Assad's Reelection Campaign Matters -- Really

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Articles & Testimony

The Syrian president wants to impose a solution to the country's crisis on his terms.

The United States and the international community have spent the better part of the last year backing peace talks in Geneva to bring about a "political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people," and ultimately end the war between the Alawite-dominated regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the Sunni and Kurdish-dominated opposition. But Assad has his own transition in mind: running for a third seven-year term as president. On April 28, the Syrian president nominated himself as a candidate in Syria's June 3 presidential poll, "hoping the parliament would endorse it."

This was hardly a surprise. Assad has hinted at his candidacy for months, and "spontaneous rallies" calling for him to run -- many complete with images of Assad beside Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah -- have sprung up across regime-controlled areas of the country, while shopkeepers have been encouraged to paint their storefronts with Syrian flags and slogans supporting the leader.

What's Assad's concession to his opponents after attempting to shoot his way out of the country's largest uprising, with 150,000-plus killed, 680,000 injured, and up to half of the country's 23 million people displaced? The Syrian president has made the next poll the first contested presidential election in the nation's modern history. That pledge, however, is undermined by the state of war in the country and Assad's previous referendums, including the last presidential election I observed personally in 2007, when he won by a Crimea-like 97.62 percent of the vote. In one polling station in Damascus's wealthiest and most Westernized neighborhood, a young woman-turned-poll worker not only urged me to vote even though I did not have Syrian nationality, but also encouraged me to follow the lead of Assad's main election poster and vote with a fingerprint in my own blood. Such tactics helped Assad improve upon his 97.24-percent showing in 2000, when his father Hafez died, and the Syrian parliament lowered the minimum age for seeking the Syrian presidency from 40 to 34 to allow Bashar to run.

Why, then, should anyone care about another rigged election in the Middle East? Because Assad's reelection is actually part of his larger strategy to destroy the international community-backed plan for a negotiated solution to the increasingly sectarian Syrian crisis in favor of a forced solution on his terms. This solution includes sieges and starvation of opposition-controlled areas, the manipulation of aid supplies, and the dropping of "barrel bombs," Scud missiles, and alleged chlorine gas canisters on his enemies. While this approach has helped him gain ground in western Syria with help from a legion of Hezbollah, Iraqi, and other Iranian-backed Shiite fighters, Assad lacks the troops to retake and hold all of Syria, unless his allies expand their involvement to a much more costly degree. Short of Syria's occupation by what is often described as "Iran's foreign legion," the opposition and their regional backers will not agree to a Potemkin transition with Assad and his Iranian allies calling the shots.

The likely outcome of all this is a failed state partitioned into regime, Sunni-Arab, and Kurdish areas, all of which are now havens for U.S.-designated terrorist organizations in the heart of the Middle East. Combined with regional tensions between Iran and the Arabs, as well as the deep chill in relations between Russia and the United States, diplomatic solutions seem distant as well. This presents Barack Obama with a dilemma that has far-reaching implications. Allowing Assad's forced solution to go forward will only contribute to the spread of a Syria-centered Middle Eastern proxy war between Iran and Arab countries, demonstrate to dictators that mass slaughter works, and show Moscow and other U.S. adversaries that Washington is unwilling to follow through on its foreign-policy principles and diplomatic agreements. But reversing Assad's course will require the kind of military action from the West and its regional allies that Obama has been extremely reluctant to use due to its expense and uncertain result for the United States.

In early 2012, as the armed insurgency in Syria gathered steam, the Assad regime's changes to the constitution to establish contested presidential elections attracted little attention in the West, which at the time was focused on Kofi Annan's five-point plan to end the crisis. When that effort failed, the United States and Russia negotiated the "Geneva Communique of 2012." At the time, the regime's contraction, if not its demise, seemed certain, so Western negotiators watered down the text's language over Assad's fate to overcome a Russian veto at the United Nations. Instead of demanding Assad "step aside" as part of a transition, the United States agreed to a "Transitional Governing Body" with "full executive powers" to be formed by "mutual consent" that "could include members of the current government and the opposition and other groups." American negotiators held up the "mutual consent" clause at the time as giving the opposition a veto over Assad's participation in the TGB. But by not ruling Assad out of the scheme, as well as failing to define which opposition groups had to agree to the TGB, the agreement gave Russia a veto over the process and allowed Assad to play for time.

And he did just that. Last year, with the backing of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, Assad launched a counterinsurgency effort that -- combined with the use of chemical weapons, Obama's unwillingness to enforce his "red line" on their use in Syria, and the regime's foot-dragging on its deal with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in Security Council Resolution 2118 -- decimated the opposition. As a seeming concession to the Russians for getting the Assad regime to give up its chemical weapons, the United States helped deliver selective representatives from the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), an opposition umbrella organization backed by the West, to negotiations in Geneva with the Assad regime in January and February. But the Syrian regime refused to negotiate a Transitional Governing Body, and went so far as to place opposition negotiators on a list of terrorists. At the same time, Assad increased bombardment of opposition areas with barrel bombs -- crude explosive devices dropped from regime helicopters. According to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power "the most concentrated period of killing in the entire duration of the conflict" occurred during the talks in Geneva. Russia, which in Security Council Resolution 2118 had effectively pledged to involve the regime in discussions on the TGB, is now suddenly unwilling to do so.

Meanwhile, in interviews with the Western, Russian, and Arab press, Assad and regime spokespersons have announced that he will run in the upcoming presidential poll and that international election observers will not be allowed into the country. The rules stipulate that each candidate file an application with the Supreme Constitutional Court, an all-Assad-appointed body that will reach a verdict on each application within five days. It is unclear what the final arrangements will be and who will run -- six other candidates have announced their candidacy. But what is certain is that Syria's election law forbids candidates who have not resided in Syria for the last 10 years, which eliminates many of the exiled opposition active in the Syrian National Coalition.

Assad says he will only deal with parties that have a "national agenda" in upcoming local and parliamentary elections, which essentially rules out not only the SNC, but also other armed groups that control large swaths of opposition-held Syria. The opposition acceptable to Assad encompasses groups in regime-controlled areas that have been tolerated for years, including the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCC). The NCC is headed by the elderly pan-Arab socialist Hassan Abdel Azim, who has little to no influence on the opposition outside Assad-controlled areas.

It is here where Assad's logic collides with the hard realities of Syrian demographics. Following the Assad regime's last attempt to shoot its way out of an uprising by its Sunni majority, which culminated in the Hama Massacre of 1982, in which up to 30,000 Syrians died, Assad's father launched a massive, decade-long crackdown in Syria that decimated the economy and confined people to their homes. Predictably, birthrates skyrocketed. In the decade following the Hama Massacre, Syria was among the 20 fastest-growing populations on the planet, particularly in Sunni-dominated rural areas (this accounts for the lack of gray hair among today's opposition fighters). This time around, there are many more Sunnis than Alawites, who had fewer children. If Assad only offers a bankrupt plan for reforms based on his "reelection" as a transition, along with promises of economic largesse that he can ill afford, there is little chance his regime will be able to shoot the Sunni opposition into submission to a degree that would stabilize and reunite the country.

The bad news for the fragmented Syrian opposition is that the loose language negotiated by Russia in the Geneva Communique of 2012 concerning the formation of a "Transitional Governing Body" by "mutual consent" could in practice mean that opposition forces who succumb to Assad ultimately form the basis of the TGB. And given the Obama administration's aversion to supporting the Syrian opposition with lethal assistance or direct military intervention, as well as its current outreach to the Assad regime's chief supporters in Tehran, the White House might be tempted to take the bait and agree to such a political transition. As might European governments concerned about the growth of jihadists among the Sunni opposition.

That would be a big mistake. Handing Assad and Iran's foreign legion even a partial victory in Syria right now would make it more difficult to contain Tehran's regional machinations and secure further concessions over its nuclear program. But more importantly, it would likely stoke a regional, sectarian proxy war centered on Syria. Arab Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, are deeply worried about Iran's spreading influence and nuclear ambitions, and appear committed to fighting Iran's legion to the last dead Syrian. These motivations have spurred some of their citizens to sponsor effective al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria with global aspirations.

The most effective and least costly way to contain Assad's advance, as well as the influence of jihadists, is through greater lethal support for the moderate opposition -- an option the White House has been debating for years and is reportedly debating now in light of the bravado that the Syrian and Russian presidents have been demonstrating recently. As the Assad regime has accelerated shipments of chemical weapons to the Syrian coast, American-made TOW anti-tank missiles have increasingly made their way to moderate Syrian opposition fighters vetted by Western intelligence. But the only way to stop the Assad regime's aerial bombardment of opposition areas and bring the government to the negotiating table is by providing anti-aircraft weapons to the opposition or launching missile

strikes on the regime's airfields. In recent days, however, Obama has sharply rebuked critics of his Syria policy who are now calling for a military response to Assad's worsening behavior.

While Obama's equation of "Syria is Iraq" has worked with the American public so far, Assad's forced solution has global implications that run directly counter to American values and interests. Permitting the Syrian president to implement his strategy would demonstrate to ruthless dictators around the world that mass slaughter and blocked humanitarian access are effective tactics. And, at a time when Washington and its European allies are contending with a resurgent Russia, U.S. adversaries eager to challenge international law will conclude that the West is weak, does not uphold its principles, and can be effectively ignored.

Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria)** . ❖

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