

# After Four Months of Revolution: Syria at a Crossroad

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By mid July, the Syrian revolution had completed its fourth month and what had initially began as a limited and sporadic popular movement, in a few cities and townships, turned into popular massive demonstrations that sometimes included hundreds of thousands and tens of thousands of demonstrators and often more. Moreover, what also began as a call for reform as well as local and class demands, have turned into an explicit call for a radical change and deposition of the regime.

As in most Arab countries that have witnessed mass revolutionary movements, the great development in the course of Syrian popular revolution is attributed to the regime's lagging in reacting to the people's demands, the extreme cruelty that has been utilized by the regime to suppress the popular move, and the dominant mood of change that sweeps the Arab sphere.

The past four months have witnessed an increasing polarized capacity of self organization by popular and traditional Syrian opposition forces. They also witnessed a clear split amongst the positions of regional powers toward the Syrian revolution as well as an escalation in international positions, especially that of Europe and the United States, against the Syrian regime and its policies.

How, then, can we assess the current status of the Syrian revolution? What is the prognosis of the sometimes bloody conflict between political and popular forces, on the one hand, and the regime, on the other hand?

## **1. The Popular Move**

Popular forces not only continue to express their opposition to the Syrian regime and its policies throughout most Syrian cities and townships but they have also shown great ability to persist. Although the cities that have been exposed to security-military storming, like Dar'a, Banyas, Latakia, Homs, and Hama, calm down a bit, they quickly return to the streets more frequently than before. Despite reports claiming that the number of detainees has exceeded 15 thousand, and military troops alongside security and pro-regime militias have exceeded tens of thousands using 3000 tanks and armored vehicles, the popular protests escalate whether in terms of cities and townships or the scale of participating masses.

In addition to Friday, which has become the regular day for the largest weekly popular protests, Syrian evenings are experiencing several demonstrations in various places in the country.

Clearly, the Syrian mass movement has become better organized and what are known as local coordinative committees are now more established and capable of renewing themselves and replacing their arrested members. The Syrian uprising's websites on the internet provide effective contribution in formulating and propagating the protest events and slogans albeit the local coordinative committees are not encompassed in one framework.

However, the major weakness in this popular movement is its inability to prompt the city of Aleppo and most of Damascus's quarters to participate in the uprising despite the efforts exerted last month (June 2011) by Syrian activists particularly in Aleppo. Although a few neighborhoods in Aleppo have weekly demonstrations, the largest commercial-industrial city in Syria, with its tremendous political heritage and its decisive role in shaping the country's future, has not engaged in the revolution's activity.

In the capital, Damascus, things are slightly different. Neighborhoods such as al Qabun, Rukn al Deen, al Qadam, and al Hajar al Aswad (or, the Black Stone), indeed have major public movements. Nonetheless, its movement is still not enough to secure a permanent protest site, such as Tahrir Square in Cairo and Sahat al Taghieer (Square of Change) in Sanaa. The

regime undoubtedly realizes the depth and scale of the mass challenge that it faces which, in turn, prompts the organization of pro-regime demonstrations in Damascus and other cities whose participants are believed to be state employees and members of the Ba‘th Party and reinforcing the security control in Damascus and Aleppo.

## 2. Opposition Forces

The movement for organizing the Syrian opposition forces was commenced by convening the Antalya Conference which encompassed a wide spectrum of the opposition factions abroad, in early June 2011. Then, on June 6th 2011, it was followed by another conference in Brussels which was largely dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In early July 2011, independent opposition figures, within Syria, called and convened for a forum in the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus that was chaired by the academic Munthir Khaddam and included a number of intellectuals and writers from the opposition. However, reports mentioned that the regime would not allow holding that forum before ensuring the participation of some pro-regime figures. Still, the forum was concluded with a communiqué that is not in the regime's interest.

Days after the Semiramis forum, Member of Parliament Muhammad Habash held a meeting that, according to him, represents the third bloc that does not agree necessarily with either the opposition or the regime. However, the meeting was clearly meant to offer the regime another opportunity.

Moreover, on July 10th, 2011, the Syrian Pan-Arab nationalist opposition figure, Hassan ‘Abd al ‘Adhim, declared, the formation of the “Coordinative Commission for Forces of Democratic Change,” which is composed of party representatives and independent figures from both inside the country and abroad, known chiefly for their secularist-liberal orientations.

Also, a prominent group of 45 Syrian figures mostly from within the country and of all political orientations and backgrounds, called to convene a national salvation conference based on the premise that Syria goes through a historical juncture and that the regime has already lost its legitimacy, and became just a party in a political arena, occupied by numerous powers, whose collective dialogue shall determine the future of Syria.

The signatories of the national salvation conference manifesto, which quickly received support from hundreds of other figures, called for holding the conference in the capital, Damascus. However, as the regime had completely ignored the call, the conference was held in Istanbul on July 16th, 2011 and was chaired by Haitham al Maleh, the most prominent human rights activist and opposition figure in Syria.

These broad Syrian political moves indicate that the Syrian revolution has poured new life into the political arena after the long-term hegemony of the Ba‘th party over the state and politics had marginalized and weakened all Syrian political forces. But the multiplicity of opposition factions and frameworks raises an important question regarding the opposition's ability to eventually speak with one voice, or whether one opposition framework will ultimately emerge as the mainstream political force, or whether the multiplicity of opposition forces will allow the regime to lure or contain some of its wings.

## 3. The Regime

Once the first moment of surprise had passed and the regime's leadership realized that it faces a popular movement that is difficult to control, this leadership developed a strategy with two

approaches. The first relies on the continuation of security-military repression operations all over the country, especially in areas that experience the strongest mass movements of protest. The second approach relies on announcing some steps towards legal and constitutional reform, to be implemented over the coming months, without any binding timetable. Such duality in the regime's strategy is one of the most important reasons behind the massive lack of confidence in the regime by the people, as well as most of the political opposition forces and independent figures.

The approach of security repression did not work out so far except in containing the popular protest movements in Aleppo and some neighborhoods in Damascus. Halting crackdown campaigns and releasing detainees has become one of the most prominent conditions, by the opposition forces, to engage in any dialogue with the regime regarding the country's future or to take the regime's reform approach seriously. However, the regime has not cared for such demands and has acted, since the beginning, as if the reform course which it claims to lead is totally independent of the repression atmosphere, opposition forces, and masses involved in the popular moves.

As it is known, the regime began its counteract by abolishing the emergency law and legislating the peaceful demonstration authorization law; but both enactments have not left any significant impact on the security-military approach. However, the cornerstone of the regime's reform approach was the announcement of a national dialogue conference, prepared and organized by a special 'Preparatory Commission' headed by Vice President, Farouk al Shara'. The Commission called for a preliminary consultative meeting during the period of 10-12 July, and was joined by nearly 180 independent and partisan figures. But apart from one or two participants, the meeting was dominated by pro-regime loyalty or partial reform interest. Nearly all opposition constituents and local revolution coordinative committees declared their boycott of the conference and refusal of dialogue in the current atmosphere controlling the country.

The consultative meeting was concluded with the issue of a statement that has left no substantial impact on the popular movement and opposition forces. The statement includes a set of general principles related to liberties, rule of law, the necessity of maintaining the state's stability and stature. It also stresses the need for drafting a new constitution and enacting new laws to liberate media and regulate political pluralism by the prospective national dialogue conference.

The impression so far left by the regime is that its adopted approach to reform is neither serious nor credible and what has been approved of that approach does not change anything in the orientation of security or nature of the regime's rule. Also the considerable dawdle in the reform steps is deliberate and meant to buy the regime more time, offer the security apparatus an ample opportunity to contain popular movement, or alleviate regional and international pressures on the regime.

However, in the long run, the regime faces other challenges that could have deeper eroding impact on its standing. First of all, the lasting mass protests will significantly exhaust the regime's loyal security and military forces, which have been increasingly experiencing officer and soldier defections. Second, the country's financial capabilities and economic resources are inherently meager. And the almost completely crippled economic, industrial, and tourist activities render such resources and capabilities worse. It is expected that financial-economic situations will reach the brink of the abyss before the end of this year (2011), if the pattern of mass protests remains as it is and if the regime fails to obtain sufficient economic aids from abroad. However, if Aleppo and Damascus fully join the revolution, the features of economic collapse will begin to show much earlier.

## Regional and International Positions

The map of regional positions has been unchanged since the early weeks of the Syrian uprising. In particular, Iran and its regional allies, namely Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shiite political forces in Iraq, are still clearly standing beside the Syrian regime and confirming the credibility of its reform intents. Also, increasing reports indicate the existence of command and logistic Iranian support for the Syrian exerted security and military efforts seeking to suppress the uprising. Indeed, other reports talk about Iranian support for the Qaddafi regime aiming to prolong the Libyan crisis so Western powers cannot single out President Assad's regime.

The Syrian regime also finds sympathy within the traditional Arab nationalist circles which, in turn, have limited sphere and influence on Arab streets; for the majority on the Arab street stands beside the Syrian popular movement and views it as an extension of the ongoing Arab revolution movements beginning early this year.

Turkey, which has received a large number of Syrian refugees fleeing from the oppression of the regime's apparatus, does not seem to have determined its position yet. While it sympathizes with the Syrian people and its demands, it exercises various pressures in order to push the Syrian President Assad to adopt steps for serious reform. Clearly, the trust between Ankara and Damascus has dwindled largely but there is no indication of the credibility of reports stating that Ankara is planning to establish a safe haven for Syrian refugees in Syrian territories, protected by the Turkish military for the influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey has not approached the extent of humanitarian crisis and the AK government leaders do not seek a fierce Arab reaction to such a step.

Certainly, the development of the Turkish position regarding the Syrian crisis is influenced by several factors: (i) the persistence of the mass movements and its entailed internal effects; (ii) the magnitude of Iranian intervention in Syrian affairs; (iii) the scale of Arab popular interaction with and support for the Syrian uprising; (iv) changes in international positions whether in the UN security council or in Washington and Moscow.

On the Arab level, several signs indicate that Arab countries – especially Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which formed their policy in the early weeks of the revolution on the premise of the survival of the Syrian regime – now, show less interest in its destiny. Thus, they allow their media outlets to cover the Syrian crisis relatively freely or without significant restraints. In Kuwait, in particular, the popular support for the Syrian revolution escalates rapidly, especially within Islamist circles. However, it is probable that the Gulf States have not yet reached the extent of supporting the deposition of the regime though they certainly seek the taming of the regime, at least politically. In general, despite the pro-Syrian regime statement by Dr. Nabil al 'Araby, the new Secretary-General of the Arab League, at the end of his visit to Damascus on July 13th, most Arab capitals are increasingly worried about the deepening Syrian-Iranian relations and the possibility of Syria's full dependence on Iranian support.

Internationally, the U.S. has just escalated its position regarding the regime's status (albeit the U.S. Department of State disclaimed the official status of Hillary Clinton's statement,) when the U.S. Secretary of State, announced that President Assad's regime has lost its legitimacy to rule. Clinton's statement came less than two weeks after the U.S. administration welcomed the Semiramis forum and considered it a positive step. Obviously, the American escalation came in response to pro-regime crowds' attacks against the American and French embassies directly after the U.S. and French ambassadors had visited the city of Hama on Friday, July 13th, 2011. The U.S. ambassador in Damascus, who plays a major role in formulating his country's position on the Syrian crisis, has in turn confirmed the peaceful

nature of the popular movements thus belying the regime's claims that armed gangs infiltrate popular gatherings. On the other hand, the French had taken a more critical position of the regime and its policies much earlier and had worked from the beginning in order to pass a UN resolution to condemn the regime and impose limited sanctions on it.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that no matter how much the Western position escalates, the maximum Western powers could do is resort to imposing more sanctions or intensify legal, ethical, and political pressures. The cards of Western powers in Syria itself are, to a large extent, limited; however, Syria's weakest flank, Lebanon, is perhaps the most vulnerable arena for significant Western pressure on Damascus. Nevertheless, the formation of pro-Syria pro-Iran Lebanese government renders the Western opportunity in Lebanon limited at the moment.

What hinders Western efforts to pass a UN resolution against the Syrian regime is not only Washington's indecision prior to its Secretary of State's latest statement, but also the Russian and Chinese positions opposing such resolution. The draft proposed in the UN Security Council is weak and inadequate from the standpoint of the Syrian opposition whose forces attempted to overcome the Russian hindrance by visiting Moscow, meeting Russian parliamentary figures, showing Syrian opposition's good intent regarding Syrian-Russian relations in the future. Some indications, however, imply a change in the Russian position; but no one can predict a significant shift without an arranged U.S.-Russian deal.

## **Syrian Revolution after Four Months**

The Syrian crisis represents an intractable or difficult dilemma abroad. On one hand, Iran and Hezbollah are sure losers in the Syrian and Arab streets, neither of them could abandon their only strategic ally in the Levant. Turkey, in turn, is aware that Syria represents the ultimate test for its Arab policy in the post-popular revolution era; and although it approaches the Syrian crisis with extreme caution, such caution itself may turn into a negative determinant or constraint. On the other hand, considering the failing financial-economic situation of the Syrian state, Arab Gulf States will face their own Syrian test. That implies that they have to decide either to extend their financial aid to the Syrian regime losing the respect and trust of their people and Arab peoples in general, or to let the regime's crisis exacerbate without being sure of its eventual collapse or its replacement with a stable and friendly regime.

As for international powers, despite their differences that preclude reaching any unified multilateral position, it is not certain if they represent a critical factor in deciding the future of the Syrian crisis even if they agree on a UN resolution. Hence, the greatest determinant in deciding Syria's future is the power balance between the regime, on one hand, and the popular move in addition to opposition forces, on the other.

Noticeably, throughout the four past months, the balance of popular power goes against the regime to a large extent, particularly in during the two months following the bloody crackdown campaign against the city of Dar'a and its rural surroundings. Perhaps it is warranted that the regime is no longer capable of defeating or containing the popular movement. The regime's main dilemma is its inability to convince the street and opposition forces with the credibility of its reform agenda or its willingness to implement profound political, security, and constitutional changes in the regime's core structure. To promote such credibility, the security and military operations should be immediately halted, and the use of weapons against demonstrators should be terminated indefinitely. However, the regime fears the decline of its security-military move will bring about greater popular protest move and will release Aleppo and Damascus from its clutches. Here lies the regime's great dilemma.

At the popular and grassroots level, Aleppo, mainly, and Damascus, relatively, both represents a major challenge to the capacity of the popular move and opposition forces to emphasize the inclusive character of the popular revolution and to undermine the regime's survival underpinnings.

At the level of state structure, the opposition so far faces the challenge of continuance of pro-regime loyalty within the security and military institutions, while there are no signs emphasizing wide-scale defections in both institutions. The opposition still has to exert greater effort to reassure the Alawite sect and Christian minorities that political change in Syria is no threat to their status or to the traditions of their Syrian citizenship.

At the level of opposition forces, if the Syrian opposition constituents fail to agree on a broad coalition and speak with one voice, it is not unlikely for the regime to succeed in enticing figures or containing factions from among the opposition.

Eventually, these overlapping complexities indicate that the course of the Syrian revolution will be relatively longer than those of other Arab revolutions, including those that have lasted for several months, such as Libya and Yemen. It should be made clear that the longer people and their political forces struggle against the regime, the greater the risk of civil strife and sectarian fissures.