

# SYRIA: Regime survival depends on Hariri outcome

Contributed by Administrator  
Wednesday, 18 July 2007

**EVENT:** The UN Security Council is this week considering the latest report of the commission investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** President Bashar al-Assad in late May won an unopposed rubber stamp plebiscite approving a second seven-year term, thus completing the consolidation of his power. Having survived colossal external pressures during the past few years, his regime is now rounding up the remaining domestic opponents to its rule. The Hariri investigation remains the major outstanding challenge.

**ANALYSIS:** Before last summer's Lebanon war, the Assad regime was so cornered by domestic and international pressures that many were thinking in terms of when, not whether, it would collapse:

- Domestic calls for reform following Bashar's promises of political openness soon turned into demands for change.
- Rising external pressures, from Washington over accusations of facilitating the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq, and then from France following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February 2005, culminated in the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon that year.

Isolation lifted. However, since then the Bush administration's Middle East travails have limited its influence further, while the regime has managed to wriggle out of international isolation

- Foreign dignitaries, including several foreign ministers from EU member states, as well as US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, have recently visited Damascus.
- Bashar has been able to secure Arab approval for his bid to host the next Arab summit meeting in Damascus.

The key external challenge remains the possibility of a guilty verdict in the Hariri assassination tribunal implicating Bashar or family members. Averting such an outcome remains the regime's top priority (Opposition vanquished. The regime has also surmounted the challenge that Syria's opposition movement posed. In addition to the power of the regime's vast repressive apparatus, several factors account for this, mostly notably the fact that the opposition is fragmented and lacks credibility:

1. **Damascus Declaration.** One of the earliest movements to challenge the Assad regime, the signatories of the 'Damascus Declaration' comprised liberal politicians, writers, artists, and academics. They called for an end to the Ba'ath Party monopoly on power. However, they were unable to harness mass support. Moreover, they were united only in their opposition to the regime. Beyond vague calls for democracy, they had no programme or strategy. It was only a question of time before the regime intervened forcefully, putting an end to their activities.
2. **NSF.** The most vocal element of the expatriate opposition is the National Salvation Front (NSF), an alliance between the Paris-based Abdul Halim Khaddam, Syria's former vice-president and senior party figure, who defected in December 2005, and the Muslim Brotherhood &mdash; Syria's largest and best organised underground political movement (see SYRIA: Regime interests dictate regional policies - December 1, 2006). That odd alliance (the Brotherhood attempted on several occasions to assassinate Khaddam) is derived from opportunism: while the Brotherhood sought to capitalise on Khaddam's important foreign connections, Khaddam sought to exploit the Brotherhood's political party organisation to topple Bashar and take over.

However, instead of winning over large numbers of new recruits, as Khaddam expected, the NSF was quickly discredited:

- o Khaddam had been the driving force behind Bashar's crackdown against the 'Damascus Spring' in 2001.
- o Along with his children, Khaddam was heavily tainted by corruption allegations.
- o His sudden conversion to democracy and good government persuaded no one, at least not in Syria.
- o Indeed, the Saudi government, despite its ire at Bashar following the Hariri assassination, tempered its initial support to him.

Despite their repeated efforts, the leaders of the 'Damascus Declaration' and those of the NSF were unable to work together effectively. The former resented the NSF's attempts to lead the Syrian opposition movement, and they were also being hounded by the regime's secret police.

3. Reform Party of Syria. This Washington-based group is led by Farid Ghadri. Not unlike Iraq's Ahmed Chalabi, Ghadri bet on a US military intervention in Syria to bring down the Assad regime. Indeed, the perception in Syria that Ghadri is a tool in the hands of Washington neo-conservatives is not entirely misguided. Moreover, to endear himself and his movement to US policymakers, Ghadri spoke openly about his membership of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and later said he would establish the first Holocaust museum in the Arab world if he took power in Damascus.

4. Rifaat. The flamboyant brother of the late President Hafez al-Assad who has been living in exile since the 1980s, Rifaat al-Assad is very unpopular in Syria, in large part because of his well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness and corruption when in power. Hafez made sure before he died in 2000 to eliminate what remained of Rifaat's power base.

Fear of the unknown. The regime has also played on the sense of fear which has long gripped most Syrians that the outcome for Syria of the democracy Washington is promoting in the Middle East would be similar to that in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine: civil war, chaos, and the breakdown of society, respectively. In light of this, the influx of Iraqi refugees to Syria, now numbering 1.5 million, serves regime purposes well as it vividly illustrates the plight that awaits Syrians should the regime collapse and civil war follow (

These scare tactics work well with Syrians, in particular as many among them recall the political turbulence of the 1950s and 1960s in which military coups and counter-coups made Syria a classic example of third-world instability. The fear of the unknown and a preference for the status quo &mdash; major factors in contemporary Syrian political culture &mdash; account for Syrian society's acquiescence in authoritarian rule.

Improved economy. The recent improvement in economic conditions has also helped the regime (

- According to a recent IMF report, the economic recovery that started in 2004 remained on track last year, with non-oil GDP growing at an estimated 6-7%, job creation picking up, and exports (to Arab markets) making strong gains.

- Private investment has gathered momentum &mdash; the volume of investment approvals has surged as companies, especially from Gulf states, jockeyed to position themselves in the fledgling Syrian market

- **CONCLUSION:** In the absence of external assistance, Syria's disunited opposition movement no longer poses a threat to the regime. Its fragmentation, together with US regional travails, a popular longing for stability and an improved economy, have saved the Assad regime. Barring a guilty verdict by the Hariri tribunal against Bashar or his family members, which would render him a domestic and international pariah, he should complete his second term of office.