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After a slow start, the unrest sweeping the Middle East and North Africa has reached the Levant. Protesters, inflamed by a local matter, have been in the streets of Daraa, an agricultural town in southwest Syria that has been historically loyal to the regime, since March 15. Some protesters are long-time democracy activists demanding greater political rights and freedom. Nonetheless, the largest motivation is similar to what we have witnessed throughout the MENA region: state corruption and a "youth bulge" of younger citizens who find themselves with good educations but no opportunities for economic advancement.

(Editor's note : 15 years ago this was dubbed "revolutions of unfulfilled expectations" by our Patron General Lord Guthrie.)

So far, the Syrian regime has responded to the upheaval with conflicting statements that seem to demonstrate how ill-prepared Assad is for dealing with a crisis of this magnitude. The regime has at times painted protesters as religious extremists or foreign agents, but then has acknowledged their "legitimate" demands and pledged reforms. This was clearly evident in President Assad's speech on 6th April in which he failed to "come up with anything dramatically new or tangible" and that, in spite of initial optimism, the situation in Syria remains unchanged. Protests were reported in various parts of the country on 8th April, with more scheduled for the following week, while a new government is being formed with the former Agriculture Minister, Adel Safar, as the new Syrian Prime Minister.

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, he began liberalizing the economy and society. As a result, high culture has boomed and foreign imports, tourism and arts are being revived. For the impoverished majority, however, the picture is grim. One-third of the population lives on \$2 a day or less. Unemployment is rampant, and four years of drought have reduced Syria's eastern countryside, including Daraa, to a wasteland of dusty and destitute towns. Added to this is a new unwillingness to tolerate brutal suppression and vague promises of future reform. The mukhabarat (secret police) and associated security forces, moreover, have been given so much leeway over the years that it is now extremely difficult to reform and/or reduce their power. Any radical attempt by the President and his allies to shake-up the security forces might indeed result in a backlash from the prominent forces loyal to the Assad family, thereby further undermining the regime's ability to govern. This is of paramount importance because current instability in Syria provides Syria's regional rivals, particularly Gulf States, with a rare opportunity to seek to precipitate its demise.

And to make matters worse, the specter of sectarianism looms. Assad is from the minority Alawite sect of Islam, though his country is predominantly Sunni Muslim with sizable population of Christians and other religious minorities. Demonstrators in Daraa now chant "no Iran, no Hezbollah, we want a Muslim who fears God". The slogan is a swipe at the Alawites, a branch of Shia Islam, and also a rejection of Syria's close ties to Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Domestic politics aside, any unrest in Syria will have great regional implications. Syria has a strategic location bordering Iraq, Israel, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. A full-fledged sectarian conflict in Syria will be disastrous to the country, and it also has the potential to spread to neighboring Lebanon, Iraq, and even Turkey with its large, deprived Kurdish population.

If a new democratic government emerged in Syria, it would alter the regional balance and improve the prospects for Israel-Palestine peace. In theory, a democratic Damascus would be bad news for Hezbollah and Iran, and thus good news for the West. But there are a number of pragmatic and strategic reasons to fear the unpredictable consequences of revolution in Syria; not least instability on the borders of Israel and Iraq and the precedent it might set for Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, now that Syria has been weakened by internal problems, the viability of the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis is in danger, which in turn could encourage dangerous risk-taking behaviors by Iran and Hezbollah to counter perceived gains by the United States and Israel.

In a nutshell, a civil strife in Syria can profoundly disturb the whole region, creating a nightmare scenario for Western officials. Thus, stability in Syria seems to be preferable to yet another experiment in Arab governance, as evident in the American, British, Chinese, French, and Turkish governments' statements, all of which rule out military intervention in Syria and instead urge President Assad to initiate reforms.

President Assad needs to act quickly and decisively to quell the rising current of dissent, not least because his own power and authority are at stake. In all likelihood, however, there is no soft landing for the Syrian regime, though a regime change or a revolution is unlikely. Fearful of being pushed from power and persecuted, Alawite military leaders are likely to stick by the President. There is no separate army as in Egypt and Tunisia, and the fact that Alawites and other minorities' fear that a fall of the Assad regime would lead to their massacre by Sunnis could protect the regime from military defections, which were necessary to ending regime rule in Tunisia and Egypt. More importantly, the President himself is generally well-liked in the country. He has managed to keep Syria united, and there has been some economic growth, fiscal and administrative reforms, and educational development. In a sense, this is what he meant on Wednesday when he claimed, "we have introduced reforms ourselves, but not because of pressure...whoever wants reform, we are here".

What remains to be seen, therefore, is: a) whether the Sunni elites, who have stood by the Assad family for over four decades, will continue to do so, and b) whether President Assad is willing to make profound and risky changes, including press freedom, formation of opposition parties, and abolition of the emergency law.

Should these reforms be implemented, resulting changes would be nothing short of revolutionary. The irony is that any concession is likely to be viewed as inadequate and only fuel additional demands because, among other things, the opposition is weak and does not have a

clear vision for the future. This is why the regime needs to implement the desired reforms fully so to convince the public that change is real, and absence of a clear popular vision for orderly change offers Assad the chance to do just that.

However, should Sunnis join protesters in large numbers and/or regime refuses to accept fundamental changes, Syria will inevitably head towards a bloody, sectarian confrontation providing western powers with a reason to regret their rush to war with Col Gaddafi. In this case, a division of labor might become the only viable, albeit costly, option available to western powers with Britain and its European allies taking the lead in the Libyan theatre, and Americans in charge of the Levant. Not only Arab revolutions will be discredited in this way, but also two years of Obama diplomacy to re-create American/Western image in the Muslim world will fritter away.