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Interesting.

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Syria Strongman: Time for 'Reform'

By JAY SOLOMON And BILL SPINDLE

DAMASCUS—Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited a regime that has held power for four decades, said he will push for more political reforms in his country, in a sign of how Egypt's violent revolt is forcing leaders across the region to rethink their approaches.

In a rare interview, Mr. Assad told The Wall Street Journal that the protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen are ushering in a "new era" in the Middle East, and that Arab rulers would need to do more to accommodate their people's rising political and economic aspirations.

"If you didn't see the need of reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it's too late to do any reform," Mr. Assad said in Damascus, as Egyptian protesters swarmed the streets of Cairo pressing for the resignation of longtime President Hosni Mubarak.

The Syrian strongman, who succeeded his father, has always kept a tight leash on his country and tolerated little protest. His regime has also maintained a close partnership with Iran and militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

While much of the region's unrest has hit countries that have developed alliances with Washington, his remarks indicate that the ripple effects of the Egyptian unrest will reach out to Middle Eastern leaders who are both friend and foe of the U.S.

Syria's response is particularly important because, while Mr. Assad's ties with the U.S. are strained, the Obama administration has been trying to pull his allegiances away from Tehran toward Washington.

But his remarks in the interview suggest that maybe harder in the wake of the Egyptian unrest. Mr. Assad said he will have more time to make changes than Mr. Mubarak did, because his anti-American positions and confrontation with Israel have left him in better shape with the grassroots in his nation.

"Syria is stable. Why?" Mr. Assad said. "Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence...you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances."

Mr. Assad said he would push through political reforms this year aimed at initiating municipal elections, granting more power to nongovernmental organizations and establishing a new media law.

His government already made adjustments to ease the kind of economic pressures that have helped fuel unrest in Tunisia and Algeria: Damascus this month raised heating oil allowances for public workers—a step back from an earlier plan to withdraw subsidies that keep the cost of living down for Syrians but drain the national budget. Tunisia, Algeria and Jordan have also tried to assuage protesters by lowering food prices.

Mr. Assad's government, and that of his late father Hafez al-Assad, have been criticized as among the region's most repressive, detaining opponents without charges. This has stoked speculation in Western capitals over whether Syria could also face unrest. Syria's one-party political system and government-controlled media, meanwhile, are seen by many as more rigid than Egypt's or Tunisia's.

Mr. Assad acknowledged in the interview that the pace of political reform inside Syria hasn't progressed as quickly as he'd envisioned after taking power following his father's death in 1999.

Still, Mr. Assad indicated he is unlikely to embrace the sort of rapid and sweeping reforms being called for on the streets of Cairo and Tunis. He said his country needed time to build institutions and improve education before decisively opening Syria's political system. The rising demands for rapid political reforms could turn out to be counter-productive if Arab societies aren't ready for them, he said.

"Is it going to be a new era toward more chaos or more institutionalization? That is the question," Mr. Assad said. "The end is not clear yet."

Many diplomats and analysts believe Syria could serve as a barometer for the direction of the broader Middle East. Damascus's influence has grown in recent years as its alliance with Iran and the militant Islamist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah has opened the door to its renewed influence in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Iraq.

Still, Mr. Assad's rigid rule could leave him vulnerable to rising calls for democracy.

Damascus emerged this month largely victorious after a nearly eight-year struggle against the U.S. for influence inside Lebanon. The standoff was sparked by the 2005 murder of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which some Western officials believed was ordered by Mr. Assad's government. Mr. Assad has repeatedly denied any involvement.

"What pleases me is that this transition between the two [Lebanese] governments happened smoothly, because we were worried," said Mr. Assad. "It was very easy to have a conflict of some kind that could evolve into a fully blown civil war."

This month, the U.S. returned an ambassador, Robert Ford, to Damascus for the first time since Mr. Hariri's murder.

Mr. Assad said that while he sought closer ties to Washington, he didn't see this coming at the expense of his alliance with Iran. The Syrian leader said that he shares the U.S. goals to target Al Qaeda and other extremist groups, but that Tehran remains a crucial ally to Syria.

"Nobody can overlook Iran, whether you like it or not," Mr. Assad said.

On the Mideast peace process, Mr. Assad stressed that Damascus remained open to a dialogue with Israel to reclaim the Golan Heights region that the Jewish state occupied in 1967. But he said he didn't think Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would engage in the same way as his predecessor, Ehud Olmert. Mr. Assad insisted he and Mr. Olmert were close to forging a peace deal in 2008.

"No, [the peace process] is not dead, because you do not have any other option," Mr. Assad said. "If you talk about a 'dead' peace process, this means everybody should prepare for the next war."

The Syrian leader acknowledged his government is likely to continue to be at odds with the U.S. on key strategic issues.

Successive U.S. administrations have charged Damascus with smuggling increasingly sophisticated weapons systems to Hezbollah, including long-range missiles that could reach most of Israel. The U.S. has subsequently put in place economic sanctions against Syria.

Mr. Assad denied charges that his government directly arms Hezbollah.

He also indicated that his government was unlikely to give the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, wide access to investigate claims that Syria had covertly been developing nuclear technology.

"It will definitely be misused," said Mr. Assad, who denies Syria has been seeking atomic weapons.

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