



Testimony prepared for hearing
"U.S. Policy in Syria"
U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs
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By Andrew J. Tabler, Next Generation Fellow
Program on Arab Politics, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Chairman:

The situation on the ground in Syria continues to deteriorate. This week, the United Nations estimated that over 3500 Syrians had been killed since anti-Asad-regime protests broke out on March 15. Thousands more have been arrested in what now can be described as the most brutal crackdown against civilians since Hafiz al-Asad's genocidal massacre in Hama twenty-nine years ago.

Protests in Syria have largely remained peaceful in nature, with Asad-regime forces using live fire to disperse crowds. The hope of the protestors, as well as the Syrian opposition in exile, was that the protests, as in Egypt and Tunisia, would bring the masses onto the streets, garner clear support from the international community, and force the regime to choose between stepping aside or continuing to hold onto power through brute force. Despite large protest numbers and condemnation by Western and regional countries, Asad has apparently decided to fight it out until the end.

The regime's strategy is simple: deploy military and security units fully into restive areas around Der'a, Hama, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, and Homs; use live fire to scare those "on the fence" from taking the protests into the central squares of Damascus and Aleppo; rely on vetoes of UN Security Council Resolutions by Russia and China; point to statements by Western and regional countries that a military solution is "off the table"; wear down the protestors so they return home; and launch a "reform" initiative that the regime can pay lip service to.

The gambit has worked thus far. The protestors continue to come out in the streets daily, and intensively on Fridays, to demand the fall of the Asad regime. But it is hard for them to see a light at the end of this bloody tunnel. Frustrated, protestors are now calling for international support via a no-fly zone or a buffer zone along Syria's borders where those opposing the regime could seek safe haven, etc. But with each announcement that such schemes are not in the making, protestors face an increasingly grim future.

Increasing numbers in the Syrian opposition are seeking to take matters into their own hands. Defectors from the Syrian military -- who fled their posts rather than obey orders to fire on protestors -- are aligning themselves with the "Free Syrian Army" -- an armed group whose leadership is based in Turkey with active operations in and around Homs, Idlib, and other Syrian locales. Added to this are two other types of armed groups: unidentified Salafist elements and certain criminal gangs whose members originate in Syria's brisk smuggling trade. While all three groups continue to be well outgunned by the security forces, many Syrians see the activities of such groups, absent international action of some type, as the only way to ultimately displace the regime.

Until now, U.S. policymakers have supported Syria's peaceful protest movement, with Amb. Robert Ford's visits to besieged cities such as Hama spotlighting the regime's human rights abuses. The embassy has also met with Syrians on the ground to better gauge the direction of the conflict. This effort has been augmented by a robust sanctions regime. Following President Obama's announcement last August that President Asad must "step aside," Washington enacted the remaining parts of the 2004 Syrian Accountability Act, broadened the scope of Treasury Department designations of regime officials and associates, and announced a ban on Syrian oil sales. The administration also successfully enlisted the support of the European Union countries to also call for Asad's departure and adopt similar measures.

With the regime using brute force to maintain its grip on power, and Syrians increasingly pursuing parallel tracks of both peaceful and armed resistance to the Asad regime, the United States now needs to develop a concerted plan to prepare for all contingencies and bring about the demise of the Asad regime. The longer the regime holds on, the bloodier and more sectarian the conflict is likely to become and spread to neighboring countries.

This plan should include the following action items:

- Form a Syria contact group: Until now, the Obama administration has been careful not to “get out ahead” of the Syrian protest movement or regional allies, who are well poised to exact pressure on the Asad regime. In the face of the Asad regime’s failure to implement the recent Arab League initiative, the Obama administration should formally push for the formation of a Syria contact group that would shepherd concerted multilateral pressure -- a method that historically worked best with Damascus -- and develop a strategy for ending the Asad regime.
- Develop a strategy for peeling away Asad regime supporters: The Asad regime is a minority Alawite-dominated group whose core consists of similar heterodox Shia offshoots (Alawites, Druze, and Ismailies) who make up the command of the military and security services. But the regime’s stability also relies on other communities with extensive familial and trade ties to Western countries, most notably Christians and Sunni businessmen. A plan to use targeted U.S., EU, and Turkish sanctions against the regime’s most egregious supporters will, if used at key political junctures, substantially weaken the Asad regime’s grip on power.
- Help the Syrian opposition plan ahead: The fear generated by the regime crackdown, petty differences among opposition figures, as well as over forty years of authoritarian rule have hobbled the Syrian opposition’s ability to plan. It is unrealistic to expect or require the Syrian opposition to come up with civil resistance strategy like that used by opposition protestors in Belgrade or Cairo to bring down regimes there. Rather, the United States should assist the Syrian opposition in developing a civil resistance strategy that broadens the protests to include tactics such as boycotts and general strikes. This will maximize the political power of the peaceful protest movement.
- Push for Human Rights monitors: The Asad regime literally wants to bury its human rights violations. The United States should facilitate, along with like-minded diplomats from allied countries, the deployment of human rights monitors, including people from Arab countries and Turkey, to keep the Asad regime’s crackdown in the spotlight.
- Prepare for a militarization of the conflict: With Security Council action blocked by Russia and China and increased fighting by defectors around Homs and elsewhere, the chances for sectarian war are increasing. Regional actors (individuals and states), seeing a moral and strategic imperative, will likely be drawn into what could be a proxy struggle. To this end, the United States will need to explore with its allies the possibility of the creation of “no-fly”, “no-go”, or “buffer” zones as ways to contain the conflict and help garner support for the Syrian opposition.
- Push for Security Council action: The failure of last week’s Arab League initiative to end the violence has opened the door for the United States and the Europeans to return to the Security Council for a resolution on Syria. While Russia and China have vetoed past measures, they will find it increasingly hard to do so as Arab efforts to negotiate a soft landing to the crisis fail. Security Council resolutions will serve as the basis for maximizing multilateral pressure, especially comprehensive sanctions and possible future use of force.

Respectfully Submitted

Andrew J. Tabler