

# Syria uses a 'security solution' to crush uprising: author

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Syria is drowning in a vicious civil war as its headstrong president, Bashar Assad, wilfully destroys the country in piecemeal fashion in a desperate bid to ensure his survival and that of his brutal, dictatorial Baathist regime.

The popular uprising in Syria – Israel's most truculent neighbour – broke out in March 2011 and has since turned increasingly violent.

With cities like Aleppo and Homs having been reduced to war zones and with the death toll having passed the 25,000 mark, the Syrian revolt has morphed into the most violent insurrection of the Arab Spring, the rebellions that have convulsed the Arab world for the past two years.

In purely financial terms, the uprising has been catastrophic as well. Economic losses have cost Syria at least \$34 billion, according to Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi, but opposition figures claim that the real figure may be as high as \$100 billion and counting.

The revolt began as a peaceful protest, but due to the regime's heavy-handed response, it degenerated into a life-and-death struggle.

Assad opted for a "security solution," writes Carsten Wieland in his informative and authoritative book, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances*, published by Cune Press in Seattle. To Assad, the uprising was and still is a zero-sum game, with the winner taking all the spoils.

Wieland, a German diplomat, knows Syria as well as any foreigner can, having lived in Damascus for two years and visited the country often. His readable book, based largely on first-hand sources and combining journalistic flair with academic gravitas, is meant for a general readership.

The revolt erupted in the periphery, in the flyblown southern town of Dara'a, and gradually spread to major urban centres such as Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Damascus, he notes.

In Dara'a, government agents arrested 15 schoolchildren who had courageously scrawled anti-regime graffiti on walls. They were thrown into prison and tortured. Protests broke out as parents demanded their immediate release.

In reaction to further demonstrations, police used live ammunition, worsening the situation. Instead of using kid gloves to defuse the tension, Wieland says, the regime,



Syrian President Bashar Assad

accustomed to docility from its citizens, deployed brute force.

Citing another defining moment in the rebellion, Wieland refers to an event that occurred a month earlier in the Old City of Damascus, when the son of a textile shop owner was beaten up by police. "Nothing unusual in a police state," he observes. "However, this time something extraordinary happened. People gathered to support the victim."

Doubtlessly emboldened by revolts in neighbouring Arab countries, Syrians had lost their fear and patience and were no longer prepared to accept the status quo of stagnation, paralysis and repression. "After the Facebook-co-ordinated protests in Tunisia and Egypt, Syria experienced the first YouTube revolution in history," he writes in a succinct summation of the role that social media played in Syria's national rebellion.

This, of course, was a highly ironic development, since Assad, in the name of technological progress, had introduced satellite dishes and built a modern communication infrastructure in Syria.

Realizing that the rebellion was spinning out of control, Assad offered a series of cosmetic concessions. State salaries, pensions, subsidies and social benefits were increased and mild political reforms were ushered in.

"In the context of the times, the moves turned out to be inadequate," Wieland writes, suggesting they might have had a meaningful impact had they been phased in years earlier, when the very idea of challenging the regime would have been unthinkable.

If he had played his cards right, he says, Assad could have avoided the catastrophe currently engulfing Syria.

Having succeeded his father in 2000, following his sudden death, Assad launched his presidential career as a reformer, promising to open up Syrian society. Arts and letters enjoyed greater freedom of expression, debating clubs sprang up and cellphones and computers became accessible to a wider range of Syrians, Wieland says.

But the Damascus Spring did not last long. Far more focused on stability than on democratic experiments, Assad cracked down, nipping in the bud Syria's tentative transition toward pluralism and a civil society.

"Arbitrary arrests, confiscations, torture, solitary confinement, ill treatment and dismal conditions in crowded prisons made up the dark side of everyday life in a Syria that otherwise appeared peaceful on the surface," Wieland writes in a stinging indictment of the regime.

From the day he succeeded his father, Hafez, who was a self-styled liberalizer as well, Assad boasted of his strong personal relationship with the "beloved people of Syria." Yet Assad, having called on Syrians in his inaugural speech "to participate in the process of development and modernization," was never really ready for genuine democracy.

Certainly, Assad was shocked by the rebellion, having sanctimoniously told the *Wall Street Journal* in a January 2011 interview that Syria would not be affected by the Arab Spring.

As he put it, "We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries, but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances."

Precisely.

Wieland correctly points out that Syria's status as the "beating heart" of Arab nationalism, its antagonism to Israel and its pro-Palestinian rhetoric did not detract Syrians from demanding change.

"Rhetorical broadsides against Israel remained a welcomed means of creating consensus," he writes. "It was easy to gain the population's support for these matters, thus distracting them from economic and political problems at home."

But after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Wieland adds, Assad's position on the Palestinian issue "oscillated between readiness to compromise and an ideological hard line."

In 2008, Syria and Israel launched indirect negotiations through the good offices of Turkey, which had solid relations with both sides. These talks collapsed when Israel invaded the Gaza Strip in 2009.

According to Frederick Hof, a U.S. diplomat well acquainted with the Syrian file, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister, Ehud Barak, opened secret talks with Assad in 2010 after Israel reportedly agreed in principle to withdraw from the Golan Heights. These discussions ended early in 2011 with the outbreak of the Syrian insurrection.

Nonetheless, Wieland says, every faction in the splintered Syrian opposition concurs on the need to recover the Golan.

*Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances* should be read in conjunction with Stephen Starr's *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (Columbia University Press). Starr, an Irish journalist who has been reporting from Syria for the past five years and has many contacts there, explains why Syria – an ethnically and religiously diverse nation – was so prone to instability. His analysis of the country's minorities is especially instructive.

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