

# After the Damascus Assassinations: A New Phase for U.S. Syria Policy

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Brief Analysis

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## The United States should take advantage of the latest blow to Assad's inner circle, hastening his demise while preventing worst-case follow-on events.

**T**oday's apparent assassination of top military officials in Syria marks a new and possibly decisive phase in the civil war between Bashar al-Assad's regime and the broad, loosely coordinated, but clearly potent opposition. For the United States, this turn of events should shift the policy discussion from a UN debate over renewal of the ineffectual Annan peacekeeping mission to ways of exploiting the disarray, namely by pressing Assad to leave power while avoiding outcomes such as chaos, ethnic bloodbath, or jihadist takeover.

With at least three of the eight targeted military leaders apparently dead, the Damascus bombing will almost certainly be a major blow to the regime's ability to conduct its war against the Syrian people. The impact will be felt both operationally and psychologically, with the potential for cascading problems in conducting military actions across the country. The surviving leadership will have to rebuild a command structure in an environment where increasing numbers of military officers and civilian supporters are likely to see the assassinations as the writing on the wall for the regime and begin to seek alternatives for their own survival. Depending on whether the regime is able to steady itself quickly, the incident could also provide an opportunity for opposition forces to press ahead with creating safe zones in various parts of the country, or even to take decisive action against Assad.

## IDEAS FOR U.S. POLICY

**T**he decimating of Syria's top security leadership clearly moves the goalposts for U.S. policy. Assad's near-term demise, while not assured, is now more likely than ever, and if it comes to pass, it will have been achieved by the courage and ingenuity of Syrian opposition forces. For some in Washington, this will validate both the arm's-length approach the Obama administration has taken to the idea of more direct involvement in the anti-Assad effort and its reliance on economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. In reality, though, Assad's demise will have come because

of armed action by Syrians, not outside measures that came months later than necessary and at the cost of thousands of innocent lives and the potential for greater radicalization in his wake.

But Assad is not yet gone. To facilitate his fall, U.S. policy must now shift gears away from the diplomatic ballet over the Annan mission, the covert effort to support the arming of opposition elements, and the low-intensity effort to organize the Syrian political opposition (via the equally unwieldy collection of nearly a hundred countries in the "Friends of the Syrian People" group). Instead, Washington should build on the Damascus attack to hasten the regime's collapse, focusing on the dangerous period marked by Assad's last stand and the emergence of whatever comes next.

Specifically, the administration should do the following:

- In coordination with key allies, urge Assad both publicly and privately to leave for exile with his remaining family while he still has a chance to avoid the fate of Muammar Qadhafi and Saddam Hussein.
- Privately urge Iran and Russia to remove any residual military presence in Syria.
- Convene leaders of the Syrian opposition (both civilian and military) and key "Friends of Syria" (e.g., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and major European powers) to discuss a blueprint for the endgame, including the formation of a successor government-in-waiting. Neither Russia nor Iran should be invited. This is as much political theater as practical policymaking, given that the goal at the moment should be to drive an ever-deeper wedge between Assad and his shrinking circle of support, especially among Alawites outside his clan and his remaining Sunni collaborators.
- Work with the Syrian opposition, the Arab League, and Turkey to issue a statement offering specific commitments to the protection of Syrian minorities in the event of Assad's departure, with reference to Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and Druze.
- Dispatch military/security officials to consult with Syria's neighbors -- Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel -- in a high-profile display of coordination to warn Assad against a desperate, last-chance external adventure.
- Begin intensive preparations for the deployment of an international stabilization and humanitarian support force designed to reduce the risks associated with post-Assad transition. Its mission should include securing and possibly removing Syria's chemical weapons stocks, supporting the successor government's efforts to prevent violent retribution against Alawites and others perceived as pro-Assad, and providing humanitarian assistance. The latter element should include medical care (on hospital ships and onshore) and other aid to Syrians who suffered during the regime's brutal crackdown, as well as assisting in the repatriation of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Although this could eventually become a UN-sanctioned operation, it is important for the United States to take the lead in defining the mission with key allies as soon as possible.

More generally, Washington now has the opportunity to apply the difficult and often painful lessons learned from political transitions elsewhere in the Middle East over the past eighteen months. While the arc of Syria's history may be bending toward justice -- paraphrasing President Obama's comments after Egyptian revolutionaries forced Hosni Mubarak out in 2011 -- transitions in the Middle East have produced not just popular governments, but also regression in minority rights (Egypt), weapons proliferation (Libya), and the empowerment of political movements long critical of U.S. policy in the region -- let alone the emergence of horrific, Taliban-style rule in Mali.

Despite not giving the opposition the material support it has wanted, the United States has avoided damaging its position among Syrians the way Russia has. If the Assad regime is truly on the edge, the Obama administration has been gifted the opportunity to help shape the transition in a way that limits the potential for negative outcomes and, along the way, bolsters America's standing in a post-Assad Syria.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

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