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**BASHAR UNDER PRESSURE:
POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE QAMISHLI RIOTS**

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On March 8, 2004, Syria marked the 41st anniversary of the Ba'th Party coup that brought the current regime to power. This year, however, the celebrations were deliberately kept low key in an effort to conceal a sense of growing anxiety and concern about the future. This is not a moment for Syrian self-assurance. Only a year ago, the United States toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, and there is a widespread feeling that Syria might be next on Washington's "hit list."

However, Bashar al-Assad's problems are not confined to Syria's relations with the US. His regime also faces serious domestic challenges, including a worsening socio-economic crisis and, most daunting of all, widening fissures in the facade of stability it had projected for so long. Almost four years after inheriting the reins of power, Bashar has still failed to quell doubts about his ability to consolidate his leadership, and he is still seen as a colorless ruler unable to steer the Syrian ship of state in stormy waters.

It is therefore not surprising that on March 8 this year, public attention was not focused on Revolution Day ceremonies but rather on a demonstration opposite the Parliament Building organized by several Syrian human rights activists. The demonstrators demanded the cancellation of the emergency laws in effect since the Ba'th seized power in 1963 and the inauguration of democratic rule. Such an event, however limited in scope, is unprecedented in Syria's recent history and would have been unthinkable during the rule of Bashar's father, Hafez. True, security forces quickly broke up the demonstration and arrested some of the demonstrators. But they also quickly released those arrested, largely because of the regime's sensitivity to foreign criticism, especially on the part of Europeans whose goodwill Syria wants to cultivate. Those released included a member of the American Embassy who had come to observe. The presence of an American diplomat at the demonstration was a source of particular concern to the authorities and prompted them to claim that Washington was stirring the fires of rebellion and inciting the local population to come out against the regime.

The demonstration in Damascus might have passed as an isolated incident were it not for the signs of Kurdish rebellion that erupted a few days later in the northern region of Hasaka and especially in the city of Qamishli, on the Syrian-Turkish border. There, a fight between fans of Kurdish- and Arab-supported football teams set off a tide of unrest that washed over the entire country. In protest against the deaths of three Kurdish youths at the football stadium and the violence of the police and security forces, Kurds themselves launched a wave of violence that included attacks on government offices and public facilities. The fire then spread to other concentrations of Kurds and even reached the Kurdish quarter of Damascus and the University of Damascus, where Kurdish students denounced violations of Kurdish rights.

The Kurdish protests erupted against a historical background of tensions between Kurds and Arabs in the north, which traditionally had a Kurdish majority but has undergone a process of Arabization in the past few decades. For years, the government has struggled to suppress any expressions of Kurdish national identity and has refused to grant Syrian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds who, according to it, fled to Syria from Iraq. At the same time, Syria's relatively decent treatment of local Kurds – certainly by the standards of Saddam Hussein's approach to Iraqi Kurds – explains the relative calm that prevailed here until recently.

What upset this balance was the signal of encouragement sent to Kurds in surrounding areas by developments in Iraq itself. American backing for a degree of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq verging on de facto independence has strengthened Kurdish assertiveness against central governments in Syria, Iran and Turkey. That undoubtedly explains the audacity of Syrian Kurds in confronting the regime in Damascus.

In response, the regime tried to conciliate the Kurds and refrained from relying only on an iron fist, as it normally did in the past. It is true that several dozen Kurdish deaths have been reported, but in repressing previous rebellions, such as the 1982 Hama uprising, the regime did not hesitate to kill thousands. In this case, it seems that in dealing with a Kurdish challenge in the north, the regime can rely on the support of Arabs, who constitute an overwhelming majority of the population and who reject any expression of Kurdish separatism, especially one relying on possible American support. And Washington will tread carefully on this issue lest perceptions of American encouragement of the Kurds lead to serious tensions with Turkey, which is even more suspicious of Kurdish self-assertiveness.

Nor does the regime need to be overly concerned about the protests of oppositionist organizations and human rights activists. For the time being, they remain a small collection of pro-reform forces lacking any real base in the broader Syrian public. In general, the regime still appears to enjoy the support of most of the pillars of Syrian society: army officers, economic elites, and the small middle class. Those elements understand better than any foreign observer that the alternative to the current regime is not necessarily a liberal democracy as envisaged by the American administration, but rather Islamist fundamentalism of the sort that would make the Ba'th look positively libertarian by contrast.

But even if recent events do not represent an immediate existential threat to the regime, longer-term trends are still likely to weaken it and perhaps bring about its eventual demise. After all, recurrent and growing protest will have a cumulative effect, particularly in combination with deepening economic problems and a problematic regional environment in which Syria faces, not only its traditional Israeli adversary to the south, but also a new American neighbor to the east.

Such pressures might push Bashar in the direction of reform at home and conciliation abroad, especially with Israel and the United States. But he may be trapped in a situation over which he has no control -- constrained at home by the recalcitrant "Old Guard" that served his father and buffeted by regional and international forces too strong for him to resist.

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