

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Iran After Asad

by Jon B. Alterman

Iran is already contemplating a future without Bashar al-Asad. It is not as much good news for the United States as many would hope.

Few can question that Bashar al-Asad's regime is useful to Iran. Through a close Iranian-Syrian partnership, the Iranians gain a powerful conduit to Lebanon's Shia community and access to two states that border Israel. Iran's Syria ties also help build Iran's broader Middle Eastern bona fides, giving it a front-row seat to Arab regional issues. In addition, close ties to a state that is at the heart of the Arab world helps undermine some of the anti-Shia and anti-Persian hostility from Iran's Gulf Cooperation Council neighbors that would prefer the region see Iran as a meddling outsider.

And yet, it would be a mistake to conclude that the survival of Asad's regime is vital to Iran. Asad's fall will neither herald the beginning of the fall of the Islamic Republic nor the end of Tehran's regional influence. Instead, Iran will compensate for its losses, and it is likely to do so in ways that neighbors find just as objectionable as its current support of Asad.

Syrian-Iranian ties are deep, but they are not intimate. For decades, one of the region's most secular regimes has found common purpose with one of the most avowedly religious ones more because of what the two countries hate and fear than what they aspire to. The two countries share a large number of goals, among them hostility to Israel and a desire to constrain U.S. influence in the Middle East. They share weaknesses, too: presiding over distressed economies, distrusted by their neighbors, and paranoid about their isolation in the region and the world. Each responds to that weakness in a similar way: through a combination of vitriol and menacing behavior.

Because Asad had dug in so deeply, and because his antagonists inside and outside Syria have grown in their resolve, Asad's days now seem numbered. He is

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Marrying Out

The specter of "spinsterhood" raises hackles in Gulf countries, and it is rising. The Saudi association Us-rati, for example, estimates that the number of unmarried women over 30 in that country will increase from 1.5 million to 4 million in the next five years, and an Emirati politician recently set off a firestorm by claiming that 60 percent of women over 30 were not married. Many say the problem lies in the growing numbers of men who choose to marry foreign women.

In 2011, more than 21 percent of Emirati men who married chose foreign brides, an increase of 12 percent over the previous year. Only 8.3 percent of Emirati women who married chose foreign men. A Saudi study recently noted that foreign women tend to request lower dowry payments and make fewer stipulations in their marriage contracts. The authors suggested a campaign to discourage marriage to foreigners. In the UAE, some are now calling on the government to give extra money to men who marry older Emirati women and to end some state-sponsored marriage benefits if men marry foreign women.

Some women make an active choice not to marry, choosing to use their education to build a career without tying themselves to a husband. Some, however, are expressing frustration that dowries and other conventions are what traditionally give women financial security in a marriage. Many men are struggling to meet those costs, even with existing government grants to aspiring grooms—up to \$19,000 in the UAE. Now, women find, foreign brides are underpricing them. ■ CB

CSIS Conference on Maghreb Economic Growth

On June 13, 2012, the CSIS Middle East Program convened a half-day conference entitled 'Building Stability through Economic Growth in the Maghreb.' The conference sought to better understand the economic and political factors shaping transitions in the Maghreb states of North Africa. It brought together a senior group of experts from government, academia, policy research, and the business community to share their insights on regional trends and developments. Because states dominate most economies in the Maghreb, the conference examined both government strategies to address a range of economic challenges and the role that trade and investment could play in promoting growth. A report that summarizes the conference presentations, themes, and key takeaways can be found [HERE](#). ■

doomed by his increasing isolation, an increasingly paranoid security apparatus, widespread defections, and an economic meltdown. Russian and Iranian support can certainly forestall his demise, but they seem increasingly unlikely to prevent it. Asad has maneuvered himself into a position in which he can neither win nor compromise, so the most likely outcome by far is that he will lose.

But there are many ways for Bashar to lose. Out of most of them, the Iranian government could pluck a victory, or at least a draw. His fall would require an adjustment in Iranian policy, but not necessarily a fundamental rethinking of it.

Were Asad to fall, Iran would retain a number of clients in Syria—not all of them Alawites. It is unclear whether the central government would have much control over the country, and a country in disarray would provide numerous opportunities for the Iranians to pursue their interests in Syria, in Lebanon, versus the Israelis, versus the United States, and toward a variety of Arab friends and foes. At the core of any Iranian strategy would be to keep post-Asad Syria weak, and the clients left behind as strong as possible.

Another potential Iranian response to Asad's fall would be to increase Iranian engagement in Lebanon, undermining the influence of Western governments and their Sunni Arab allies. It is true that some of the heavier weapons currently flown into Damascus and transported by truck into Lebanon would have to find a new route in. Yet, it is conceivable that Iranian allies could gain control of at least one Mediterranean port and sustain several zones in Lebanon that help project Iranian interests into the Mediterranean Sea and down onto the Israeli border.

An additional potential response would be to encourage a string of Sunni-Shia proxy wars that extend from Lebanon through Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and into Yemen. Iraq would likely be the key to this effort. While Iraq is no puppet of Iran, Iran's deep ties in the country cover multiple actors in every sphere, from economics to politics to religion. Its ability to wreak havoc, should it choose to do so, is extensive. Regional sectarian tensions would underline Iran's ties to populations throughout the region, project Iranian interests outward, and help persuade the leading Sunni states that some accommodation with Iran is necessary to safeguard their interests.

None of this is to suggest that the Iranian government is indifferent to Bashar al-Asad's fate. Iran has not only benefitted from its relationship with Asad, but the precedent of a friendly government succumbing to a popular uprising will surely awaken the ghosts of the Iranian street protests in 2009 that shook the government to its core. Depending on whose reports you believe, Iran has given Syria a loan of almost \$6 billion in cash, oil supplies, and both weapons and advisers intended to help Asad weather the storm. There is no question that the Iranian government wants Asad to stay.

Yet there are many signs that Iran is contemplating a future without Asad. Last year, one senior Iranian adviser speculated that even a successor government to Bashar would sustain good relations with Iran, suggesting Iran is contemplating that possibility.

The most important fact to remember is this: Iran feels no special need to win in Syria, only not to lose. As in many other instances, Iran is content to play this game to a draw. Iran is concerned with its own position in the Middle East, and Syria is only one of many tools with which to secure it.

Asad's fall would make Iran's tasks different and perhaps even harder, but it would certainly not render them impossible. The end of Bashar al-Asad's rule will not spell the end of Iranian influence in the Arab world, but only the beginning of a new chapter in an enduring conflict. ■ 9/6/2012

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman and Haim Malka published an article in *The Washington Quarterly* entitled “Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry.”

NPR quoted Jon Alterman in “Next U.S. President Faces a Middle East ‘In Turmoil.’”

Bloomberg Businessweek quoted Jon Alterman in “Egypt Military Signals It Won't Contest Move on Generals.”

The New York Times quoted Haim Malka in “After Sinai Attack, U.S. and Egypt Step Up Talks on Security.”

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