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The revolt in Syria Not so easy

The uprising against Bashar Assad presents a trickier conundrum than previous Arab upheavals

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THE frightening spiral of violence in Syria and the determination of its ruler, Bashar Assad, to crush peaceful opposition are a bleak reminder of how far the Arab spring still has to go before summer arrives—and how easily the region's hopeful mood could turn wintry again (see [article](#)). Syria, unlike Libya, is a hub of the Arab world. If it were to embrace a democratic future, the beneficial regional impact would be enormous. Conversely, a successful reimposition of Mr Assad's iron rule would give succour to all Arab despots. Unfortunately, the West has no simple way to ensure that the forces of good will prevail. It can help in the margins by encouraging the opposition and putting sanctions on Mr Assad's regime. But Syria is primarily a challenge for the Syrians themselves, with help from their Arab and Turkish neighbours.

Syria is a hub of influence by virtue of its geography, history and the canniness—plainly on the wane—of its leaders. It is neither rich, having only modest amounts of oil, nor especially populous, with some 22m inhabitants. Despite some tepid reforms, most of its economy remains stuck in a dirigiste impasse. Its army, though crucial to Mr Assad's survival, is not powerful in global terms, having been serially swatted over the years by its Israeli neighbour.

Yet Syria can put spokes in just about every wheel in the Middle East. It has been a conduit for insurgents in Iraq and it ran Lebanon as a virtual dominion for 15 years until it was ousted in 2005. More recently, it has reasserted its influence in Beirut, partly by backing a Shia party-cum-militia, Hizbullah, which in turn is sponsored by Iran, Syria's biggest friend in the region. It hosts a "rejectionist" alliance that refuses to recognise Israel and eggs on Hamas, the harshest of the main Palestinian guerrilla groups. Indeed, it has cosied up to a variety of Arab terrorist groups over the years, and has condoned and connived at the assassination of people who seek to cross it. This has brought



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it many enemies. Relations with Saudi Arabia and Jordan have often been frosty. With Egypt under Hosni Mubarak they were icier still. Over the years, Syria has had difficult dealings with Turkey, its beefiest neighbour, though they have improved. In short, Syria has been a regional nuisance but one that can rarely be ignored or kept down for long.

There was a time when Mr Assad promised something better. An ophthalmologist by profession, he became the heir to his father, Hafez Assad, an air force general who ruled ruthlessly from 1970 until his death in 2000, only because his abrasive older brother had been killed in a car crash. He made tentative steps towards loosening things up. He let a few dissidents out of prison, sounded ready to negotiate with Israel, put out feelers to the West and, more recently, befriended Turkey. Many Syrians seemed willing to trade stability for freedom in a turbulent region. The Assads, themselves hailing from the minority Alawite branch of Shia Islam, have mostly managed to keep a sectarian peace between various religions and denominations, with Christians, among others, enjoying security.

But this stability has always been underpinned by coercion and the threat of force. As soon as the democracy bug began to spread earlier this year, Mr Assad wavered between promises of reform and growls of repression. Once the demonstrations gathered momentum, he chose repression. Already the death toll may exceed 450, with the scale of bloodshed rising fast. Few forget that when an Islamist revolt erupted in 1982 in the town of Hama, Assad *père* killed some 20,000 people. In the son's ruling circle the same old security apparatus remains paramount and the same grim logic seems to prevail.

Double standards?

If the West deems it right to bomb Libya in an effort to force the murderous Muammar Qaddafi from power, why not do the same to Syria? The answer is entirely pragmatic. Most Libyans inhabit a thin coastal strip connected by one big road that can be policed from the air; Syria's geography is complex. Moreover, Colonel Qaddafi is far more isolated and derided by his fellow Arabs than Mr Assad is. The Arab League, the UN Security Council and countless Libyans have all endorsed the Western assault on Libya. No such constellation has come together over Syria, and it is unthinkable at present for Western leaders to intervene militarily in the face of widespread local objections.

The mood in the region may change. Turkey, vaunting itself as a rising power, has the most clout: as one of Syria's main trading partners it should be pressing Mr Assad harder to call off the tanks and give his people a proper electoral choice. Egypt, renewing its authority as a regional giant, should do the same. If the Arab spring is to flourish, the Arabs must lead the way. There may be time, yet, for Mr Assad to back down. If he did, the Arab spring really might turn into summer.

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