

What Must Be Done in Syria

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Jul 25, 2012

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As the Syrian crisis grinds toward a conclusion, the action -- or inaction -- of the international community may determine whether the future Syria is adversary or ally.

The following is the original English submission of an article published solely in German and available as a PDF download.

More than a year into the Syrian uprising, the regime of Bashar al-Assad finally appears to be approaching the demise that Western leaders have long insisted is inevitable. The assassination last week of senior Assad lieutenants, the increasing number of high-level regime defections, and the mounting achievements of opposition forces have contributed to the sense that the endgame in Syria is near.

Yet Assad is not yet finished. While his inner circle has suffered a grievous blow, he is far from isolated. Key advisors, including his younger brother and key military official Maher al-Assad, remain by all accounts loyal. So too do entire segments of the Syrian populace, such as Assad's own Alawite community, other ethnic minorities who fear an Islamist takeover of Syria, and wealthy businessmen who have prospered under the regime's patronage. Assad also retains support of foreign allies, such as Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia and China, which recently vetoed for the third time a UN Security Council resolution which would have imposed stronger sanctions on the Syrian regime.

Critically, Assad also apparently remains in command of Syria's armed forces and in possession of its chemical weapons stockpile, providing him with the capacity to visit further violence upon the Syrian people. As Assad's options narrow, he becomes increasingly dangerous and perhaps apt to lash out in a desperate bid to cling to power. The Syrian opposition is disinclined to accept any compromise in which Assad remains in office, yet he is unlikely to depart readily.

Even if Assad departs, however, the crisis in Syria will not end but merely move into a new phase. Prior to the seizure of power by Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor in office, Hafez al-Assad, Syrian politics were tumultuous. The

country experienced repeated coups between its independence in 1946 and Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1971, and in the 1960s alone had seven different presidents.

There exists the danger that the collapse of the Assad regime will be followed not by peace and demobilization, but by sectarian strife and even territorial disintegration, with Alawites, Kurds, and others retreating to their own enclaves. Such violence could spark significant refugee flows, and the attendant breakdown in order could make Syria fertile ground for extremists and make its armaments vulnerable to proliferation. This would pose a risk not just to Syria but to the surrounding region, just as arms and displaced persons from Libya contributed to the destabilization of Mali. For the West, the fall of Assad and Syria's emergence from brutal autocracy would be a welcome development and quite possibly a strategic boon; a descent into deeper chaos, however, would not be.

So while Assad may finally be losing his grip on power, this is no time for the international community to breathe easy. Instead, it still can and should play a role in shaping a positive outcome to the crisis.

First, the West should do what it can to hasten Assad's departure. Beyond strengthening sanctions and avoiding any new proposals which would allow him to retain power, there is much the West can do to increase the pressure on the Syrian president and those loyal to him. To deepen the widening fissures within the regime, Assad, his family members, and his top lieutenants should be encouraged to seek exile and military commanders should be urged to defect, and should be advised of stiff consequences should they refuse. In addition, Syrian and non-Syrian businessmen who facilitate the regime's activities should be subjected to international asset freezes and travel bans.

To reduce Assad's external support, Iran and Hezbollah should be warned that any escalation of their activities in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime will prompt a tough Western response, and increased emphasis should be placed on halting the flow of arms and assistance from Iran and Lebanon to Syria. Iranian arms shipments, in particular, are a violation of existing UN sanctions prohibiting the purchase of weapons from Tehran, and any entities or individuals found to be involved in such transactions should be swiftly and harshly punished.

To increase the military pressure on the regime, opposition forces should be provided with support in their effort to gain and hold ground. While the West's reluctance to provide direct military assistance is unlikely to change, other forms of support -- such as training, communications, intelligence, and logistical assistance -- could prove useful. Critically, the provision of such support would also begin the process of professionalizing opposition forces and building links between them and Western militaries, which will help avoid a breakdown of order and security in Syria after Assad's fall.

Second, the international community should look ahead to reducing the risks associated with the regime's fall and helping Syrians establish a new government. In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, Syria will face three primary risks. The first of these is the proliferation of chemical weapons and other armaments: to prevent this, Western countries along with opposition forces should develop a plan to secure the regime's most dangerous weapons.

The second major risk is a significant increase in the flow of refugees within Syria and across its borders. Western governments and international organizations, working with Syria's neighbors, should begin planning to assist refugees and prevent such flows from destabilizing those border regions.

The third risk is of reprisals and sectarian violence. To address this, the international community should press the Syrian opposition for firm commitments to disarm militias and to protect minorities and include them in any future decisionmaking bodies, and if necessary begin planning to expand the mandate of the existing UN observer mission and convert it into a more capable entity.

Syria's future is characterized not only by risk, however, but also tremendous opportunity. To help Syrians seize this opportunity, the international community should begin now to work with the opposition -- building on work already begun by international NGOs - to conduct a post-Assad transition, build a new government, and ensure liberals are

well-organized and represented, a task complicated tremendously by the violence of the last sixteen months and the despotic rule of the past four decades. Any new Syrian government will require assistance from the world, in the form not only of financial aid, but also technical advice.

Thus far in the Syrian conflict, the West has largely sat on the sidelines, prioritizing avoiding risk over capitalizing on the unanticipated opportunity to help the Syrian people shape their own future and that of the Middle East. Whatever one thinks of this policy, it is certainly no longer appropriate. As the Syrian crisis grinds toward a conclusion, the action -- or inaction -- of the international community may determine whether the future Syria is adversary or ally, and a source of instability, or of peace.

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