

Where is President Assad taking Syria to?

Aljazeera Center for Studies



Three weeks after the start of forceful crackdown on the popular movement, Syrian cities and towns witnessed a new wave of protests on Friday, 13 May. Syrian leadership was quick to send army units, whose loyalty is assured, to the battle since the last week of April after having realised that security forces were unable to extinguish the flames of demonstrations that have swept throughout the country since 15 March.

The primary target of the security- military crackdown was the southern city of Dar'a, where demonstrations commenced strongly demanding reform. The campaign quickly moved to the cities of Baniyas, Homs, and to suburbs of Damascus near the southern part of the capital.

Talk of reform and promises has in turn disappeared. President Bashar al-Assad had used this as a tactic around late March and early April to contain the heated mass movement. Since then, however, the language of killings, mass arrests and intimidation has been employed. What is the Syrian president trying to achieve? And to what extent can the regime succeed in confronting this unprecedented popular Syrian uprising, being the first of its kind since the Assad family assumed power over forty years ago?

How does the regime assess the challenge?

It is incorrect to say that the Syrian regime is not aware of the link between the popular uprising in the country and the revolts throughout the Arab world which have been erupting since the end of last year, demanding freedom and justice and opposing the corruption of the ruling classes. It is also wrong to assume that President Bashar al-Assad has no say in the country and that things are run by a repressive security faction in the ruling class.

The fact of the matter is that the Syrian regime has been watching the movement of the Arab revolts with interest and awareness, and clearly see that the fall of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes marked radical changes in the nature of relationship between Arab peoples and their rulers. Following the fall of the Egyptian President, the Syrian president embarked immediately on discussions in his meetings, at least one of which with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, about his country's need for a broad reform program.

There is no doubt that the Syrian President, since 2004 at least, has been in full control of the regime's decisions, and that during the past few years he had implemented procedures involving pillars in the security and military establishments, without any opposition at all.

President Assad and the small circle on which he depends in managing the crisis believe that this popular movement is a battle of destiny - his destiny, the destiny of the ruling class and the destiny of the system at large. However, after he failed to engage the popular movement with vague promises of reform, lifting the state of emergency and a change of government, he realised that further retreat in the face of popular protests and opposition forces will ultimately lead to the downfall of the system.

Given the regime's extensive record of suppressing the Syrian people, and given that the ruling elite is based on enormous financial and economic privileges in addition to the fact that the regime has emphasised during the past few decades – intentionally or unintentionally – the correlation between the ruling establishment with its privileges and the Alawite sect in Syria. The leaders of the regime do not consider the popular uprising as a movement for change and political reform, but, rather, a matter of life and death of everything they have been representing throughout the past four decades.

The regime was initially surprised by the size of the popular movement and its rapidly widening scope across the country. It moved quickly after the first moment of shock to adopt a set of actions which were considered successful in quelling the popular movement, or what

is said to be the option of Humah: heavy security control in the capital, using security forces, the army, Special Forces and Republican Guard forces. The regime repeatedly insists on the rhetoric of “armed terrorist infiltration” of Syria and its people. It has completely banned the media from areas that saw major protests in which it cut off electricity and means of communication and implanted security and military forces. It has also been executing the arrests of any individuals suspected to have a role in the movement of popular protests and has contributed to painful losses of lives and property of civilians.

It is certain that the Syrian regime will fight against the popular movement for as long as it can.. The statement made by Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of President al-Assad and the most prominent Syrian businessman, to the New York Times on 10 May declaring that "the regime will fight to the end" is conceivably a true reflection of a dominant mood among the ruling Syrian group.

This, however, does not mean that the regime has lost its sense altogether, and that the policy of overpowering the people is the only one likely to be adopted. It was the regime’s hope that its loyal security organisations and military forces would be able to quell the popular movement, and only then, would the president present a host of legally and constitutionally calculated reform measures.

The regime’s objectives behind these reforms is to emphasise that the war it waged against its people targetted armed terrorists rather than advocates of reform; taking into account that the promised reforms would not affect the destinies of the ruling class that is controlling the country. However, the rallies of Friday, 13 May, put the regime’s plan to the test, and perhaps will force it to speed up the reform measures, despite its failure to suppress the popular movement.

Public Reaction: Growing Discontent

Three weeks of security-military crackdown have left considerable impact on the popular movement and the network of political activists and opponents. As a result of the detrimental quelling of demonstrations in the city of Dara, a relative decrease in the size of the demonstrations in other towns and cities has been observed since the second week of May. There is also a decline in reports by political activists in favour of tapes and testimonies to the global media as well as a decline in the contributions by political leaders of opposition in the independent media coverage about the situation in Syria; whether due to security pressures or detention.

However, the statement made by President Assad’s advisor, Ms. Shaaban, to the New York Times on 9 May affirming that the regime had been able to take control of the situation and managed to pass through the worst moments of the crisis, is not supported by reality. While demonstrations were quelled in the city of Dara, they broke out in the smaller towns surrounding it. This was also the case for the city of Damascus, particularly in the central, north and coastal regions: the more the security - military pressure, the sooner the protest movement moved to the next city or town.

Nonetheless, the regime has failed to convince most of the Syrians, the Arabs and international public opinion that Syria is the victim of a foreign plot, terrorist infiltration, or a plan by radical Salafi and sectarian groups.

Capitalising on public anger and insistence, Syrian activists were quickly able to restore their position in the lead. The Friday, 13 May demonstrations covered all parts of Syria; from Abu Kamal to Baniyas and from Qamishli to Dar’a itself, which the regime thought to be a lesson to all other cities. These demonstrations have proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the option

of Hama had failed, and that Syria and the world in 2011 are different from what they were in 1980.

What is noteworthy also is that the leaders and the political opposition have not yet been able to rise up to the level of the Syrian People's Movement and its requirements. In light of the massive campaign of repression, the young activists in different parts of the country are not able to develop a national coalition to express the voice of the popular movement and direct its national destiny. This task was expected to be undertaken by well-known opposition political leaders, both inside and outside the country. But such a national body does not yet exist.

The Arab and regional powers: absence of the Arabs and Turkish anger

Arab nations still avoid expressing an opinion on the situation in Syria, whether at the level of the Arab League or the just the state, with the exception of expressions of solidarity with the Syrian regime from Yemen, Libya and a Shia faction in the Iraqi government, and two visits by the foreign ministers of the UAE and Bahrain to Damascus, without clarity on what either of them had discussed with the Syrian president.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the support expressed by Iranian spokesmen of the regime in Syria was coupled with Iranian operational support for the Syrian security-military repression mechanism. It is believed that the Iranians sent a group of security officers experienced in dealing with crowds and protest movements, and that the Syrian security agencies had benefited from the experience they gained while dealing with pro-reform demonstrations in the summer of 2009 particularly with regard to isolating the media and traditional electronic means of communication.

Turkey, the second major regional ally of the ruling system in Syria, has run out of patience in relation to the regime of President Assad. Following the meeting between Assad and Erdogan last February, the Turkish president sent both his foreign minister and head of intelligence in a series of visits to encourage Assad to embark on a serious, comprehensive reform project.

The most recent visit to Damascus was by the Turkish chief of intelligence, Dr. Hakan Fidan, on 28 April, heading a delegation that included the chairman of the State Planning Commission. It is believed that the Turkish delegation did believe in the sincerity of President Assad's intentions of reform.

The following days witnessed intensified criticism, by President Erdogan, of the Syrian government's policy of repression. On 10 May, President Erdogan, implicitly refuted the official narrative of the events that entail the state's confrontation of armed terrorists and compare the actions of the Syrian regime to the atrocities committed in Hama and Halabja Iraq in the eighties of the last century. In order to have a proper understanding of his increasing criticism of Assad's policies, we have to take into account the pressure of the Turkish Islamic grassroots and secular-liberal press in an atmosphere of elections.

More importantly, the Prime Minister of Turkey has seen the negative impact of the confusion of Turkish policy towards Libya during the first two months of the Libyan revolution, and is trying to avoid such confusion in its position toward the Syrian events, which are of much more strategic importance. It is clear that the persistence of the popular uprising on the one hand, and the continuation of the official policies of repression, on the other, will ultimately lead to a significant deterioration in the –Turkish-Syrian relations.

What draws attention in the alignment of regional and Arab political forces towards events in Syria is that it is increasingly taking on sectarian characteristics as most supporters of the Damascus policy of rule, at the Arab regional formal and informal level, are Shiites, while the mounting criticism of the regime and support for the popular movement are Sunnis. Such an alignment will undoubtedly have negative bearings on the overall relations between the communities in the Islamic Levant.

International Reaction: An Escalating Sanction

On 9 April, the Obama administration announced the application of limited sanctions on the Syrian regime. This move came after the failure of world powers in the Security Council to agree on a statement denouncing the way the regime deals with the protest movement. However, the EU did not decide to impose sanctions on officials in the regime without affecting President Assad himself until early May when the application of these sanctions took effect on the tenth.

However, the language used by Western officials concerning the events in Syria suggests that both Europe and America do not want to break with the Assad regime, perhaps for fear of the unknown, or perhaps because the Western powers seek to alter the position of the popular opposition movement with President Assad's close ties with Iran and its support for the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance forces.

On 7 May, for example, U.S. Secretary of State said in an interview with Italian television that the Assad regime cannot be compared to the Gaddafi regime, and that Washington is still hopeful that Assad will initiate steps for serious reform. There is no doubt that the soft position of the West on the regime's suppression of its people has encouraged President Assad to continue to expand the policy of repression to other cities, after the security-military invasion of Dara.

Such a position, however, was not possible to maintain as pressure on the American administration by active members of Congress and Arab-Americans, and pressure on the European Union within the European Parliament, was on the rise throughout the first two weeks of May.

It is no longer possible to ignore reports about the steady campaign of repression in Syria in the Western media. Since 11 May to 12 May, the language of Western officials became harsher; including threats by the U.S. to declare the illegitimacy of the Syrian regime. But this escalation of Western criticism and action against the regime of President Assad, does not imply that anyone in the major Western capitals is thinking of a scenario similar to the intervention in western Libya.

Syria is not Libya, and neither Syrian opposition forces nor the Arab League is in a position, at least in the foreseeable future, to provide a cover for such intervention. Moreover, the Libyan experience so far does not show the potential success of foreign intervention in a country far more complex like Syria.

Results and Prospects: The Infiltration of Fear into the Syrian Regime

The evening of Wednesday, 11 May, saw anti-government student protest rallies in the city of Aleppo, the city which has been praised for its loyalty for weeks by government media and loyalists. It is a commercial and economic centre, the second largest city and most important to the regime and its president. There is no doubt that student demonstrations in Aleppo indicate that the extent of popular opposition and expansion of scope is far beyond what the regime had anticipated

It is noticeable that, as per the orders of the president who apparently feared the consequences, the number of victims of the demonstrations of last Friday was relatively small, compared to those of previous days. The day ended with a new and mysterious declaration by the regime to start a national dialogue on ending the crisis.

However, it is now difficult to conclude the extent the Syrian popular movement can reach and the extent to which the regime can go in its repressive policy and its pretention that it can control the situation, and whether it will be compelled to make significant concessions to the popular movement. A number of factors should be noted before reaching such a conclusion:

- 1- The extent to which the Syrian army can remain coherent and continue implementing the policy of repression pursued by the regime, especially after reports about the defection of soldiers and officers refusing to fire on civilians
- 2- The coherence of the ruling Baath Party organizations and the loyalty of its members to the regime and its leadership
- 3- The possibility of cracks in the structure of the state, especially in the judiciary diplomacy and Sunni religious institutions
- 4- The escalation of the protest movements in the city of Aleppo, and its breakout in the city of Damascus, especially in the inner city neighbourhoods
- 5- The sustainability of the popular movement in general, and the ability of political forces to form a national coalition representing all segments of the Syrian people and their political rights movements, to represent the masses and make demands on the regime and the world
- 6- Whether the regime will really begin to adopt serious and convincing reforms on the legal-constitutional and political levels, in partnership with all of the forces of the Syrian people, and not merely as an initiative of the regime and in accordance with its terms
- 7- The size of global, regional and Arab support to the Syrian popular movement and its demands