

Is Regime Collapse on Syria's Horizon? Evaluating Assad's Grip on Power

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Jun 22, 2020

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Brief Analysis

A State Department official explains the latest sanctions against entities that do business with Assad, while two experts assess the regime's current status and its susceptibility to foreign pressure.

On June 17, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Joel Rayburn, Oula Alrifai, and Sam Dagher. Rayburn is the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for Levant affairs and special envoy for Syria; he addressed the forum briefly upon the rollout of the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-caesar-act-comes-into-force-part-1-increasing-the-assad-regimes-isolation) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-caesar-act-comes-into-force-part-1-increasing-the-assad-regimes-isolation>). Alrifai is a fellow in the Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics and a former political asylee from Syria. Dagher is a nonresident fellow at the Middle East Institute and author of the book *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JOEL RAYBURN

On June 17, the United States announced thirty-nine Syria-related sanctions designations, most of them under the Caesar Act. The act is named after the Syrian photographer who courageously released thousands of photographs documenting torture in Bashar al-Assad's prisons, providing the U.S. government with a powerful way to promote accountability for such crimes. The passage and implementation of the Caesar Act represent cooperation between the legislative and executive branches on a common policy of holding the regime liable and peacefully resolving the Syrian conflict.

It is important to focus on the reasoning behind this legislation. As two recent UN reports show, the Assad regime's responsibility for war crimes is a matter of international consensus, not just an American opinion. On April 6, a UN Board of Inquiry issued evidence indicating that the regime and its allies have launched devastating attacks against hospitals, schools, and other civilian infrastructure. Additionally, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons recently attributed responsibility to the Assad regime for using sarin and chlorine gas in three separate attacks in 2017. These are just two of many examples from the brutal war that the regime has waged against the Syrian people with help from Russia and Iran, at the cost of at least 500,000 innocent civilians dead.

The Caesar Act sanctions will be mandatory against targets that facilitate the regime's production of oil or its acquisition of aviation-related goods, services, and technologies used for military purposes. These are the first Syrian sectoral sanctions that the United States can apply. Sanctions normally require a high evidentiary hurdle, but the Caesar Act lowers the bar for application. For example, authorities do not need proof that a company entering the Damascus region to carry out reconstruction projects is directly benefitting the Assad regime, only that it is investing in a certain sector. The act also targets any entities caught supporting mercenaries, as well as foreign actors who perpetuate the conflict on behalf of the regime and its allies. Likewise, it targets those involved in war profiteering, including entities who would provide significant reconstruction or engineering services to the regime.

In the long term, the Caesar Act aims to foreclose any economic or financial benefits the regime might accrue from an ultimate military victory in Syria. The overarching U.S. goal is to promote accountability and deny the regime access to the international financial system until a political solution to the conflict can be reached. The new sanctions are part of this goal, meant to help ensure that the parties to the conflict resolve it under the auspices of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the internationally accepted roadmap for a political settlement. Further, before the current or future Syrian government can be allowed to join the international community and take part in the global economy, it must do the following: hold perpetrators accountable for war crimes; cease sponsoring terrorism; create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees; verifiably and permanently dismantle its chemical weapons program; sever its ties with Iran's military forces and Iranian-backed groups; and drop its hostility toward regional neighbors.

Some have argued that the Caesar Act might undermine humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, but U.S. sanctions are not responsible for the war conditions and economic hardship that the population is currently suffering—the Assad regime is. The new sanctions are designed to deter the regime from continuing its war on the people and hold it accountable for what it has done. And as with all other Syria sanctions, the Caesar Act has extensive exemptions for legitimate humanitarian trade and activity. So far, the United States has not seen any legitimate activity precluded by the Syria sanctions program.

The announcement of Caesar sanctions is the first taste of what the U.S. government will do on this front in the coming weeks and months. Several tranches of additional Syria sanctions are already in the pipeline. This summer, the United States will put unprecedented political and economic pressure on the Assad regime to return to the political process, with the goal of achieving a just and fair political solution to the conflict.

OULA ALRIFAI

Recently, the international community witnessed a dramatic war of words between Bashar al-Assad and his wealthy cousin Rami Makhlouf, Syria's biggest tycoon. This may seem like a major fracture inside the regime, but the longstanding dynamics of their family's disputes say otherwise—for example, witness how the regime survived [more serious internal crises](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dont-overthink-the-assad-makhlouf-feud) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dont-overthink-the-assad-makhlouf-feud>) pitting Hafiz al-Assad against his brother Rifaat, and Bashar against his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat. In the latest rift, it is important to keep in mind that Makhlouf is part of the regime's circle, not an independent businessman. He has played a massive role in financing Assad's 2011 crackdown and keeping the regime afloat during the war.

To be sure, the current diffusion of power in Damascus has exposed the regime's weaknesses. Rapid consolidation of power is now unlikely for

Assad due to the country's financial meltdown, the population's worsened living conditions, and the persistence of popular uprisings. Yet Assad is still left with a hardened group of supporters who benefit from his presence. Accordingly, one potential scenario is a turf war between security-backed gangs and their political affiliates in parliament. Anti-Assad demonstrations may continue erupting in various locations (e.g., Suwayda province; smaller communities in central Syria, the coastal areas, and the mountains), but a general uprising like that of 2011 is unlikely at present due to the country's deep divisions.

For their part, Iran and Russia may find themselves more involved in arbitrating internal disputes to prevent a meltdown in Syria. Receiving greater international support could make Assad even more assertive, emboldening him to demand greater support from the Syrian people. Yet Moscow and Tehran may grow tired of his zero-sum game if he continues to prove incapable of embracing win-win scenarios.

As for the Caesar Act, the Syrian people will be unsatisfied with it because it does not call for the regime to step down. In general, the people still want the Assad regime to go—a demand currently being voiced by citizens in the south, Idlib province, and other areas. Moreover, despite the humanitarian aid exemptions, the new sanctions will mostly affect the average Syrian. The burdens will be transferred to the wider citizenry because that is how the economy works under Assad.

SAM DAGHER

The Syrian economy is in deep trouble. There is no investment for reconstruction, patrons like Iran are unable to help, and Lebanon—which acted as the economic pressure valve for the regime and average Syrians—is [facing its own crisis](#)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-caesar-act-comes-into-force-part-2-pressuring-hezbollah-in-lebanon>)

. Given his limited options, Assad decided to launch a grand shakedown of Makhlof and other cronies to help shore up his regime's coffers. Most of these cronies gave in, but Makhlof decided to resist, posting Facebook videos that brought normally private disputes into the public eye. Assad retaliated by freezing his family's assets.

In the short and medium term, the showdown might help Assad appease his support base and his foreign patrons alike, allowing him to claim that he is cracking down on corruption. The move is also well-timed ahead of the 2021 election, which will likely be just as much of a sham as the previous vote in 2014. And if Syrian opposition figures up the pressure on Assad, he could try to appease them by bringing some of them into his government.

At the same time, the current rift could be a problem for the regime if Makhlof decides to fight and not sit on the sidelines. For example, he could rally Alawites from his clan and associated families, or look to the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which boasts its own armed wing and a longstanding rivalry with Assad's Baath Party.

Whatever the case, Assad is weaker now than at any other time during his rule. Outwardly he is the war's victor, but he is only able to maintain power because of support from Russia and Iran. The moment they withdraw this support, he will be at huge risk. Even at the war's height, he was in a better position than he is today. Funds were coming in from Tehran, credit was being given by Moscow, and his regime had coopted a multi-billion-dollar UN humanitarian program in order to reward his supporters, who further benefitted from massive looting. These same supporters now want to see the fruits of victory, but the economic situation has gone from bad to worse, especially as Lebanon's problems deepen.

The regime still has a few options to get through the current crisis, however. It could escalate the military campaign in Idlib. Alternately, it could try a conciliatory option to buy time in the hope that the Trump administration is on its way out and the next administration will ease the pressure—for example, by opening tentative negotiations through the UN process. Depending on how deep the Caesar sanctions cut, Assad and his partners in Moscow and Tehran may also try to rally and confront the existential threat. Finally, the regime could reach out to China, though Beijing is not eager to get involved in Syria.

This summary was prepared by Kevin Mathieson. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ♦

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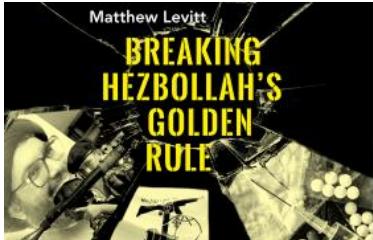
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