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BRIEFING PAPER:

SYRIA / A turning point for the Arab Spring?

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Events in Syria are at a turning point. After oscillating for weeks between reform and repression, President Bashar al Assad has in the last fortnight cracked down on anti-government protesters with extraordinary ferocity. On April 25th, as tanks rolled in and the army took control of the southern city of Deraa where protests had begun six weeks earlier, it became painfully clear that Bashar had finally made up his mind. Instead of following Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who tried too little too late to appease protesters, the Syrian president has taken a leaf from the book of Libya's Gaddafi and turned the full force of his security apparatus on his population. And as the death toll has soared into the hundreds¹ and international condemnation has intensified, Bashar's image as a cautious reformer has been definitively shattered. Will the Syrian regime win its fight for survival? What are the implications of Syrian unrest for the region? Just as nobody could have predicted what happened in Egypt or in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011, so Syria's future is uncertain. Already, at the time of publication, the Syrian government is claiming to have gained the upper hand over the uprising, and a newly confident regime is already reaching out again to the opposition with a new raft of concessions. Could the Arab spring have come to a halt in Syria?

Syria's initial unrest began mid-March in the small southern town of Deraa, close to the Jordanian border, after local authorities arrested and sent to Damascus fifteen teenagers who, inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, had written anti-regime graffiti on a wall. Protests over this treatment occurred in the town, but at any other time things would never have escalated any further. Deraa itself was not the most likely of places for a revolution. Far from being one of Syria's more marginalised regions, it is more developed than the country's Eastern border area and much better off than the drought-stricken North-east. But under the influence of the wave of Arab revolutions, this small spark did indeed ignite a whole tinderbox. As elsewhere in the Arab world, half of Syria's population is under thirty, corruption and clientelism are endemic, the sudden liberalisation of the economy has allowed a very few to very quickly become wealthy, and just as importantly, political freedoms are almost nil. With these grievances, it was hardly surprising that the protests would soon spread geographically to Latakia and Baniyas, Syria's principal port cities, before moving by late-March to Homs and then right across the country, especially to rural towns and the outlying suburbs of many cities.

Bloody security responses to uprisings are far from new in Syria². Ever since the Tunisian revolt in January, the regime had been preparing itself. The day after Ben Ali fled Tunisia, Bashar al Assad assembled the heads of his multiple security forces (and even many of his father's security officials), along with the leaders of the many organisations affiliated with the Baath Party to draw up contingency plans³. Thus, when the troubles finally began it responded forcefully: the *mukhabarat* firing on protesters in Deraa. By doing so however, the regime only aggravated its problem, commencing what would become a vicious cycle whereby violent repression of small protests only lead to larger, more radical protests. As elsewhere in the Arab world, Friday prayers became

¹ At the time of publication, Amnesty International claims that over 350 people have been killed, while national Human Rights organisations in Syria put the number at over 800.

² After all, it was Bashar's father Hafez who ordered the three-week massacre in Hama in 1982 that killed upward of 15,000 people.

³ An example of this preparedness was the military infiltration of Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, as early as January, where troops particularly loyal to the regime were dispatched and stationed neighbourhood by neighbourhood to thwart any attempt at unrest.

the focal point of the protests, though not for religious reasons.⁴ Week after week the same situation repeated itself: security forces opening fire on largely non-radical Friday protests, which were followed over the weekend by much bigger and angrier protests, marking the funerals of those slaughtered on the Friday.

But the Syrian regime's response, has typically, not been all stick and no carrot. Like many other authoritarian regimes, Damascus has a long tradition of pulling the trigger with one hand, while the other reaches out in compromise. Less than a week after the uprisings got properly going, on March 24 Bashar's spokeswoman, Bouthaina Shaaban, described the people's demands as "just" and announced a raft of concessions that the government had been readying backstage: a possible lifting of the Emergency Law in place since 1963, a new law to allow more political parties, a salary rise for public servants, and a commission to investigate corruption. However, instead of being a sign that the government was ready to reform, Shaaban's announcement was the start of an inept and confused mishmash of often contradictory official responses, without doubt a reflection of Bashar's own confusion, as he saw his own inclination toward reforms clash with the necessities of realpolitik. On April 30th, Bashar himself, who had been keeping out of view, gave a much-anticipated speech before parliament that was very much a disappointment. Instead of admitting mistakes and real socioeconomic and political problems, or mapping out a future to redress these problems, his speech was triumphant, dashing the hopes protesters had placed in him. He did force his government to resign and appoint a new one, and then gave another, bolder speech on April 16th announcing more reforms and the lifting of the Emergency Law, but by that time it was too little too late. The regime had fallen behind the curve of the rising demands of protesters, who by now had coalesced around the idea that Bashar himself must go.

In this critical impasse, with a stark choice between extinction or survival, the regime chose survival. Was this a sign of divisions in the regime and that hardliners in the regime had won? Probably not. While Bashar is surrounded by relatives with reputations for ruthlessness, including his brother Maher who leads the army's Fourth Armoured Division, and his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, an intelligence chief, it is far from true that Bashar is not in control. In his eleven years in power Bashar has succeeded in surrounding himself with loyalists and supporters. Being in control however, does not mean that Bashar al Assad is an absolute ruler. The Assad family has a reputation for collective decision-making and it being clear by late-April that concessions would no longer suffice (at least not until the regime had put itself back in a position of strength), the family chose to nip the uprisings in the bud, before they reached a critical mass and became unstoppable.

International reaction to events in Syria has been totally distinct to reaction to what it was in the Tunisian, Egyptian or Libyan uprisings. The international community's restraint and prudence have multiple reasons, which broadly fit into two categories: domestic and diplomatic. Domestically-speaking, while the Syrian regime is distasteful to most governments, regionally and further afield, the alternatives could be far worse if Syria's remarkably successful religious equilibrium were upended. Indeed, the country's minority Shiites,

⁴ While Syria does have the potential for a far more explosive cocktail than other Arab countries given its large Sunni majority (85%) and important minority groups, in fact, protests have centred on mosques for the simple reason that the mosque has for long been the only public space in Syria that has not been muzzled by the regime.

Christians, Kurds and Druzes may prefer to live under the current Alawite dictatorship, rather than face the unknown quantity of a regime controlled by the country's Sunnite majority. If the regime collapsed, the danger of sectarian instability destabilising the entire region is also real. Diplomatically speaking meanwhile, there are two reasons for restraint. The first is that long before the uprisings began, the US and EU had been trying to separate Syria from Iran, to isolate Teheran and weaken an alliance that allowed Iranian arms and money to pass to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. This strategy has now been caught short. The second reason is one of leverage. The Syrian regime is subject to much less leverage from the international community, than say Egypt.⁵ The Syrian regime meanwhile has considerable leverage of its own and the means to dissuade the outside world from applying serious pressure. Faced with sanctions or a military intervention like in Libya, Damascus could be easily tempted to stir up trouble in Lebanon or create major problems on Israel's northern, eastern and southern borders. International pressure then is unlikely to go any further than criticism and half-hearted sanctions, or become a factor in favour of the Syrian uprisings.

What then are the chances for success of a Syrian revolution? Very scant, for now. The regime has made clear in the last fortnight that it will use incommensurate force to protect itself. Faced with this crackdown some reports indicate that protests are dwindling. On May 9th, Bouthaina Shaaban told reporters that the worst was over and that the government was ready to negotiate.⁶ On May 11th, reports are that after intensive tank-shelling, Homs, Syria's third-largest city, has been pacified. Thus, unless something significant happened that changed the ball game, such as if the cities of Damascus and Aleppo rose up, if university students around the country began to get seriously involved, or the army refused to continue butchering the population (which until now, apart from some minor isolated incidents, has not happened), a revolution does not seem imminent. If the Assads succeed in re-establishing the fear their regime has depended on for nearly a half-century, the seemingly irresistible groundswell of the Arab Spring may well be pushed back.

⁵ Egypt is notably dependent on US economic and military aid and political support as well as Western tourism, none of which are important factors in the Syrian economy.

⁶ "I hope we are witnessing the end of the story... I think now we've passed the most dangerous moment. I hope so, I think so." cf. "[Syria Proclaims It Now Has Upper Hand Over Uprising](#)" in The New York Times, Monday 09 May 2011