A Balance Sheet on Syria

by Sami Moubayed (in Damascus)

Ordinary Syrians are getting a comic relief from the hardships of their day-to-day lives through lively posters plastered across the country in anticipation of the upcoming May 7 parliamentary elections. Most of the faces, with one or two exceptions, are political nobodies. They are running for office with no political program, expecting Syrians to vote for them based on colorful photos or catchy yet empty slogans such as “We are the future” or “Let us all fight corruption.” The known figures are Ba’thists and are running as independents in order to give the impression that Syrian officialdom is starting to do away with Ba’th Party influence. Had these elections taken place on time, in mid-2011, then more credible figures from the opposition and almost all the independents would have likely run for office with the aim of democratizing Syria. Voter turnout would have undoubtedly been much higher. Today, however, most people are neutral—to say the least—about election day. Most are in fact boycotting these elections.

The Syrian Parliament has been a rubber stamp Chamber since the Ba’thists came to power in March 1963. With the Syrian opposition not taking part in the elections and the only candidates either pro-regime or members of the Ba’th Party, Syria’s next Chamber is bound to be business as usual. For example, the National Progressive Front (NPF), an assortment of socialist parties affiliated with the Ba’th, is running for office with complete backing of the Syrian regime. It is these same parties that have transformed the Chamber into a “yes parliament” for 40 years. And these parties, unlike any serious party around the world, were never interested in achieving power, only cementing and beautifying Ba’th Party rule.

The real problem lies deeper than this collection of candidates. It revolves around the unconstitutional meddling of the Ba’th Party in state affairs, even though according to the new charter, it is no longer “ruler of state and society.” Indeed, didn’t Syrian officialdom just do away with Article 8 of the
1973 constitution, which designated the Ba‘th as rulers? Wasn’t one of the major demands of the Syrian street—long before the uprising began in March 2011—the abolishment of one party rule and the supreme role of the Ba‘th Party? Why then is the Ba‘th still appointing civil servants, ranging from entry-level clerks to senior ministers? Why is the Ba‘th using government buildings and agencies to celebrate party holidays such as 8 March (the day it came to power in 1963) and 7 April (the day of its founding in 1947)? Why does it still control a wide array of government posts, such as the premiership, the speakership of parliament, and critical jobs in the ministries of foreign affairs, interior, information, and defense? If anything, this is a clear indicator that the new constitution promises mediocre political change.

The Ba‘thists, after all, are not in a position to give up power—or even change their way of doing things—regardless if mandated to do so by the constitution. The way they see things, they are getting the upper hand, given that the international community has no clue as to what to do with Syria. With the weakness of the Syrian opposition, many countries in the West have started to rethink their policies. Because of the aftershocks of the Libya war, there won’t be a NATO strike on Syria. There is no appetite for it in Europe. The international community has altered its rhetoric from asking President al-Asad to step down to calling on him to stop the violence and accept Kofi Annan’s peace plan. Syrian officials believe the Americans are too busy with presidential elections and will not interfere in Syrian affairs, neither on a micro nor a macro level, before the vote next January. As a result of these and other developments, the Ba‘thists feel that by simply not falling 13 months into the uprising, they have actually survived and are on their way to a slow yet steady recovery.

Ba‘th party survival, however, has taken a backseat as the world has focused on the shaky cease-fire called for by the Arab League and Annan. The main objective today is to put an end to the violence, as a political process leading to the democratization of Syria cannot occur until the killing ends. To date, people are too busy burying their dead to mind the Ba‘th Party or the new Chamber. Last week, the first group of UN monitors arrived to Syria; a total

---

1 The plan calls for an end to fighting between government security forces and rebels, withdrawal of heavy weapons from towns, the return of the army to barracks, and humanitarian access and dialogue between the government and opposition aimed at a “political transition.” See Louis Charbonneau, “Syria Hasn’t Fully Complied with Annan Peace Plan: UN Chief,” Reuters, 19 May 2012, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/syria-un-idUSL2E8FJ0N420120419.
of 30 observers were mandated and were backed by a resolution and the support of Russia. Last week the UN mandated an additional 250 observers—military and unarmed—to head to Syria to participate in the shaky truce. While everyone has their fingers crossed, little hope remains that Annan’s team will succeed. On 23 April, Syria scored an astonishing 80 dead despite the presence of the observers, making it only a matter of time before the ex-UN chief waves a white flag and announces the defeat of his mission.

Though Syrian officialdom is not pleased with the UN observers, it nevertheless accepted them thanks to Russian lobbying—and Russia’s part in the events is indicative of larger structural issues at play. Moscow has come under increasing pressure from the international community to do something serious about Syria, and it wants change to happen in an orderly manner, through state institutions and elections rather than through foreign military intervention. The overarching goal of this strategy is to preserve the Syrian military establishment—Russia’s real ally since 1957. This means, as far as Moscow is concerned, all armed attacks against the Syrian military by rebels must come to a halt—hence Russia’s support for the UN observers. To date, the Syrian uprising has played out nicely in Moscow’s favor, coming almost as a blessing in disguise. It has given President Putin a golden opportunity to jump back into the world scene as a leader who can reposition his country as one that does not take orders from the West or follow it blindly.

As such, Moscow is using Syria as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the United States. Six months ago, Russia tried to bring about soft change in Syria by calling on the regime to change the cabinet of Prime Minister Adel Safar, author a new constitution, herald a new parliament, and do away with the Ba’th Party’s one-party monopoly. When Syrian officialdom proved reluctant, Russia toyed with the idea of al-Asad delegating some powers to Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa, as explicitly called for by the Arab League. That too did not yield results. At one point in January, so frustrated were the Russians that they were on the verge of voting for the UN resolution calling for al-Asad to step down. Closed-door conversations revolved around the idea that a veto would only win Russia short-term influence in Syria, with the United States and its allies ultimately shutting Moscow out in regard to any international understanding.

So eager were the Americans to hear of Russia’s supposed change of heart that they moved the date of the UN vote from a Monday back to a Saturday. That Saturday morning, Russian Foreign Minister Serge Lavrov met with his
U.S. counterpart Hillary Clinton in Munich. The meeting reportedly went badly—but not over Syria, per se. As a price for Russia not using its veto, Lavrov spoke about making deals vis-à-vis the U.S. missile shield in Europe, Chechnya, and the then-upcoming Russian presidential elections. The United States reportedly declined, and Russia vetoed the resolution. Three months later, Russia is still hedging its bets, waiting to see how far the “Friends of Syria” group (which includes the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) is willing to go to please Moscow’s top officials. Thus Russia-U.S. bargaining is not yet over—and Russia’s self-interested motives fail to take into account Syria’s best interests.

*Sami Moubayed is a university professor, historian, and editor in chief of Forward Magazine in Syria.*