

No need to show Assad the door, yet

By: Gabi Siboni

The debate has intensified recently over whether Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's continued rule in Syria is good for Israel, or whether his downfall is preferable. Some are taking it a step further, beseeching Israel and the West to actively expedite Assad's removal from power.

The Syrian civil war has raged for quite a while, and while public opinion in Israel used to tend towards wanting to see the rebels defeat Assad's oppressive regime, as the fighting continues there is a clearer understanding of the complexities involved, making it difficult to unequivocally separate the "good" guys from the "bad" guys.

The scope of violence we are witnessing in Syria appears to be particularly powerful, as is the scope of the hatred between the sides, testament to pressures that exploded after years of oppression.

A central argument in favor of deposing Assad relates to his regime's prominent role in the radical Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis, which sanctifies the fight against Israel and the "corrupt" West. Iran and Syria provide Hezbollah with advanced weaponry, including long-range missiles with precision capabilities, air-defense systems and sophisticated land-to-sea- missiles. All these could upset the fragile strategic balance in the region, meaning Israel could find itself mired in another fierce clash with Hezbollah, due either to developments in the north along the borders with Syria and Lebanon, or because of an Israeli or American attack in Iran.

In such a conflict Israel would likely need to deal with these advanced capabilities, which would target the civilian home-front and hinder the Israel Defense Forces' ability to operate with maximum effectiveness.

The supporters of deposing Assad say that his downfall would sever this axis of evil and stem the flow of weapons to Hezbollah.

Indeed, impairing the radical axis is a worthy, significant objective, but any risk management process also requires examining the alternatives. Assad's removal is liable to create severe regional chaos. It is no secret that Syrian opposition forces include strong jihadist contingents from al-Qaida and other extremist groups. Syria after Assad would be fragmented and in disarray, and radical Islamist groups flourish in such conditions. After Assad is gone, they will without severely threatening his regime's downfall. Israel's room to maneuver is still considerable. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu echoed this spirit when he said Israel would continue attacking weapons shipments intended for Hezbollah.

Preserving the fragile makeup in which there is (still) a clear address in Syria, is a supreme Israeli interest, along with preventing or at least delaying the hostile takeover of Syria by Islamic extremists. This should also be the interest of human rights advocates. Letting radical Islam enter Syria through the front door could prove to be a strategic blunder of the highest order.

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