

Assad's Taqiyya to deceives his people

Contributed by Walid Phares
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While appearing to reform to meet protestors' demands, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is actually engaged in taqiyya, a practice in Shi'ite Islam where adherents conceal their faith when they are under threat, persecution, or compulsion

Although the origins of taqiyya are found in fundamentalist dogma, Ba'athists and other authoritarian regimes in the region have used it for decades in propaganda. Once widespread opposition to his one-party regime became evident, Assad needed to shield himself from international retribution. In an effort to buy time, the Syrian dictator announced that he would cancel the "emergency law" which forbids demonstrations and limits free speech.

Assad's lack of credibility immunizes Syrian protesters to his "taqiyya." No deception will convince them that the president's intentions are good. Ma'moun Homsy, a former member of Syria's parliament who has been jailed several times for speaking out against the regime said recently, "The dictator is gaining time and playing the propagandist, nothing more."

In an April 16 speech, Assad made his "reformist" stance clear, saying there will no longer be "an excuse" for organizing protests after Syria lifts the emergency law and implements the reforms.

Emergency laws are lifted so that protests can take place freely, not the other way around. In fact, Assad's speech sought to gild the rapidly deteriorating image of Damascus' ruling elite. Dozens of citizens, mostly youths, have been killed by hit teams and snipers since the beginning of April. Reports have accused Assad of importing Iranian and Hezbollah militias to help suppress the protests. With such bloodshed - media reports state that up to 200 have so far been killed - the regime has been delegitimized and its leaders will eventually face Syrian or international justice, no matter how long it takes, as is the case in other Arab countries where rulers ordered protesters killed.

Assad's flanking maneuver to attack the Syrian revolt's rearguard is not reform. He never mentioned changing Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution which states "The leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Ba'ath Party."

The protesters' main goal is breaking the monopoly of Assad's ruling party. There was never any mention of releasing all political detainees. Equally important, there has been no dismantling of the existing security apparatus; and last but not least, there is no intention of revising the Syrian constitution. The only thing the dictator is doing is accusing imaginary "foreign conspiracies" from Israel, the United States, Arab Sunni governments and Lebanon. His citizens do not buy these stories.

The demonstrators, mostly from civil society groups, were inspired by the "Damascus Declaration" issued more than five years ago by dissidents, some of whom remain in jail to this day. Most of the protesters are young males, with female protesters seen primarily on college campuses. Political movements that oppose the regime (left wing, liberals and others) support the uprising but aren't moving to the front of the protests for fear of being exposed. This also applies to the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, which is present on the streets but prefers, for the time being, that others be seen as taking the lead.

The protests started initially in Daraa in the south, where most of the killing took place. Gradually, they spread to cities in the north and finally Damascus. The demonstrators are mainly Sunnis, Syria's numerical majority, but Kurds, Christians, the Druze and even Alawites (Assad's own ruling sect) have joined the marches.

The regime is using security forces and militias to suppress the revolt. Regular troops are only seeing limited involvement, to avoid provoking troop defections. In addition, Iran and Hezbollah have permanent bases inside Syria and have been supplying the Syrian regime with equipment to track and suppress the communications of opposition groups that are organizing the demonstrations.

Despite the Assad regime's police state, the masses will not retreat now. The demonstrators know all too well that the son of Hafez Assad could surpass the Hama massacres - a 1982 crackdown on a Sunni Muslim community in Hama that saw an estimated 10,000 killed - if the revolt recedes.

Bashar played his last card with hollow promises of legal remedies rather than the principles of free elections. The Syrian dictator's taqiyya hasn't fooled the people on the streets; they are well acquainted with the regime's methods, which have

been on display against Syria's enemies for decades. Assad can't fool his own people; he can only frustrate them further.

Dr Walid Phares is the author of *The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East* and a professor of Global Strategies in Washington DC. He advises members of the US Congress and the European Parliament.