

Syria and Iran: Kindred Souls?

Abbas Milani

Stakes in Syria are high. Not only the prospects of democracy in the Muslim Middle East, but also the possible emergence of a new brotherhood of authoritarianism—with China and Russia as its Big Brothers, Iran and Syria as its critical Islamic beach-heads, and state capitalism as its economic model— is at stake.

In spite of their apparent differences, the Syrian and Iranian regimes are kindred souls. Syria is a pseudo-totalitarian *secular* regime, founded on an eclectic Ba'athist ideology—a strange brew of Arab nationalism, and European fascism. The Islamic Republic of Iran is also a pseudo-totalitarian *theocratic* regime, based on Khomeini's eclectic form of Shiism—one that places absolute power in one man (*Valiye Fagih*) who not only claims to represent God on earth but can, upon expedience (*Maslehat*) override even the fundamental tenets of Islam.

Syria and Iran are both ruled by increasingly isolated minorities—the Alawite Shiites in Syria, and the proponents of Khomeini's version of Shiism in Iran. They both cling to power by dint of the military-intelligence complex they have created and continue to nurture. They also both rely on the support of a small minority of the population whose livelihood and fantastical riches are dependent on the regime. In both countries, this military-intelligence complex controls a large portion of the economy. Both regimes blame outside forces—particularly the West and Israel—for their woes.

Both regimes are isolated from even their Muslim neighbors. Leaders of Muslim majorities in Egypt and Tunisia have in recent weeks reiterated their strong objection to both the Assad regime in Syria and the Iranian form of theocratic incompetence. Tunisian and Egyptian moderates have articulated their preference for the more pragmatic Turkish model (where instead of the rule of *Sharia*, Islamic forces hope to emphasize some form of Islamic identity.)

Both Syria and Iran have been helped in their survival strategy by China and Russia—not just in terms of diplomatic cover and the use of veto, but in arms shipments, and intelligence support. Iran and Syria both have hegemonic designs in Lebanon, and both have seen Hezbollah as their chief vehicle of influence.

Both countries have in the past relied also on Turkey as a neighbor, trading partner and ally. The Iranian regime has now become the only Muslim nation still supporting Syria. Tehran has dispatched elite forces of the *Qods* brigade, including their storied commander, Hadj Qassemi, to Syria, and sent two Iranian navy vessels currently docking in Syrian ports. While the Iranian regime is full of self-congratulatory rhetoric about the rise of the Islamic and democratic movements in the Arab world—claiming against all evidence to the contrary that these movements are all inspired by the Islamic revolution of 1979—they have systematically excluded Syria from the list of such movements, suggesting instead that the Syrian opposition is part of a conspiracy by the US and Israel. There is, in spite of this otherwise bleak picture, some room for optimism and the key for this ray of hope is Turkey.

Turkey and Iran, close allies until a few months ago, are on a collision course in Syria. Sources close to the IRGC and the Iranian regime have in recent weeks not only attacked but threatened Turkey over its Syrian policy. For Syrian and Iranian democrats, no less than for Muslim moderates throughout the region and the West, Turkey's new strategic turn offers a great opportunity.

The best strategy open to the West is to encourage Turkey, and countries like Tunisia, to keep up their pressure on the Assad regime in Syria. An immediate end to the killings by the Syrian regime must be the point of departure for any moral and realistic policy.

Moreover, the concentrated pressure of the Arab oil producing nations, the West, and Turkey might well be enough to convince China and Russia to end their quixotic support of the Assad regime. Concerned Arab states can also help stabilize the price of oil. With the Iranian economy already in shambles, and with the fact that the Iranian currency has in less than two months lost almost forty percent of its value, and with every economic prediction pointing to darker days ahead for the clerical regime in Tehran, the Islamic Republic's ability to help its proxies (like Hezbollah) and allies (like Syria) is sure to diminish. Without Iranian financial and logistical support, the fate of the Assad regime will be sealed sooner than later.

While a "negotiated" end to the Assad regime might lead to the rise of a democratic Syria, and expedite the end of Iranian despotism, such a welcome option might also help foster a new wave of democratization in the region. On the other hand, a prolonged military suppression of the Syrian opposition, might well beget a civil war. The resulting bloody violence will not only destabilize the region, but it will make it more likely that radical Islamist elements in Syria will find more opportunity for mischief.

More dangerously still, such a civil war might fan the flames of sectarian tension in the region, pitting the Shiite trinity of Iran, Hezbollah and the Syria regime against the Sunni majority of the Muslim world. Such tensions bode ill for the world and the West.

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This post is part of The Caravan, a periodic discussion on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. Other commentary in this symposium on Syria is provided by Charles Hill, Itamar Rabinovich, Habib Malik, Russell Berman, Nibras Kazimi, Abbas Milani, Joel Rayburn, Josh Teitelbaum, Reuel Gerecht, Asli Aydintasbas, Camille Pecastaing, and Fouad Ajami.

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