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The delusions of Bashar al-Assad

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Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, insists on believing that his support for the "resistance against Israel" distinguishes his regime from others in the region and, therefore, makes it immune to the revolutions that have brought down pro-Western presidents in Tunisia and Egypt.

His support for Hamas and Hezbollah may make the Syrian president more popular among Arabs, but he is engaged in dangerous delusions if he thinks this makes the killings of peaceful Syrian protesters less reprehensible.

The eruption of Arab revolutions has been a reaction to decades of repression and the skewed distribution of wealth; two problems that have plagued anti- and pro-Western Arab governments alike.

And Syria is one of the most repressive states in the region; hundreds, if not thousands, of people have disappeared into its infamous prisons. Some reappear after years, some after decades, many never resurface at all.

Syrians have not been the only victims. Other Arabs - Lebanese who were abducted during the decades of Syrian control over its neighbour, Jordanian members of the ruling Baath party who disagreed with its leadership and members of different Palestinian factions - have also been victimised.

Syrian critics of the regime are often arrested and charged - without due process – with serving external - often American and Israeli - agendas to undermine the country's "steadfastness and confrontational policies".

But these acts have never been adequately condemned by Arab political parties and civil society, which have supported Syria's position on Israel while turning a blind eye to its repressive policies.

Thus while Syrian dissidents, including prominent nationalist and leftist intellectuals, are incarcerated in Syrian jails, other Arab activists and intellectuals have flocked to Damascus to praise its role in "defending Arab causes".

This hypocrisy has reinforced the regime's belief that it is immune from the criticisms directed at repressive pro-Western governments in the region.

The myth of resistance

Although the rule of Hafez al-Assad, the late president, was even more ruthless than that of his son, Bashar, who succeeded him in 2000, the repressive security apparatus has maintained its firm grip on state institutions.

Under Bashar al-Assad, the regime has continued to use its "resistance" status to justify the suppression of free expression and the stifling of the opposition.

But, it may now be time to seriously examine Syria's claim to be a state of resistance – and consequently more legitimate than other Arab regimes and dictators.

In the broader context Syria's position has prevented Israel, and the US, from totally penetrating otherwise accommodating, if not totally subordinate, Arab states. But Syria's contribution to blocking Israel from attaining peace with more states in the region has not come without political compromises.

Syria's claim to be "a fortress of resistance" is based on two factors: Firstly, Damascus has refused to sign a peace treaty with Israel without the return of the Golan Heights, which Israel has occupied since 1967; secondly, its support for various Palestinian groups, as well as for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

There is no doubt that its refusal to reach a compromise with Israel – in contrast to Egypt, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – has boosted its Arabist credentials and bolstered its geopolitical role. But Syria has made a trade-off that allows it to pose as "confrontational" state while ensuring that its frontiers with Israel remain the quietest front in that "confrontation". It has done this by ruthlessly enforcing a ban on the smuggling of weapons into the Golan Heights and by guaranteeing that Syrians, Palestinians and others are unable to cross its tightly controlled borders.

Syrians or members of Damascus-based Palestinian groups would therefore never dare attempt to smuggle weapons or attack Israel in the way others have via the Jordanian or Lebanese frontiers.

Furthermore Syria has been surprisingly quiet about the Israeli expropriation of land, building of settlements and transfer of Jewish settlers to the occupied Golan Heights. There are more than 30

Jewish settlements in the Golan Heights, supposedly on some of the best agrarian land, inhabited by at least 20,000 settlers. The Arab population of the region has dwindled from 130,000 people in 1967 to 20,000 today, while Israel has expropriated all but six per cent of the land there.

Syria argues that it will not settle for less than a total Israeli withdrawal from all of the Golan Heights regardless of the number of settlers or settlements. But, while there is some logic to such an argument, Syria's silence regarding Israeli activities there has helped cement the de facto calm between the two enemies.

More bark than bite

When subjected to closer scrutiny, Syria's support for "resistance" groups also appears tainted. It has continually sought to control the Palestinian resistance movement, often using force in its attempts to consolidate its domination of the Palestinians.

Palestinians have not forgotten that one of the most tragic chapters in their history came at the hands of the Syrian army, when troops who had entered Lebanon with the declared mission of enforcing peace and order during the civil war obliterated the Tel a-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut.

In the mid-1980s, Syria also actively supported the Lebanese Amal movement's siege of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Syria's internal interference in Palestinian affairs, often nurturing divisions, is also well known and documented. Moreover, while Assad has in recent years challenged the Palestinian leadership to opt for armed resistance, Damascus did little to support the first and second intifadas.

Its rhetoric is no doubt appealing to Arab progressive and nationalist forces. However, Syria's actions have rarely extended beyond encouraging others to fight Israel until the last drop of mostly Palestinian or Lebanese blood is spilled.

Removing masks, exposing tyranny

Syria has been shrewd in refusing to be dragged into open-ended negotiations with Israel without a guarantee that occupied Syrian territories will be returned. This has helped to foment their position in contrast to seemingly more submissive states – posing a dilemma for the many Arabs who have felt obliged to choose between supporting Damascus or supporting Western plans for the region.

But it is wrong, and at times immoral, to remain silent about the Syrian regime's crimes and to deny that its agenda has been self-serving.

The regime's "survive at any cost" policy saw it join the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1990 and enthusiastically cooperate with the "war on terror" after 9/11. Its "resistance position" did not

prevent it from torturing the Syrian Maher Arar when he was handed over as part of the controversial extraordinary rendition policy.

The cynical use of revolutionary political language by the regime to cover its contradictory political positions has no doubt helped it. But the Arab revolutions have stripped all regimes of their masks and this regime's attempt to crush protests has unveiled its tyrannical face.

Bashar al-Assad, judging by his "j'accuse" speech, is still living with his delusions. But the era of crying foreign conspiracy to cover up bloody crimes is over, even if the message has yet to reach the Syrian president.