SYRIA’S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Marco Vicenzino

Since the death of Hafez El Assad, who ruled Syria with an iron-grip from 1970 to 2000, the minority Alawite-dominated regime’s sole objective under his son, Bashar El Assad, has been self-preservation and survival by placating the ruling elite, even if that means sacrificing certain members. The apparent suicide, or possible state-assisted suicide, of the Interior Minister, Ghazi Kanaan, may serve as an example. In principle, Bashar Assad makes all final decisions. In practice, competing factions in his inner circle wield enormous influence to protect the fiefdoms granted to loyal servants by his father. However, gone is the father’s political astuteness, diplomatic cunning, Soviet support and, above all, the extreme state of fear that ensured the undivided loyalty of officials and the obedience of the masses. The UN investigation, led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, into the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, which points to “converging evidence” of Syrian and Lebanese involvement, presents the most serious crisis to Bashar’s reign, marked by consistent ineptitude, and threatens to undermine the regime’s existence.

The politically-inexperienced Bashar was plucked from the ordinary life of a London medical professional to being groomed for leadership of an autocratic regime after the death of his brother, the heir-apparent. The initial political opening when he assumed power sparked talk of a “Damascus Spring” but was short-lived. In fact, since Hariri’s assassination, internal repression has increased to quell any dissent and eliminate any discussion of “once Lebanon goes, so will the Assad regime”. It would be an exaggeration to speak of a thriving reformist civil society movement in Syria, but since the death of Hafez el Assad a grass-roots discourse has been slowly emerging on issues unthinkable during his reign. Recent developments in Lebanon throughout 2005 have further influenced this gradual evolution.

It is questionable whether a Syrian display of “people power” would trigger a Damascene conversion of the regime. Past experience demonstrates the regime’s willingness to crush any form of dissent, particularly from Sunnis which constitute over 75% of the population. The most drastic example is provided by the slaughter at Hama in 1982 which claimed the lives of over 10,000 Sunni Islamist militants. With the significant reduction of the fear factor since Hafez El Assad’s death, all that remains is an ideologically bankrupt regime which attempts to retain control through brute force and coercion. Despite the decrepit state of its weaponry, Syrian forces may possess sufficient supplies to maintain domestic stability by force if necessary. The question remains: would they and what would happen if they did?
The concepts of humanitarian intervention and national sovereignty have evolved over the years, particularly since the 1982 Hama massacre. The recently endorsed concept of the right to protect civilians from atrocities at the UN annual meeting in New York in September 2005 signals an historic change. The lessons of the Balkans and Rwanda have impacted international public opinion.

However, one cannot exclude the possibility of regime-change from within, perhaps through a coup, general civil disorder, spontaneous breakdown of state control or the sudden disintegration of institutional structures.

International pressure through the UN Security Council, principally from two permanent members, the US and France, will force the Assad regime to make an existential decision as whether to pursue a policy of cooperation and negotiation or obstruction and obfuscation with respect to the UN investigation.

Syrian obstruction would further complicate matters for an already cornered and isolated regime. In the past, Syria could often rely on U.S.-allied Arab states, principally Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to help defuse U.S. pressure. However, their lower profile in recent years is due largely to Syria’s diplomatic incompetence.

Syria will attempt exploiting the traditional reluctance of Russia and China to approve sanctions at the UN Security Council. However, this reluctance will significantly depend upon the conclusions of the UN investigation scheduled to terminate on December 15. Ambiguous conclusions as to culpability will serve Syrian interests and facilitate Chinese and Russian support. Incontrovertible and unequivocal evidence of Syrian involvement at the highest levels will complicate the ability of Russia and China to veto sanctions and increase the likelihood of abstentions.

Furthermore, Syrian obstruction would seriously threaten its economic survival, particularly should the UN Security Council approve multilateral sanctions. If such economic sanctions were to be comprehensively binding and fully enforced, like the South Africa and Libya sanctions regime (and unlike the Iraq food-for-oil sanctions), it would have a devastating and crippling effect on Syria’s decrepit Soviet-style economy, which no longer benefits from lucrative illicit activities, such as the $1 billion trade in illegal Iraqi oil and, most importantly, control of black market activities in Lebanon.

Reaching an accommodation, principally with the U.S., may ensure the regime’s survival, at least for the immediate future. However, it would entail making substantial concessions that may seriously outweigh face-saving incentives and risk the significant loss of international, regional and, most dangerously for the regime, domestic credibility. Comparisons may be made to how Libya is being “re-integrated” into the international community after renouncing its WMD capability (although it is still included on the State Department’s terrorism list, principally for alleged involvement in planning an assassination of the Saudi King Abdullah). Other Syrian concessions would include a systematically compliant approach to monitoring and controlling its border with Iraq and pro-ac-
tively preventing and seizing any form of support, whether human or material, destined for Iraq's insurgency from entering or exiting the border. Another concession would be completely and verifiably withdrawing support from militant groups, principally Hizbullah and Palestinian factions such as Hamas. If deemed compliant, Syria would be commended with the status of "ally" in the war on terror. However, Syria did cooperate with U.S. intelligence after the 9/11 attacks in light of its own traditional battle against radical Islamic extremists. Many in Washington wish to pressure Syria to resolve all outstanding disputes with Israel. However, no Syrian leader, whether dictator or democratically-elected could survive, unless such a resolution clearly guarantees Syria's long-term interest and, most importantly, is perceived so by the Syrian public.

Another significant concession would be surrendering certain individuals to international law enforcement authorities for the UN's Hariri inquiry. This could provoke serious opposition and a power struggle among influential elements within the regime’s inner circle, principally those threatened by a wider UN investigation. The potential for instability in terms of attempted coups, assassinations and wider political violence, endemic of pre-1970 Syria, would not only destabilize Syria but the wider region and inevitably international security and stability. Consequences would include an increase in the price of oil clearly impacting international commerce, the creation of a power vacuum ripe for jihadist exploitation and possibly resulting in civil disorder similar to parts of neighboring Iraq with innocent civilians paying the highest price. The worst case scenario would be an arc of chaos extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.

Although many in Washington favor regime change, Syria’s neighbors remain wary of its potentially destabilizing consequences, which would certainly worsen an existing grave situation in Iraq.

Turkey continues to struggle with its own restive Kurdish minority in its southeast and feels constantly threatened by an increasingly assertive Kurdish autonomous, and to some a de-facto independent, region in Iraq’s north. Instability in Syria may strengthen the confidence of Syria’s more recently vocal Kurdish-minority, adding an entirely new dynamic to the complex Kurdish question and further complicating the geopolitical landscape for Turkey and the region.

Jordan is already vulnerable to the spillover effects from Iraq to its east. Although its security services have proven highly effective against Islamic extremists, instability in Syria to its north would seriously impact internal security and aggravate efforts to develop its economy. Chaos in Syria would threaten Lebanon's fragile road to recovery, which can only be guaranteed by the constant involvement and consistent engagement of the international community, principally the US and France, leading the European effort.

From Israel's perspective the survival of the Assad regime may serve its interests. Although a threat in terms of its sponsorship of Hizbullah and mili-
tant Palestinian groups, Syria does not present an existential threat and remains a weak and predictable enemy. The alternative outcome of regime change is unpredictable. It may give rise to a reformist government or a militant government, perhaps even radically Islamist in nature, which would have catastrophic consequences for the region and beyond.

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