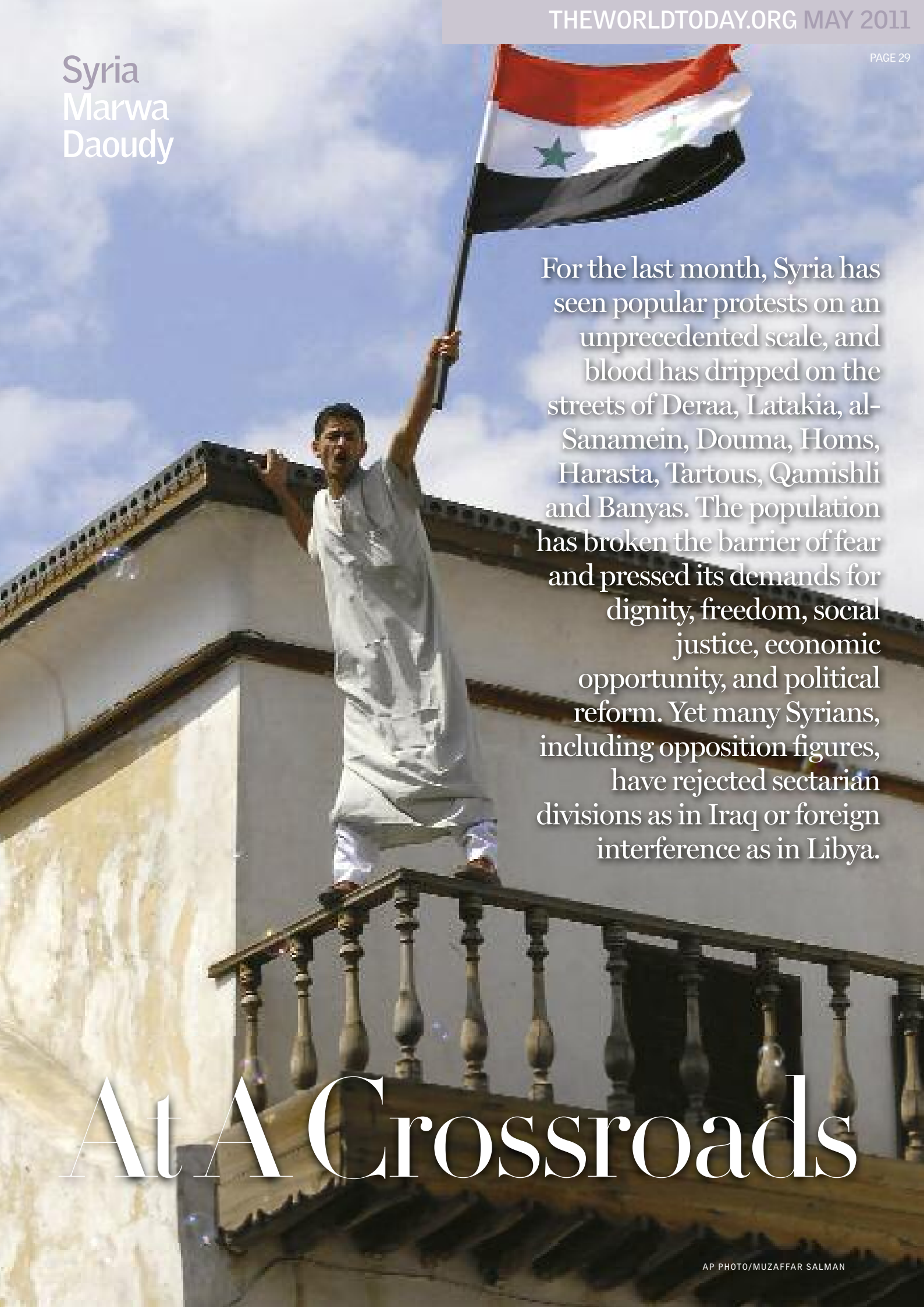


Syria
Marwa
Daoudy



For the last month, Syria has seen popular protests on an unprecedented scale, and blood has dripped on the streets of Deraa, Latakia, al-Sanamein, Douma, Homs, Harasta, Tartous, Qamishli and Banyas. The population has broken the barrier of fear and pressed its demands for dignity, freedom, social justice, economic opportunity, and political reform. Yet many Syrians, including opposition figures, have rejected sectarian divisions as in Iraq or foreign interference as in Libya.

At A Crossroads

IN THE STREETS, PROTESTERS KEEP ON CHANTING “THE Syrian people are one, one, one, the Syrian people are one!” This unrest has offered the Syrian president an historic opportunity to introduce effective reforms in a national dialogue with his people, including opposition figures, to design a common future together. Can Bashar al-Assad still find a meaningful way out of the current confrontation? Will he seize the moment and lead the country to a peaceful transition towards political change?

The Syrian president is a smart political player who has managed to enhance the country’s geopolitical position by keeping a firm stance in the conflict with Israel, building strategic relations with Turkey, Iran and Iraq, resisting foreign pressures, and initiating a dialogue with the Barack Obama Administration while continuing to support the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance. Bashar al-Assad’s personal popularity since 2000 has also allowed the regime to limit the scope of internal reforms and preserve the power of the security services over society. The ‘Chinese model’ of neo-liberal economic shift with no political reform was adopted in 2005. State-owned enterprises and institutions would be developed and modernised within a “social market economy”, with a view to develop and modernise state-owned enterprises and institutions. A hundred and thirty four laws and presidential decrees were issued to reform economic and administrative systems. The liberalisation of the economy followed steady progress with public-private partnerships in the oil and transport sectors; private banks, media and universities were legalised, and more space allocated to the private sector. However, no defined policy or adequate tools were adopted. The country witnessed a significant rise of elite-driven non-governmental organisations with mandates limited to social and environmental issues. The Baath Party and secret services were given increased power in administrative and economic decisions, and new monopolies controlled and established by governmental elites. Further crackdowns were carried out on intellectuals, activists and the private press.

As a consequence, Syria remains a developing country with a weak economy and poor results in sectors such as housing, education and employment. The agricultural sector – which contributed to thirty percent of the GDP - has considerably suffered from years of drought and governmental neglect. One third of the Syrian population lives on two dollars a day or less; 65 percent are under the age of thirty; and food insecurity and youth unemployment are major problems.

Things have dramatically unfolded since mid-March. The trigger was the arbitrary imprisonment and torture in the small town of Deraa of school children for drawing graffiti inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Deraa is

plagued with poverty, an influx of refugees from the drought-hit eastern parts of the country, and deficient state institutions. From Deraa, popular protests spread to the rest of the country.

So far, the regime has responded with mixed signals: continued brutal repression combined with half-hearted concessions and recognition of the ‘legitimate’ demands of the people. The unrest is still blamed on the action of foreign-led armed gangs and, more recently, Islamist groups. Protests are also said to be part of a wider conspiracy aimed at spreading insecurity and sectarian strife. However, videos and pictures diffused over the internet show peaceful marches with unarmed Syrians, calling for freedom and dignity. The appeal to non-violence is reiterated by opposition groups and chanted by protestors: “Silmiya, silmiya” (peaceful, peaceful). Armed gangs have perhaps infiltrated the demonstrations and killed military officers, but popular and peaceful mobilisation has also happened and was met with rounds of live ammunition. Since March 18, more than two hundred civilian casualties and hundreds of wounded are estimated by the Damascus Centre



for Human Rights, and other human rights groups to have fallen in violent clashes with the security forces. Several hundreds of protestors, journalists and activists are still detained by the security forces.

Prominent Syrian intellectuals and opposition figures have recently signed a declaration in Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir*, calling for a national pact to establish a democratic, civilian and modern state in Syria, based on national unity and the rejection of violence and sectarian divisions. They have also outlined their programme for political reform along ‘patriotic’ lines: the abrogation of the state of emergency and its

replacement by a new emergency law solely for situations of war and natural disasters; the release of all political prisoners; the cancellation of Article 8 of the Constitution (which states that the 'Baath Party leads the State and society'); the amendment of the Constitution within a maximum period of six months; a change of the electoral law to include new political parties on condition that they do not accept foreign funding; new parliamentary elections; in-depth reform of the judicial system; a ban on all intelligence services from interfering in civilian affairs except for national security issues; the end of any state control over the press; the launch of immediate economic measures to end corruption; nationalisation of the two mobile phone companies; and the delivery of passports to all Syrians with no restrictions, except in cases of high treason.

Prominent personalities in the opposition, such as the long-detained journalist Michel Kilo, have called for the end of the state of emergency and the introduction of a multi-party system, but so far have not demanded regime change. Others

fear that effective reform is impossible without regime change, because corruption has been institutionalised for far too long.

Bashar al-Assad's much awaited speech on March 30 failed to meet even the more moderate demands. The main point of the exercise seemed to be to show the people that he was dealing with the crisis from a position of strength: the rejection of foreign attempts to fragment and destroy the country through fitna (religious strife); clarification that reforms were launched since 2005 and not under international pressure; and delays in their

implementation due to regional wars from 2000 to 2009. Core issues, such as the state of emergency and the new law for political parties, would be handed to the newly appointed government. Many amongst the Syrians were bitterly disappointed; renewed waves of protest spread to other parts of the country. The speech oscillated between forceful language and promises of reform, but with few practical results. Immediate investigations in the 'incidents of Deraa and Latakia' were announced, and the Syrian nationality given to parts of the Kurdish population. But overall, the ruling power has chosen the path of repression and confrontation rather than political settlement.

Bashar al-Assad is believed to be genuinely intent on reforming his country. He now has a unique opportunity to enter Syria's history as a real reformer and moderniser. Moreover, he can show vision in domestic affairs, without giving up on the independent foreign policy which is so popular with his people. But meaningful political and judicial reforms will need to be delivered soon and the repression of non-violent demonstrations stopped. Since 1963, the state of emergency has allowed successive Syrian governments to ban public demonstrations (except the ones in favour of the regime), detain civilians without warrants and try them in military courts. In his first televised meeting with the newly appointed government, the Syrian president acknowledged popular aspirations to "dignity" and "employment", and promised to lift the law of emergency in the coming weeks. Its effective abrogation would be a significant step forward. Immunity from prosecution given to security services in legislative decrees issued in 1969 and 2008 should also be lifted, and overview of security matters handed to civilian authorities. These measures would effectively pave the way towards the reinforcement of the rule of law in Syria.

Some pundits predict the weakening of Syria's external strategic position due to internal unrest. But if consensus is reached on political reform at home, the regime is unlikely to come under pressure to reverse its foreign policy. Others fear for the country's security and secular rule in an unstable regional environment. Progress towards democratisation is, in fact, Syria's best long-term bet for stability, internal cohesion, and enhanced regional influence. Syria's allies - Turkey and Hezbollah - realise the stakes and are urging the regime to heed the calls for reform. There is resistance to change from within the regime but it can be overcome by showing that pre-emption from the top is a more promising way forward than repression and bloodshed.

There is no incompatibility between a strong stance in the conflict with Israel and addressing the Syrian people's legitimate claims for social justice, jobs, freedom of speech, and political representation. Syria is at the crossroads. As protests are expected to continue in the coming weeks, two options are now on the table: brutal crackdown leading to unpredictable consequences; or transition to peaceful change in the system. Will repression continue to prevail? Will the president have the courage to initiate a national dialogue with all political and social trends? Whilst still open, the door is gradually closing as heavy civilian casualties continue to fall on Syrian streets. Only a genuine shift towards democracy would enable the regime to survive the revolutionary wave that is sweeping the region. All Syrians, like the rest of the Arab world, want to be masters of their own fate.



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