

Commenting on Oula Alrifai's: To Save Syria, Assad Must Step Down

by [Thomas Parker \(/experts/thomas-parker\)](#)

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Dr. Thomas Parker worked in the Executive Office of the President, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, the Intelligence Community and the U.S. Congress over the course of thirty years. He currently teaches security studies at George Washington University. Dr. Parker is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

February 28, 2018

No Help from Moscow

Ms. Alrifai's thoughtful [article \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/to-save-syria-assad-must-step-down\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/to-save-syria-assad-must-step-down) calls for U.S.-Russian coordination to force President Assad to give up power. Unfortunately, I doubt very much that the Russians would be interested in such an outcome for many reasons.

First, the Soviets or Russians have been allied with the Assad family since it took power in the early 1970s.

Second, and more important, the reality is that Moscow saved Assad by its military intervention in 2015 has provided Putin with a foreign policy triumph. It presented Russia to the world with political and military strength, far from its perceived decline that began during the 1980s under Gorbachev. In fact, the Russians probably believe that the Russian president has "made Russia great again," unlike the American president.

Third, the Russians no doubt believe correctly that while their intervention was opposed by the Sunni Arab world, Sunni countries would come around to the realities of successful Russian power. Sure enough, Turkey has given up on trying to oust Assad in favor of containing the Syrian Kurdish movements, perhaps with Russian assistance. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have decided to cultivate Moscow, including purchasing Russian military equipment: for the first time ever, in the case of Riyadh, or for the first time in decades, in the case of Cairo.

Fourth, the Russians probably sincerely believe that they have done Syria, the Middle East, and the world a favor by keeping a secular, anti-jihadi leader in power. The fact that is also a tyrannical one, as Ms. Alrifai eloquently points out, surely does not bother them much; after all, President Putin is something of a dictator himself.

The Russians saw the alternative to Assad as radical, religious opposition forces, led by al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra fighters. They also saw their intervention to save the regime as a corrective to recent, highly problematic Western military interventions to topple regimes in the Arab world. After all, even many Americans now believe that the NATO intervention and subsequent overthrow of President Qaddafi in Libya in 2011 was a mistake, ushering in a period of civil war that continues. Similarly, many in Europe and the U.S. feel that the intervention in Iraq in 2003 to

overthrow a secular tyrant opened up a Pandora's Box of civil war. I agree that the Libya intervention was a mistake. However, the Iraq intervention is more complicated, given that the U.S. intelligence community sincerely thought that Saddam had advanced nuclear and biological weapons programs. In any case, the intervention was not a personal vendetta, as Ms. Alrifai suggests.

For all these reasons, the Russians will hardly force Assad to give up power. Yes, they will nudge him to open up his government by reaching out to Sunni Syrians. No doubt, he will try to broaden his governing base by doing so. But you don't give up power when you have overcome a near-death experience as Assad has done.

Do not Count on the Americans (or the Israelis)

Ms. Alrifai helpfully points out that the Americans (and others) have a military presence in northern and eastern Syria to support the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance between Kurds, Arabs, and some local Assyrian Christians against the Islamic State. But their purpose is to prevent the return of the Islamic State and perhaps contain Iranian military activities. They have little leverage over Assad's increasing control over the rest of the country.

While Israel destroyed a good part of the Syrian air defenses in early February, the main purpose was to attack Iranian military bases. Most Israelis have no illusions that they can shake Assad's hold on power. They just want to minimize or eliminate the Iranian presence. Assad, they can live with.

Syrian People Exhausted, But Assad's Long-Term Future Shaky

For now, I suspect that the Syrian people are exhausted by the ongoing civil war. Many, including Sunnis, just want a period of peace even if it is under the old Alawite dictatorship. Some members of the Sunni urban merchant classes and Kurdish groups will probably agree to some form of cosmetic "reconciliation" with the Assad regime, however much they may wish that he had lost the civil war.

Over the longer term, however, the Assad regime's future is not assured. It remains a narrowly based government, as Ms. Alrifai points out. The Alawis are only between 10-15 percent of the population. Significantly, they have a lower birth rate than the less urban Sunni population. The small Christians minority may tend to support the secular Assad, but their top priority is probably emigration. An important variable will be how many of the Sunni refugees who fled Syria return. Ironically, German Prime Minister Angela Merkel's well-meaning but mistaken welcoming refugee policy has helped Assad to remain in power.

However, a new Syrian generation, not traumatized by the civil war, will eventually come into being. They may be willing to challenge the Assad family's hold on power. Let us hope that the international community does not let them down again. ❖

RECOMMENDED



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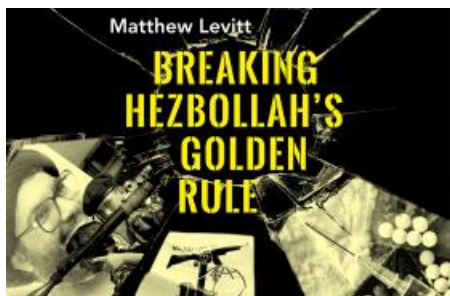
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