Syria is the low-hanging fruit in the post-Saddam Middle East. Washington hawks, hoping to extend the impact of America’s victory in Iraq, are looking to Damascus as the next battlefield. The Ba’thist regime in Syria is isolated, bankrupt and divided under the leadership of its young President, Bashar al-Asad. Its very military and moral weakness make regime-change a temptation to policymakers who believe that America’s greatest enemies in the region are dictatorship and the status-quo. As David Frum and Richard Perle explained recently, “when the door [to democracy] is locked shut by a totalitarian deadbolt, American power may be the only way to open it up”. [1] The question for the hardliners is not how to apportion the carrot and the stick, but how most deftly to deliver the coup de grace. Israel’s ambassador to Washington explained how this could be done: “The way to deal with [Syria] is to de-legitimize its regime and the way to do that is by applying political pressure and to really apply economic sanctions… this is the key element to pressure [it] into regime change... So, this is the direction – a lot of psychological pressure.” [2]

The United States would be unwise to squeeze Syria to the breaking point. Regime change will present the U.S. with a number of immediate dangers and few clear advantages. The likelihood of Syria producing a fully democratic regime in the next ten to fifteen years is remote; it enjoys none of the recognized prerequisites for sustaining democracy: its elites are not committed to democracy, its population is not homogeneous, its national institutions are extremely weak and its per capita GDP is closer to $1,500 than the $5,500 commonly viewed as the democratic tipping point. Moreover, the strategy of promoting external opposition groups, such as Farid Ghadry’s Reform Party, is unlikely to succeed. Similar efforts to support exile groups to bring change to Cuba and Iraq have met with an unbroken record of failure. Should the Asad regime collapse, state institutions such as the army and police would likely disintegrate and the country would slip into chaos and inter-confessional violence. The model for intra-elite conflict would be the brother’s war of 1984. When Hafiz al-Asad fell seriously ill, his brother, Rifa’at, sent his militia onto the streets of Damascus to contest succession with the various security chiefs. Civil war was narrowly averted when Hafiz revived. Today, with no clear successor to Bashar within the Alawite community, it is quite possible that the Alawites would be pushed from power altogether. Should the Sunni majority reassert itself, it will not be the small class of liberals or old bourgeois families that take control. Experts agree that the likely alternative to the current regime is an Islamic state run by the Muslim Brotherhood.

By threatening Syria’s stability, the U.S. will elicit the opposite effect it desires. Syrians will rally around their government rather than demand change. Syrians are obsessed with maintaining stability. The notion that their country might catch the Lebanon disease and collapse into civil war or slip into lawlessness like Iraq has plagued public imagination. Stability was the major selling point of Hafiz al-Asad’s regime during its last decade.
Indeed, Syria has suffered less civil strife over the last 20 years than any of its neighbors, with the possible exception of Jordan. Many Syrians put up with enduring economic stagnation and political repression as the price of stability. The United States is more likely to get the change it seeks by pursuing a strategy of engagement with the government and by supporting internal reform movements.

Bashar al-Assad has consistently sought reform. Although, he has been hesitant and unsure of himself, he has demonstrated time and again that he is looking for a way out of Syria’s economic stagnation and a way into the good graces of Washington. Before becoming president, he led a steady and successful campaign to clean up the streets and local government of Latakia, the capital of the Alawite region. Latakia was traditionally known for its lawlessness and chaos. The shabbiha (young toughs and often Asad family members) had free run of the city. They regularly extorted money from local merchants, marketed smuggled Lebanese goods and openly carried automatic weapons about. They beat people up for unrecognizable slights in order to boost their profile and inspire fear. In short, they exhibited all the characteristics of a Mafia with few of its restraints. When Bashar inherited the mantle of power following his brother’s death in 1994, he waged a campaign to bring law and order to the Alawite heartland. He disciplined the Alawite ruffians and brought unruly family members to heel – in one incident, he personally had his cousin’s bodyguards thrown into jail for roughing people up. In 1996, thirteen of the nineteen Alawite professors at Tishrīn Medical School were fired for corruption – a measure designed to show that the regime would neither play favorites nor protect fellow coreligionists at the expense of the law. Today, the city is a much tamer place than it was in the 1980s, which is due in large measure to Bashar.

Of course, corruption and clientelism have not disappeared; they are the backbone of the regime. No Asad can eliminate them without hastening his own demise. All the same, much reform can be achieved by the Asad regime if it is pushed in the right direction. By encouraging reform without threatening regime change, there is a good chance that, in the long run, the very process of reform will transform the system. This is the logic being pursued with great success by the U.S. in its relations with undemocratic China. It can also work in Syria.

Since Bashar al-Assad assumed national leadership, Syria has begun a process of power pluralization. Where it will lead is still unclear. Bashar’s early eagerness for reform and encouragement of the “Damascus Spring” even as he insisted he would follow the Chinese path of forbidding political liberalization while pursuing economic reform was clearly contradictory. It confused Syrians and demonstrated his lack of experience. Opposition members immediately demanded free elections and regime change, forcing Bashar to crack down on them. This played into the hands of the old guard and seemed to sign the end of reform. Nevertheless, Bashar has not eliminated the civil society groups. This permissiveness may be a cynical contrivance to placate western observers, but it also allows for a steady stream of criticism that the President uses to keep the old guard on their heels and to keep the issue of reform on the front burner.

Bashar must deliver on his early promises to bring economic growth and political
liberalization to Syria. His legitimacy depends on it. Why else does he appoint reform-minded ministers and skilled technocrats? He needs change. Michel Kilo, a leading member of the civil society movement, recently explained that “Syria is no longer the same as it was under Hafiz al-Asad. The fear that was instilled in people’s bones during the old regime has disappeared. The discussions have become freer and critics more outspoken. During Hafiz al-Asad’s rule, the regime had a well-defined center of power. It was stable and unified. This is no longer the case. Power is scattered among different centers.”[3] Some Syrian reformers view the devolution of power taking place in a negative light because it has resulted in the increased independence of the pillars of the old regime – the Ba’th Party, the mukhabarat (secret police) and the army. Hakam Al-Baba, the Editor-in-Chief of the now defunct satirical weekly Al-Domari, explained, “Earlier one person ruled, now many rule. This is a dangerous chaos which leads to paralysis and the abandonment of political principles.” Other critics are hopeful that the relaxation of political principles and the pluralization of power will ultimately lead to greater liberty. They point to the emergence of new power centers espousing reform, greater openness and the participation of civil society. It is not only the old guard that benefits from Bashar’s weakness and willingness to put up with dissent, they argue. The devolution of authority creates new options in Syria. It also creates new options for the United States.

The path ahead for reform is unclear. The proliferation of economic reform plans is causing real confusion over who is in charge and what government policy really is. This past year, three separate wide-ranging economic reform plans were put forward. A draft economic reform plan (ERP) was released to the press last May and presented as a full program to reshape and liberalize the economy. No explanation was given for how this is to be linked to the five-year plan that is officially used as a framework for government work. Meanwhile, the Minister of Finance, Mohammad al-Hussein, announced on 20 November 2003 that his ministry had devised a three-year financial reform plan. Likewise, he made no reference to either the ERP or the five-year plan, although a major part of his plan covered financial and fiscal reform.[4] The flurry of economic reforms announced in the past several years demonstrates that many government officials are aware of the urgent need to reform and have been emboldened by the new president. The creativeness, initiative and new ideas that are being produced by the various Syrian ministries are directly attributable to Syria’s increased pluralism and the dynamism of its reforming spirit. Pluralism, however, is a double-edged sword. The lack of strong presidential leadership and the growing number of power centers can result in paralysis and chaos. However, Syria’s recent signing of the Economic Association Agreement with the E.U. and the Great Arab Free Trade Agreement with fellow Arab countries are promising signs. So is the recent inauguration of Syria’s first commercial banks.

The United States can help break the paralysis and push along the reform process by engaging with Syria. Nothing would help this more than for Washington to actively encourage a solution to the Golan issue. Bashar’s recently announced willingness to go beyond his father’s conditional commitments to pursue peace with Israel is promising. It offers Washington a chance to clear away the main impediment to improved relations with Syria.
Syria’s estrangement from the United States and radical turn towards socialism, military dictatorship and anti-Westernism began with the 1948 War and the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict. By helping to end that conflict, the United States can open a new chapter in regional politics and help steer Syria back toward the path of parliamentary politics and pro-Western policies. As one of Israel’s most astute Syria observers has recently written, “Bashar apparently understands that the best way to ensure his regime’s long-term survival and extract Syria from its economic travails is to reconcile with the United States. And for Syria, the road to Washington passes through Jerusalem.”[5] Washington’s use of the cudgel with Syria has clearly frightened Bashar al-Assad. He has responded positively by asking for American help with the Golan, sharing intelligence on al-Qaida and by signing important economic agreements with Europe. By playing the bad cop to Europe’s good cop, Washington has achieved some success. There is no reason, however, why the U.S. cannot play the good cop itself and reap the rewards. With a bit of positive reinforcement, Bashar al-Assad may even find the authority to push economic reforms with renewed vigor. To get out of its economic stagnation, Syria will have to privatize industry, cut state subsidies and go through many painful changes – all of which will produce widespread domestic opposition. The US should help Syria negotiate this difficult path, not impede it.

Endnotes:


3. Quoted in Carsten Wieland, “Syria After the Iraq War: Stagnation or Change?” (Unpublished article sent to me by the author who is presently researching the reform movement in Syria).


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