

Confronting Damascus: U.S. Policy toward the Evolving Situation in Syria, Part II

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Chairman Chabot and Ranking Member Ackerman:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on the situation in Syria and U.S. government efforts to force President Bashar al-Assad to "step aside," as outlined by President Obama in August 2011.

During Part I of this hearing in December 2011, a representative of the Obama administration characterized Assad as a "dead man walking." I agreed with that assessment at the time, and I think much of it still holds true: international pressure and sanctions placed upon the Assad regime are having an unprecedented effect on its ability to fund its operations, and evidence shows that hard currency reserves are being rapidly depleted. Unfortunately, however, repeated vetoes by Russia and China of United Nations Security Council action, the overall lack of "defections" from the core of the Assad regime, and the findings of a recent visit I made to southern Turkey and Lebanon have all helped me understand that Assad still has many more political and military resources that he can call upon to continue what is literally a "death march" for months if not years to come. To force Assad to "step aside," the United States will need to accelerate efforts from the ground up by supporting the opposition "within Syria" in concert with allies forming the "core" of the Friends of the Syrian People group of countries.

TREATING THE SYMPTOMS BUT NOT THE DISEASE OF THE SYRIA CRISIS

The Assad regime's continued suppression of the Syrian opposition continues, and has claimed upwards of 10,000 lives thus far. Thousands more have been arrested or displaced, including those that have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Recently, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution backing a six-point plan developed by special envoy Kofi Annan intended to bring about a cessation of hostilities and a process to facilitate a "Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, plural political system." Despite agreeing to the plan, the Assad regime has failed to meet agreed deadlines to cease use of live fire and heavy weapons, as well as its commitments to withdraw its forces from population centers. The UN has also approved a plan to place up to 300 monitors in Syria

for up to three months to observe implementation of the plan. Given the regime's failure to observe the agreement thus far, it is unclear if the monitors will be able to do their jobs. What the regime's failure to implement the agreement thus far shows, however, is that what has become known as the "Annan plan" may be able to deal with some of the symptoms of the crisis in Syria, including introduction of monitors and delivery of humanitarian assistance, but it has little hope of dealing with the disease itself -- a minority-dominated regime with a forty-two-year track record of being unable to reform, and now brutally suppressing an opposition carved out of one of the youngest populations in the Middle East.

The UN monitors who arrived in Damascus recently have observed protestors brave enough to endure a military lockdown that is severely limiting the people's ability to use civil resistance to make Assad "step aside" -- the stated goal of President Obama. The regime has had a far harder time dealing with civil resistance over the past year than armed resistance. Assad's actions thus far indicate that he wants to use the Annan plan to grind down not only the armed opposition, but the overall protest movement as a whole. Thus the Annan plan, as currently implemented, serves Assad's interests and directly undermines those of the United States.

The introduction of monitors is a positive development, but only insofar as it will help guarantee Syrians' right to peacefully express themselves in favor of the Assad regime stepping aside. Quite simply, the regime is failing to implement point two of the Annan plan -- halting fighting and use of heavy weapons and withdrawing its forces from population centers -- because it knows it cannot implement point six of the plan: "respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed." Assad knows well that peaceful protestors, who have continued their activities unabated as the international community has focused its attention on the armed opposition, will fill Syria's main squares and demand his departure or worse. To preclude this scenario, he has labeled peaceful protestors as "terrorists" and used live fire to put them down.

Diplomacy will continue to play an important role as the crisis unfolds. In the end, Russia and China may be important as part of any effort to get Assad to step aside and usher in a Syrian government more responsive to the demands of its youthful population. But Assad's dodging of the Annan plan's deadline, as well as his attempt via Russia to blur the main tenets of the agreement by introducing monitors before a ceasefire, amply demonstrate the limits of diplomacy at this time.

But perhaps most important, the regime's failure to seriously implement the plan calls into question whether any viable political solution can emerge from Annan's stated goal of "comprehensive political dialogue between the Syrian government and the spectrum of the opposition." In the end, whatever solution emerges will of course be uniquely Syrian. But what will it look like? A "reform" of the political system similar to Lebanon's, where various posts and bodies are essentially allotted to different sects, with Alawites and other minorities gathered around the presidency and the parliament going to the majority Sunni population? The Lebanese system was formed over time and in many ways is dysfunctional. A "managed transition" similar to Yemen -- a goal of the Obama administration -- may be preferable. But Assad seems unlikely to negotiate his own exit, especially as Russia and China have forbidden language in Security Council resolutions outlining what the end goal of the process would be.

PLAN B: A GROUND-UP STRATEGY

The best way the United States has of ensuring that President Assad steps aside and expediting a more democratic government in Syria is to implement "Plan B" -- a coordinated effort to pressure the regime from the ground up, including support for the opposition "within Syria." This effort is already partially underway and would be implemented in addition to sanctions and other diplomatic pressure.

The United States is a member of the Friends of the Syrian People, a collection of eighty-three countries that met for the second time on April 1 in Istanbul to support the people and prepare for a post-Assad Syria. Washington would

be well placed to work with the group's other core members -- which include Britain, France, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar -- to forge and lead a coalition of countries to more directly support the opposition within Syria and prepare for all contingencies concerning the crisis. Different countries would play different roles within this coalition. Gulf countries, for example, have already indicated a willingness to help arm the opposition within Syria. Turkey, which had to deal recently with live fire from Assad's forces in the Oncupinar Syrian refugee camp near Kilis, is now considering methods to funnel support to the opposition and has reportedly developed a contingency plan to create border safe havens for refugees within Syrian territory. Thus far, the United States has officially committed to giving nonlethal assistance to the opposition within Syria, which could include communications equipment.

Pressuring Assad to end violence against the population and, ultimately, make an exit will require more such U.S. assistance. In the short term, the United States should share limited intelligence with the opposition inside Syria concerning the deployment and movement of regime forces -- security, military, and paramilitary shabbiha -- especially as they approach population centers for an assault. This will help alleviate the effects of Assad's "whack-a-mole" approach to the opposition, in which regime forces attempt to clear areas -- a tactic that drives up death tolls and refugee flows -- but cannot hold them.

Second, the United States should intensify its examination of the opposition within Syria, both those entities practicing nonviolent resistance against the regime and those engaged in violent revolt. Such assessment should include ways to support popular self-defense alongside civil resistance as two sides of the opposition coin. A key first step would be to intensify the process of identifying and engaging groups that share not only Washington's short-term goal of ousting Assad, but also its long-term goals, including a democratic and secular post-Assad Syria whose government respects human and minority rights.

Third, Washington should immediately expand contingency planning about possible direct U.S. military support as part of actions to head off massacres or a humanitarian disaster. This includes supporting the creation, with allies such as Turkey, of safe havens inside Syria. In addition, the United States should consider what kind of military force may be required, and under what circumstances, to assist the Syrian opposition in deposing the Assad regime.

DILEMMAS POSED BY CIVIL AND ARMED RESISTANCE WILL ACCELERATE ASSAD'S DEPARTURE

Washington should continue to press for UN Security Council resolutions or statements condemning Assad. But to base its approach on the likelihood of international consensus on a workable and sustainable solution to the crisis would be unwise at this time.

The best means of whittling away the regime's support base continues to be exposing Assad's brutal response to dilemmas posed by the civil and armed opposition inside Syria. What is going on in Syria is not a civil war, but an armed and unarmed insurrection against a regime that responded with extreme brutality to peaceful protest. The opposition in exile organized under the Syrian National Council may be rife with divisions, but as the conflict has morphed into a civil and armed insurgency against the regime, coordination among atomized opposition groups inside Syria has intensified for reasons of sheer survival. The United States needs to find ways to promote, assist, and influence that trend. Such trials by fire, which now are an inevitable part of the uprising, will likely serve as the forge in which a viable post-Assad Syrian political system is formed. Greater U.S. involvement would increase the chances that the new Syria is much more democratic and closer to American interests than Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's [Program on Arab Politics](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/program-on-arab-politics/) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/program-on-arab-politics/>). ❖

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