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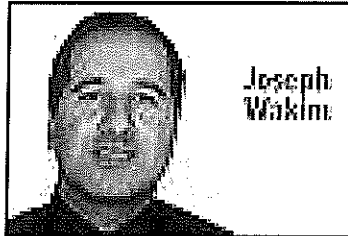
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## Sweet victory, without the war

Joseph Wakim August 18, 2011



Do you want to eat the grapes, or to kill the vineyard's guard? This rhetorical Arabic question addresses a disconnect between the means and the end. It is an apt metaphor for Syria's crossroads and future.

Is the end game to dethrone yet another Arab leader, or ensure that its citizens gain human rights?

We already know from Iraq that toppling the leader of a pluralistic secular state unleashes sectarian militias, tribal warfare and al-Qaeda insurgents competing for control in a state that has become dangerously chaotic.

Do we wish the same anarchy for the Syrian people?

The resulting Iraqi parliament is created on the basis of delicate ethno-sectarian quotas. The ongoing human cost of this regime change has been horrific, with desperate asylum seekers floating to our shores and 1.4 million seeking refuge in Syria - a secular "sanctuary". Apart from Iraqis, Syria has been a safe haven to many minority groups such as Jews, Kurds, Ismailis, Druze, Palestinians and Christians.

Syria has the potential to change its policies without removing its president. Unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya - where presidents were unwilling and unable to implement dialogue and reform - Syria's Bashar al-Assad has ratified his reform package, but will implement it only if the "chaos" subsides, creating a vicious circle.

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Eleven years after he inherited the presidency and the old guard of the Socialist Arab Baath Party, the pro-democracy demonstrations in Syria may have given Assad impetus to revisit his original reform agenda.

However, the president needs to redress the blatant disconnect between his brutal suppression of demonstrations and his rhetoric.

The escalating fatalities and arrests give unarmed civilians the ammunition to join the armed struggle. If the president is serious about his overdue reforms, including "regulated peaceful protests", he could let the protest voices be heard rather than hidden.

The regime's dilemma is that the armed militia are increasingly, strategically and

deliberately intertwined with the unarmed civilians.

The president cannot continue to hide behind a charade of conspiracies that armed saboteurs, extremists, snipers, terrorists and gangs are hiding among the "protesters who have legitimate demands". His ban on foreign media has backfired with his promises now dismissed as propaganda, and unverified images from mobile phones and exiles thriving as the official version in Western media.

When speaking to Australians who recently visited Syria, there is a disconnect between our media reports and their experiences, which confirm an overwhelming majority of Syrian citizens do not want their president ousted. They trust him to facilitate the reforms, as a means to an end, regardless of who may be democratically elected in the future.

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Too often, media vision and audio put forward as anti-government protests are actually pro-government because Arabic-language interpreters have not been engaged.

Unlike the neat and naive narrative that we would like to believe, the anti-government protesters are not all unarmed pro-democracy civilians. Ironically, Assad's claims about foreign and armed militia infiltrating the protests have been verified by many Australian witnesses.

The Saudi-supported Salafists are pushing for a theocracy - government by divine guidance or by religious representatives - not a democracy. The militarised insurgents with their urban warfare training are armed and funded - by which countries and for which reasons?

This parallels the recent reports in Egypt where the largely secular revolution has already been hijacked by Salafists calling for an Islamic state, hoisting Saudi flags and intimidating Copts.

With the lessons learnt from Iraq, the UN Security Council must have considered the regime change alternatives and consequences with its double-edged resolutions. While it "condemns the widespread violations of human rights", it also "stresses that the only solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process".

Western leaders should pressure the Syrian president to break the cycle and implement the reforms that articulate the aspirations of his people.

The least violent regime change is the organic evolution rather than bloody revolution. This means trimming the branches and poisoning the roots of the old guard rather than uprooting the entire tree and leaving a big black hole where citizens cave in.

Like all citizens, Syrians are more interested in the policies than the president. Perhaps they can reap the (sweet) grapes of political autonomy without killing the guard.

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