

Predicament of Syria - The MENA Issue

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ABSTRACT

While other Arab regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have crumbled due to popular pressure without massive amounts of blood being spilled, the Syrian government continues to oppress and kill oppositional forces and its citizens at an increasingly alarming rate. Despite European and US pressure through United Nations mechanisms, there does not appear to be full international support for any post-Assad Syria, nor a response to outside intervention, such as that done by Russia and Iran. The current US administration is in large part distracted because of upcoming elections and the lagging economy. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a false diplomatic choice: a US led Invasion or a UN Sponsored Resolution. Perhaps the resolution of the Syrian 'dilemma' is somewhere else. This paper will explore other options besides 'bullets and speeches'. In fact, this paper will argue that Syria presents an opportunity to make major strides on THE MENA issue: a nuclear Iran.

Introduction

Unfortunately, the American electorate and those pandering for votes pay precious little attention to foreign affairs. If the Gaza Strip is mentioned, many think this is a Palestinian night club. The West often sees the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as “cleanly divided between moderates and militants” and this type of gross generalization results in skewed public support for skewed policy (Malley and Harling 2010). Effectively, the US cares more about jobs, interest rates and gas prices than the billions of dollars spent around the world trying to win friends and influence nations. Thus, when the so-called „Arab Spring“ began in January 2011, policy makers were caught flat-footed and have only responded tepidly and without focus. By the time Libya was in free-fall, the Obama administration was still struggling with the options of a false diplomatic choice: invasion („boots on the ground“) with or without allies, or a United Nations (UN) resolution through the Security Council.

Here, in what would foreshadow the present Syrian crisis, the US pressed for a „no-fly zone“ over Libya and measures to protect civilians (note: no direct military commitment) in the UN Security Council (no.1973). However, both China and Russia

abstained from this largely humanitarian resolution. While most European states and the US saw this action as “responding to cries for help,” the Chinese and Russians were already thinking three steps ahead to thwart the US in the larger MENA. Still, Libya collapsed and by early fall of 2011, Muammar al-Gaddafi was dead. In fact, by that point there was seemingly a justification for American policy makers to be optimistic: Tunisian President Zine Ben Ali had stepped down (January 14, 2011), Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had been deposed (February 11, 2011) and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh ceded power and fled the country (February 27, 2012). It would be easy to understand how and why erroneous conclusions would be drawn from these events: with nothing more than speeches and UN resolutions, the MENA was seeing unparalleled changes. In a nation strapped for cash, this type of foreign policy making was cost-effective. States that were led by authoritarians for decades were crumbling from within.

Yet, those MENA monarchies, while not completely insulated from the winds of the Arab Spring, certainly proved more resilient than the authoritarian regimes (Goldstone 2011). Maybe a new type of foreign policy strategy is evolving. Are „boots on the ground“ policies now a relic? Had diplomacy through conflict or war fallen out of favor? Could the US rely on „soft power“ and „reset“ relations elsewhere without committing troops? Since this approach had „worked“ in the rest of the MENA, was this not the right avenue for Syria? Unfortunately, this was not the first time when flawed MENA policy created a short-term „successful“ outcome. In All the Shah’s Men, one of the larger points made is that the US just kept trying to recreate conditions similar to the one where Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown in 1953 (Kinzer 2003). The reasoning is as follows: the Iranian people today “are desperate to be rid of the clerical regime and that the United States can encourage them and even help them to do so” (Pollack 2004). When nuclear weapons or support for terrorism is added it creates a sense of urgency that *prima facie* justifies such an approach. But, how often was such a flawed approach tried in the Middle East with calamitous consequences?

The (Latest) Syrian Crisis

In 1920, at the dawn of a new, modern secular Syria, the French backed Prime Minister made a toast under a flag designed by the French proclaiming, “United Syria!” (Pipes 1990). There was no united Syria then or now. The repressive regime of Hafiz al-Assad bequeathed his son Bashar al-Assad a “fragile mosaic” of ethnic and sectarian communities” that hardly can be piecemealed into a modern nation state (Kessler 1987). According to the CIA World Factbook (2012), there are at least 11 Christian sects in Syria, more than 4 Muslim sects, and a small Jewish community. On a good day, Syria is hard to govern. As noted in a Saban Center (part of the Brookings Institute) publication, “these social and sectarian cleavages have for centuries been a source of considerable tension” (Leverett 2005). Yet, there is no need to go back centuries or decades to find support for civil unrest. If MENA experienced an Arab Spring beginning in January 2011, then there was already a „Damascus Spring“ in September 2000. As detailed in his work Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom, Alan George (2003) describes an enigma:

Bashar al-Assad inherited a demoralized, corrupt authoritarian system that cannot be reformed. Proof of this was found in The Statement of 99 (and later the 1,000), which broadcast aspirations for democracy and a cry for human rights on September 27, 2000. This was almost 12 years before the Arab Spring.

The signatories represented professors, lawyers, poets, economists, etc...a real cross section of the intelligentsia of Syria. Anyone paying attention should have seen this coming for miles. With regard to the present crisis, electronic media has difficulty keeping up with the almost daily account of atrocities committed by the Assad regime. Also, there has been a tendency to imagine the worst case scenario. This is quite unnecessary as the present crisis is already gruesome enough. In an interview with Canadian TV, Middle East expert Robin Wright describes the Arab League reaction to the crisis as well as a call upon Assad to step down. What is even more troubling is the concern shown over the potential use of chemical weapons on his own people. While many continue to suggest that Syria's days are numbered, Assad's regime has shown remarkable stamina in fighting the rebels. But, as a writer for the Christian Science Monitor postulates, there are five specific developments that point to this situation reaching a "tipping point":

- Assassination of major Assad cabinet members, especially Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat;
- Fighting in Damascus;
- Assad keeping a low profile;
- Controlling the borders and ports by the rebel forces; and
- Wavering in unconditional support by Russia (Bright 2012).

Still, Syria has flirted with danger for years. Its relationship with Hezbollah through Iran certainly has proved useful against the US and Israel but also in Lebanon (Norton 2007). But, this could give way to extremists gaining more ground at the cost of the civil liberties and pro-democracy (not necessarily pro-Western) factions. As one manifesto stated, "Jihadists in Syria believe they have hit the trifecta: a weak Syria that is tyrannical, sectarian and heretical" (Kazami 2010). Could a religiously intolerant regime be waiting in Syria? And why not? Consider the massacre of the Muslim Brotherhood by Bashar's father Hafiz in 1982. There, "tens of thousands of people were killed" as Syrian regular forces used artillery on civilians (Tabler 2011). Fast-forward to today, the present regime has shown no hesitation in slaughtering its citizens struggling for democratic reforms.

The Persian Connection

The link between Iran and Syria travels in large part through Hezbollah. This association is more than state-sponsored terrorism or having a proxy willing to do your dirty work. At the same time, this connection has given fuel to the fire of labeling Iran and Syria as part of the group of nations opposing democracy and Western versions of human rights. In his State of the Union Address on January 22, 2002, President George W. Bush labeled Iran as part of the „axis of evil“ along with Iraq and North Korea. While making a great sound bite, it was just bad policy to assume that Iran could be lumped into

a category with states led by Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il. In short, Iranians looking for a thaw in US relations found another American President advocating regime change and demonizing Iran's leadership (Katz 2005). Another opportunity missed. Such a missed opportunity in effect opened the door for others than saw Iran and its regional partner Syria as less ideological and more pragmatic (Takeyh 2006). Yet, severing the Hezbollah ties between Iran and Syria, while still strong, are not a guarantee of success, even if this is possible.

Hezbollah now has its own power base since its summer class with Israel in 2006. This means that Hezbollah is a regional force irrespective of Iran or Syria and can shape policy in Lebanon and Israel as a "pivotal power" (el-Hokayem 2007). In many ways, part of the reason Hezbollah has been able to gain power is because of the Syrian retreat from Lebanon. Briefly, Hezbollah may not go quietly into that goodnight. One author states, "A global nuclear revival is taking place" (Bratt 2010). If that accurate, then Iran is at the center of that revival. Iran's nuclear program is the focal point of almost all of this administrations MENA policy at the expense of the Palestinians and Syrians. Perhaps this issue warrants such attention. Yet, the overwhelming view regarding this issue is that Iran's nuclear program (i.e., either for civilian energy usage or as part of offensive weapons) is a pressing policy issue and a showdown is inevitable (Evans and Corsi 2006). In fairness, there are those that do not perceive Iran's nuclear program as a direct threat to the US or its Persian Gulf allies. One researcher states that "the slow pace of Iranian nuclear progress to date strongly suggests that Iran could still need a very long time to actually build a bomb...and [they] could ultimately fail to do so" (Hymans 2012). This can be partly explained by the lack of wealthy oil states (i.e., Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia) to build a nuclear weapon yet despite decades of effort and billions of dollars.

Next, there may not be a consensus among the power elites of Iran on this issue. In other words, Supreme Leader Khamenei, as have other religious leaders, spoken out in the past against chemical and nuclear weapons, and may have gone as far as to issue "a secret fatwa" (Ali 2001). Regardless, there are factions within Iran that are apprehensive about developing weapons, although most support a civilian or domestic energy related program (Walsh in Caraley and Kando 2007). Related to such a program, states with a dysfunctional bureaucracy often struggle with administering complex technology projects such as a nuclear program. Iran's bureaucracy on a good day would only be described as dysfunctional. But, does Pakistan necessarily have a well-adjusted, functional bureaucracy? Regardless, the fact that Israel (an ally) reached a decision to use its nuclear arsenal during the Yom Kippur War in 1973 (but backed off) shows that even under a scenario where the US has its greatest influence, a nation will act in its perceived interests in spite of its rationality (Hersh 1991).

Many states have played some role in the development of Iran's nuclear program and the US, albeit early in the process, was one as well. According to a collaborative Turkish and Russian research project, Iran found a willing partner in the former USSR and by 1995 this arrangement was taking over the Bushehr facility (Aras and Ozbay 2006). Is it possible that a nuclear Iran could still be a regional partner or, just maybe, an

ally for the US? It is important to understand that Iran could have been a partner in Iraq before, during and after the American invasion (Barzegar 2008). Where would Shi'a refugees fleeing Iraq naturally seek shelter? Iran. The trap of conceptualizing that Iran is attempting to create a „Shi'a crescent“ in the MENA relies too much on an ideological interpretation of Iran and not a more pragmatic one (Ramazani 2004).

American Foreign Policy

President Barack Obama was sworn into office with a handful of foreign policy initiatives that would “refurbish the United States” image abroad, especially in the Muslim world; end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; offer an outstretched hand to Iran; „reset“ relations with Russia as a step toward ridding the world of nuclear weapons; elicit Chinese cooperation on regional and global issues; and make peace in the Middle East” (Indyk et al. 2012). Obama’s platform is best described as „progressive pragmatism“. He is clearly a break from Bush, but not so much a departure that his policies are overly idealist or multilateralist. Unfortunately for Obama, this has meant that in certain areas, the MENA being one, he appears neither on the „left“ or „right“ which makes him a target for both extremes of America’s two major parties. For example, The Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee prodded Obama to be tough with the Iranians and stop allowing them to continue “lying to the international community [as they had done] for years about its allegedly peaceful nuclear intentions” (Parsi 2012). Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski urged President Obama to avoid unilateralism and sanctions where the middle class gets hurt, such as a gasoline embargo (2010). He advocated a policy that is based on patience and sensitivity. That will be a difficult position to take regardless of party affiliation.

In a worse case-scenario, President Obama often appears to have no strategy, but merely a method to react. Perhaps nowhere on the planet better demonstrates the need for better American foreign policy than the MENA. The US frequently finds itself “playing catch-up with a region that it pictures as stagnant” (Malley and Harling 2010). Further, every US administration finds itself faced with the desire for change in policy and then are struck by the reality that there is nothing simple in the MENA, especially in Iran or Syria. And, when the issue of nuclear weapons is added to the mix, then it really gets tricky. In particular, the US (and Israel) have overestimated Iran’s nuclear potential and technological abilities for the past 20 years (Hymans 2012). In fact, one could argue that the present Obama administration has shown as little meaningful success as every other previous administration: no better, no worse. Still, since the 2009 Iranian Presidential elections and subsequent economic sanctions on Iran have led many to see Obama’s first term as largely a disappointing for making improvements to the past „carrot-stick“ (with few carrots) approach (Maloney 2010). He certainly could have taken a hint from the Clinton administration that attempted to relax economic sanctions in 2000 by lifting penalties against agricultural and medical goods.

As one Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili stated, “We have lived with sanctions for 30 years, you cannot bring down a large nation like Iran with economics” (Der Spiegel

2009). If not sanctions, then what? War or the threat of war? Coercive diplomacy “has a bad record.” The US should avoid violence or threats of violence does not have the intended result and could “produce armed (or in this case nuclear) conflict [instead of] accommodation” (Dobbins 2010). On a related matter, one must ask: was the Stuxnet computer worm that damaged Iran’s nuclear equipment a legitimate form of sanctions or a Western-backed form of cyber terrorism? This could push nationalism among the scientific community in a direction unforeseen and against US or UN interests (Hymans 2012).

Moreover, economic sanctions, which primarily target Iran’s oil sector, are largely ineffectual as demand for oil prevails over the desire for crippling their economy for the purposes of negotiating the nuclear issue (Maloney 2010). One Middle East expert claimed that neither war, sanctions nor anything short of a “30 years commitment to containment” would make a dent in Iranian objectives to become a great power (Baer 2008). In fact, sanctions have failed to produce any “measurable progress for the core objectives of US foreign policy (McFaul et al. 2006). Some have even argued that the US should merely adjust its foreign policy to assume that Iran will develop a nuclear weapon and this is actually less dangerous than Israel alone having many such weapons (Waltz 2012). That seems like a strange argument if Iran will continue to support Hezbollah and publicly call for Israel’s destruction. With regard to Syria, consider the US approach once it was clear that internal forces alone were not going to bring down the Assad regime: sanctions and threats of support for the opposition. That sounds much like policy toward Iran. The parallels of policy, failure and restructuring are remarkable. By President Bush’s second term, Syria had gone as far as to revoke American visas to continue in the Fulbright Program (Tabler 2011). As American influence and prestige suffered, Iran was all too ready to fill the void. According to an Iranian news report, Iran had invested almost ½ billion dollars in Syria, or about 2/3s of all Arab monies invested there (IRNA 2007).

The (Not So) United Nations

Those looking for evidence of an impending crisis in Syria should have considered UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (adopted on September 2, 2004). Here, the issue of Lebanon was addressed and Syria’s departure from that war-torn country began in earnest. But, as substantiation of what would become a significant obstacle to American (and the EU) policy in MENA, China and Russia would abstain. Later, Russia would move from abstaining to vetoing, especially when it concerned Iran. Russia’s position on opposing Iranian sanctions and Syrian intervention show the overall weakness of the UN system. Russia, acting on her own self-interest, can veto (as does China) any attempt to increase the US or UN presence in MENA, especially Syria and Iran. The reason is obvious for Iran: Russian cooperation on nuclear technology is the dominant factor (and one of the few areas of significant disagreement with the US) and will remain so. Russia’s claim is that the US has virtually the same relationship with North Korea as Russia does with Iran (Aras and Ozbay 2006). As a result, there is mutual

leverage between Russia and Iran: economic and political. Russia turns her head on the issue of Syrian support by Iran and Iran continues to buy nuclear technology from Russia. No UN Security Council resolution trumps that. China, on the other hand, is a bit more philosophical in its abstention.

China views sanctions as “both ineffective and interference in the affairs of another state --- a principle that China holds dear as a protection against Western criticism...of its own internal matters (Parsi 2012). As long as China abstains or vetoes minor measures, such as sanctions, then they will never have to deal with the larger issue of placing UN peacekeepers in Damascus or Tehran. On April 29, 2011, according to US Presidential Order 13572, Obama declared: [T]he Government of Syria’s human rights abuses, including those related to the repression of the people of Syria, manifested most recently by the use of violence and torture against, and arbitrary arrests and detentions of, peaceful protestors by police, security forces, and other entities that have engaged in human rights abuses, constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States... While this offers a solid, but cursory, account of the problems in Syria, it is hard to accept the final clause without wondering why little has been done. One, do the problems in Damascus „really“ impact the national security of the United States? Then they do, then why has there been little follow up? Other than perfunctory efforts in the UN Security Council, where is the diplomatic effort?

In February 2012, the UN released a Human Rights Council report detailing the atrocities being committed in Syria (See Appendix B). In short, the US, the EU and the Arab League would like for the violence to end and for Assad to leave the country. Syria’s response (See Appendix C) dismissed the report, its methodology and conclusions. Unfortunately, the UN is still struggling to find a way to resolve this crisis peaceably. As for the Iranian nuclear program, the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has a terrible track record for compliance and thus no capacity for enforcement. Consider the language from Security Council Resolution 1696: The Security Council, seriously concerned that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was still unable to provide assurances about Iran’s undeclared nuclear material and activities after more than three years, today demanded that Iran suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, and gave it one month to do so or face the possibility of economic and diplomatic sanctions to give effect to its decision. This was passed in the Security Council with Qatar the only vote against. But that was in 2006. Would either Russia or China support this measure today? The UN has been a disappointment in terms of finding a way to peaceably halt Iran’s nuclear program.

An Opportunity

Those that see Syria and Iran attached to the hip like Siamese sovereign states entirely miss the point of nuanced MENA politics. While they have many common foes (i.e., Israel) and allies (i.e., Hezbollah), their positions are not lock-step. Take for

example the issue of Israel. Iran continues to espouse (regardless of whether this is pure rhetoric or not really does not matter) Israel's destruction. Syria continued to support negotiations until the Arab Spring. Another area of dissimilar policies could include Iraq. "Iran seeks an Iraq under heavy Iranian influence, whereas Syria hopes to make the country an integral part of the Arab world (Malley and Harling 2010). The history of Iranian-Syrian relations is unlikely to end any time soon expect for one thing: regime change in Damascus (Goodarzi 2006). This helps explain much about the tenacity of Tehran's support for Assad regardless (perhaps because of?) Arab, EU, UN and US pressure. James Dobbins describes the atmosphere post-911 where regional stakeholders met to discuss Afghanistan. One of those at the table supporting the US was Iran. And why not? US policy in Afghanistan and Iraq (toppling Saddam Hussein) saw the biggest windfall for Iran in decades (Cole 2010). Was it not the Iranian government that sounded an early alarm regarding the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda in general?

In fact, many Iranians were hoping for some level of public "acknowledgement on how much help it was providing to the US" (Katz 2005). But this never happened and relations soured again. President Obama could "pick up the dialogue with Tehran where it was left in 2003" (Dobbins 2010) when the Afghani negotiations broke down and include a key component that seems to always be lacking: engagement with Iran. Such engagement would obviously include "countering drug trafficking and development the infrastructure in Afghanistan" (Sadat and Hughes 2010). In 1906, the Constitutional Revolution appeared to lay a foundation for what would become an Iranian secular democracy, but they are still "grappling with how to achieve a democratic state (Gheissarri and Nasr 2006). In a major work, Fakhreddin Azimi (2008) describes the historical struggle of Iran for democracy and to reach modernity against the backdrop of authoritarianism. Without being too heavy-handed, the US could assist in developing democratic structures that have a Shi'a flare. This would be similar to how the US assisted East European states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the larger MENA, working with diverse (and religious?) leadership post-Arab Spring will become a necessity.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was already an organized and viable entity prior to January 2011. But, they also have a strong presence in Iraq, Jordan, Syria and with the Wahhabi establishment in Saudi Arabia (Nasr 2006). Thus, it is not important to denigrate them, but work with them through a democratic process that includes secular representation. Since there is also "disenchantment with utopias" from either the left or the right, religious or secular (Filali-Ansary 2012) meaningful reform and representation, especially for women and ethnic and religious minorities is key. In other words, those parties or organizations promising a glorious future built on, for example, Shari'a law, will be met with resistance and disbelief. This is a different MENA than the one where Ayatollah Khomeini "turned religion into politics...[bringing] to power a government promising social transformation (Mackay 1996).

Conclusions

Since developing sound MENA policy, especially with regard to Syria and Iran, is so difficult, most administrations either offer only token gestures or they attempt to “minimize its involvement with Tehran while simultaneously trying to minimize Iran’s ability to cause problems for the United States” (Pollack 2004). The US, Iran and Syria share many regional interests but are separated by conflicting ideologies (Parsi 2007). As one American diplomat has asserted, “Sanctions and negotiations are not alternatives” (Dobbins 2010). Consequential engagement is based upon full understanding of interests and motives and a sympathetic view towards variances in policy. After all, even among America’s allies, is there 100 percent agreement across all issues? There are also significant areas for potential collaboration among America’s MENA allies and Iran and Syria. Thus, the surface area for diplomacy is expanded to generate the possibility for greater cooperation. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran have a mutual interest in wiping out al-Qaeda (Cole 2010).

Iran, Syria and Turkey have common threats and interests (i.e., riparian rights and refugees) that coalesce with American interests (Kinzer 2010). Clearly, the drive to include Turkey has additional benefits, especially on the nuclear issue. Some have suggested that a delicate balance of power that has existed since 1639 (Treaty of Kasr-I Shirin) will now be radically shifted to favor Iran (Kibaroglu and Caglar 2008). There are tensions between the two states, but undoubtedly these have lessened since the height of anti-Iranian rhetoric of the 1990s from Turkey’s secular class. But, does a nuclear Iran mean a nuclear Turkey? Would an increase in Turkish involvement subsequently draw in the European Union (EU)? The EU only allows member states to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. The Hoover Institution produced a report that was part of the Iran Democracy Project. Here, the researchers proposed the following changes to US foreign policy:

- End the economic embargo;
- Unfreeze Iranian assets;
- Restore full diplomatic relations;
- Support discussions of Iran’s membership to the World Trade Organization (WTO); and
- Encourage foreign investment (McFaul 2006).

In other words, begin the process of normalization of relations with Iran. However, these suggestions occurred before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Now, there has to be several events occur before the aforestated changes can occur. In terms of clearing the foul sky of the MENA, there appears to be a sequential pattern for peace:

- Regime change in Syria;
- Reduction in Hezbollah’s presence and influence in Lebanon and Syria;
- Elimination of Iran’s stronghold in Syria;
- Turkish commitment to be a regional partner and help with Syrian refugees;
- Normalization of EU, US and Arab relations with Syria post-regime change; and
- Commitment to restart Palestinian-Israeli peace talks that include Syria as a partner (along with Jordan and Egypt).

Then, the US would be free to „reset“ relations with Iran without the distractions of a myriad of other issues. As long as the civil unrest remains a staple of Syria, then no larger issues can be approached. The festering of Syria cripples the region. Iran wants to be treated like a great power. But, with great power comes even greater responsibility. Iran has to start behaving like a great power. A rejection of the US (UN, EU) offer could spell doom for Tehran as theocratic power would be revealed for what it is.

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