in a modified form. It is also possible that pent-up frustration will lead to a popular upheaval with an unpredictable outcome. Before examining how the United States and Europe may promote and respond to these possible outcomes, it is important to consider the three most likely scenarios.

Scenario 1: The Regime Digs In

The first and most likely scenario is the survival of the regime. President Bashar al-Asad may not remain the most powerful member of the triumvirate that also includes Maher al-Asad and Asef Shawkat, but the existing power structure will prevail.

The regime may survive the many pressures, particularly if the investigation into the Hariri assassination cannot find conclusive proof of Syria's involvement. To date, Bashar has been able to capitalize on the regional and international pressures to foster support on the street. Syrians are widely skeptical of U.S. intentions, and they generally believe that the United States and Europe are not serious about promoting democracy and human rights in Syria. Thus, many see international pressure on the Syrian regime as a manifestation of hostility toward all Syrians, and indeed, the Arab world more generally. This perception, combined with the humiliation of the forced withdrawal from Lebanon, the international investigation into Syria's role in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, and the resentment of U.S. intervention in Iraq and its policy toward Israel, has reinforced Syrian nationalism and increased support for the regime. Bashar has also been able to take advantage of the widespread anti-U.S. sentiment in the Arab world to boost his regional standing.

The regime may thus survive. Domestically, it will continue to circle the wagons, maintaining a narrow base of support, and justifying repression in the name of external threats. Regionally, it will continue developing its role as the anti-Western, regional leader, strengthening the Iranian-Syrian-Hizbollah axis. As Bashar noted in his recent speech to the Arab Parties Congress, Syria will find friends elsewhere than in the West (that is, the Gulf, China, Russia), rejecting both the support and the opposition from the West.

Scenario 2: An Alawite Regime Remade

A second possibility is that increased popular and international pressure will weaken the regime and leave it vulnerable to an internal coup carried out by Alawites in the military. Alawite elites are largely convinced that they cannot afford to lose control over the reins of power. As long as the Asad family appears best-placed to maintain control, it is unlikely to face an Alawite opposition. If its grip should start slipping, Alawite military forces may attempt to take matters into their own hands.

The obstacles to an internal coup are significant, however. Since the mid-1980s, the Syrian military has been deliberately fragmented. Real military and security powers have increasingly been concentrated in the Republican Guard, under the control of the president's brother, Maher al-Asad. Finally, the death of Interior Minister General Ghazi Kanaan, the former Syrian intelligence commander in Lebanon who was perhaps the most likely to succeed in such an attempt, both removed an important potential coup leader and demonstrated the difficulties that such an operation would face.

If such a coup were to succeed, it would not represent a paradigm shift toward democracy. Any Alawite-based regime is bound to fear real democratic reforms, because Alawites are too few to win a popular election. Small improvements in human rights and political freedoms might take place, particularly in the early honeymoon period of the regime. The major change is more likely to be in foreign policy, with a shift toward better U.S.-Syrian relations. The regime would try to make itself indispensable to the United States, but in doing so, it would probably also reduce U.S. interest in promoting Syrian democracy.

Scenario 3: Regime Collapse

A complete collapse of the regime brought about by a popular uprising appears even more remote, but nevertheless should be considered. The old adage, that revolutions appear impossible before they take place and inevitable afterward, is apt. Beneath the heightened Syrian nationalist sentiment are widespread grievances caused by high unemployment and underemployment, increasing poverty, economic stagnation, and limited political and social freedoms.

The major military and security forces appear to be firmly in the regime's hand, but it is difficult to know what would happen if the regime were confronted with widespread disorder and mass demonstrations, for example. A collapse would become more likely if business elites and the reformists within the party—who would prefer regime change but largely sit on the fence, fearing that such changes would not be successful—became convinced that the regime's days were limited. The critical question is what factors would lead to such a change in expectations. One triggering element might be a growing perception among Syrians that the regime had lost its capacity to repress the opposition, or if they became convinced that a revolt against the regime would gain international support.

The consequences of regime collapse would be far-reaching, but not necessarily positive. The change would likely restore a Sunni-based regime, but it would not necessarily be either pro-Western or democratic. The opposition forces that stand at the forefront of the public movement are largely divided themselves over the degree of democracy and the nature of the regime they want. Even pro-Western, prodemocracy forces tend to favor limited democracy, fearing the potential for Islamist victories or sectarian conflict. Regime collapse is not a sure path to democracy.

OPTIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

None of these scenarios suggest that pro-Western, liberal democracy is likely to emerge in Syria in the short run. The prospects for a significant paradigm shift are virtually nil if the present regime remains in power. They would remain very low even if a new military-based Alawite regime were to take power, although such a scenario would probably lead to improved relations with the United States. Regime collapse would of course represent a definite paradigm shift, although not necessarily one toward democracy. If regime collapse were followed by long-term instability and domestic conflict, the cause of democracy would not advance. If stability were quickly re-established, the new government, if majority-based, might not be initially democratic, but it might ultimately find democratic reforms less threatening than the present, minority-dominated regime does.

The international community is thus faced with two possible challenges: If the regime survives, can it take steps to encourage reforms that would improve conditions for Syrians, regardless of the regime in power? And if the regime collapses, could it help to steer the country away from civil conflict and make the aftermath more conducive to democracy?

Promoting Domestic Reform

The United States and European countries can promote some reforms that, while falling far short of democracy, would improve the daily lives of Syrians, help to stabilize the country, and even eventually evolve toward democracy. To succeed, however, any outside force must emphasize steps that do not directly threaten the regime. For example, it should advocate reforms that improve respect for human rights or help broaden press freedom, rather than call for free and fair elections and support opposition groups.

Measures currently adopted by the United States are the most likely to prove counterproductive in promoting democratization. As we have seen, the forceful positions Washington has taken vis-à-vis Syria—imposing sanctions through SALSA, steering Resolution 1559 through the UN Security Council, and expressing strong disapproval of the regime in every possible forum—have caused a nationalist backlash that plays into the hands of the government. Washington's efforts to support the prodemocratic opposition have instead undermined the opposition's legitimacy and further split these forces. The United States has little leverage to affect democratic regime change in Syria: economic ties have always been minimal, and U.S. influence has been further undermined by SALSA and popular hostility to U.S. policy in the region. The United States would have a greater effect on reform if it de-escalated its criticism of Syria's policies in the region, stopped calls for regime change, and relied instead on conditional aid and diplomatic pressure to convince the Syrian government to improve human rights.

European countries are better placed to influence change. The EU has stronger economic relations with Syria, and thus has more economic carrots and sticks. So far, however, the EU has steered away from demanding significant political change as a condition for stronger economic ties. This has led many Syrians to conclude that European countries are only interested in economic benefits and do not care about reforms that affect Syrians. Moreover, socioeconomic development programs such as those supported by the EU can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the regime, pouring large sums of money into the hands of individuals and groups closely associated with the ruling elite. For the EU to tie economic and social development programs to political

reform, and to ensure that development programs are implemented in ways that reduce social disparity, will require a great deal of political will and attention to implementation.

Even more carefully designed development programs, however, would not immediately bring democracy. Nevertheless, the West must avoid the temptation to seek more dramatic results. Attempts to support specific opposition groups in the hope of enabling them to challenge the regime more effectively are not likely to succeed. Financial support of Syrian opposition forces (such as that provided for by the current Middle East Partnership Initiative) will only taint groups that accept it and make it more difficult for them to build constituencies.

An attempt to overthrow the Syrian regime by force is even less likely to serve U.S. or European interests. There is little question that the Syrian regime could be relatively easily removed from power, much as the Iraqi regime was. As in Iraq, however, regime overthrow would result in a long, costly period of instability and conflict, heightening resentment of the United States and leading even further away from the establishment of a pro-Western, democratic regime.

Putting pressure on the regime to improve human rights and providing development assistance, on the other hand, will demonstrate to skeptical Syrians that the West is concerned with their problems, not just its own interests. Although anti-U.S. sentiments will not disappear completely without major changes in U.S. policies toward Israel and Iraq, a clear commitment to improving conditions for Syrians will help to undermine the anti-Western sentiment that reinforces the regime.

Avoiding Conflict and Instability

Even modest efforts such as those outlined above may nevertheless provide a catalyst for more radical regime change, as set forth in Scenario 3. As seen in Iran during the 1970s, opposition leaders may increase their pressure if they perceive the regime to be weakening. Even modest domestic reform may thus stimulate regime collapse.

This would not necessarily be a positive development. Syria suffers from long-standing sectarian and regional divisions, as seen in its early, tumultuous history. Social trust among different groups has been further undermined by the past forty years of Baathist rule, which played on social divisions to strengthen the regime. Regime weakness or change could provide a catalyst for sectarian violence and even secessionist movements in areas such as Jebel Druze and the Kurdish northeast. The weakness of cohesive, national opposition groups, discussed earlier, would compound the problem, increasing the influence of locally based, fragmented opposition forces that, given the prevalence of weapons in Syria, would probably be armed.

The West must thus prepare for the possibility that the regime will collapse, even if it follows a cautious policy of promoting domestic reform. The most important challenge for the United States and the EU will be to minimize civil conflict. This means making sure that the military and security forces remain intact at the lower level even as the top officer ranks are removed and that the state apparatus continues to function, in other words, avoiding massive purges of people previously associated with the Baath party. The United States and EU would also need to avoid the tendency to pick winners and losers, looking for allies they can trust while excluding others from the political process. Doing so is likely only to support the introduction of a nondemocratic regime and to prolong the process of consolidating a new regime.

There is no easy, safe policy to encourage political reform in Syria that the United States and Europe could embrace. An aggressive policy of supporting the opposition and putting strong pressure on the government is likely to backfire, discrediting opposition groups and increasing popular support for the regime. A cautious policy of encouraging economic development and improvement in human rights is an unsatisfying response to a difficult, hostile regime. Even modest changes could destabilize a regime with as narrow a support base as the present one, leaving a vacuum of power likely to be filled by fragmented sectarian groups with access to weapons.

Whether the regime survives or collapses, Syria is not on the verge of democracy, and Western policy makers must keep this in mind. Current leaders and their supporters see the regime's survival as a matter of life-and-death and will not give up power easily. The Syrian opposition is too weak and fragmented to either force the regime from power or to create an orderly, democratic new system if the regime collapses. The specter of civil conflict and nondemocratic successors—whether Islamist or secularist—leaves many Syrians wondering if they may not be better off with the devil they know than that which they don't. In this difficult terrain, democracy promotion by outsiders must be a cautious endeavor with a long-term horizon.

NOTES

- ¹ “Syria: Ba’ath Party Deputy Pledges Continuation of Al-Asad’s Policies, Ideals,” Syrian Arab TV (Damascus), in BBC Monitoring International Reports, June 17, 2000.² Section C(2) of SALSA, available at http://www.fas.org/asmp/resources/govern/108th/pl_108_175.pdf.
- ³ Sami Moubayed, “Allied to, Created by or Friends of the Ba’ath,” available at www.mideastviews.com.
- ⁴ Cited in Sami Moubayed, “Allied to, Created by or Friends of the Ba’ath,” available at www.mideastviews.com.
- ⁵ Samir Aita, “What Reforms while a Storm Is Building?” in Arab Reform Initiative, Arab Reform Brief no. 60, April 2006, http://www.arab-reform.net/IMG/pdf/Syria__word_1_-_final_-_aita.pdf.

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