

Assad Must Be Forced to Allow Peaceful Assembly

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Brief Analysis

Videos and reports from Syria over the past week show that Bashar al-Assad's forces continue to violate the ceasefire outlined by UN special representative Kofi Annan on April 12. The regime has neither ended its use of heavy weapons in population centers nor -- an additional obligation -- pulled back its military. This suppression of dissent in centers of resistance has obviously constrained the people's right to freedom of peaceful expression and assembly, a key tenet of U.S. policy that is clearly outlined in point six of the Annan plan. As a result, Syrians are afraid to express their demands as part of the "Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, pluralist system" and have demonstrated in lesser numbers than expected over the past week. Even if a viable ceasefire can eventually be brokered, protests and other forms of civil resistance will be the key means to judge what the people want going forward.

It seems certain that the UN monitors who have arrived in Damascus over the past few days will be observing only those 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.

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. Failure now to ensure that point six of the Annan plan is carried out will only strengthen the regime's hand against the opposition and ensure that the agreement addresses neither the symptoms nor the disease in the Syrian conflict -- a minority regime's brutal suppression of the youngest population in the Middle East outside the Palestinian territories.

To boost the Annan plan's effectiveness, the United States should immediately release daily satellite photography outlining the regime's violations and noncompliance with demands to stop using heavy weapons and to begin redeploying its forces, as it did on April 6 ahead of the previous April 10 redeployment deadline. Next, given the scale of continued regime operations in Syria, the distribution of protests, and the country's geographic size, the United States should demand a sharp increase in the number of proposed monitors, currently slated for 250. (In comparison, 2,000 observers were deployed in 1998 to Kosovo, which is barely a tenth the size of Syria.) Given the

divisive nature of the Syrian crisis in international politics, monitors should be selected from a wide spectrum of countries, not the array of "neutral countries" of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa outlined by Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem earlier today. Monitors should be empowered to go where they see fit and given self-protection, secure means of communication, intelligence from the United States, and other services to assist the planning of operations and rapid response to unfolding violence. In addition, the protocol worked out between the UN and the Syrian regime must allow for full range of motion and access to all sites.

Last but not least, it is time to activate Plan B. The regime's limited implementation of the Annan plan to date indicates that there is little hope of convincing Assad to honor the agreement's other tenets, including engaging in an "inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people," the "timely provision of humanitarian assistance," "release of arbitrarily detained persons," and ensuring "freedom of movement throughout the country" and a "non-discriminatory visa policy" for journalists. Therefore, the United States should explore ways to manage the Annan plan's breakdown and expand the agenda of tomorrow's "Friends of the Syrian People" ministerial meeting in Paris to include ways of better coordinating the activities of the alliance's "core group" -- i.e., the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

A major motivation for Syria's noncompliance and Moscow's willingness to provide cover for it -- as witnessed by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's April 17 criticism of the Friends meeting -- is both countries' desire to leverage compliance with the Annan plan against the formation of an effective coalition to deal with the crisis. This includes Assad's demands that Annan obtain written guarantees that the opposition will lay down its weapons, and also commitments regarding Qatar and Saudi Arabia's support of the opposition. Therefore, the best way to reverse the regime's violence and piecemeal implementation of the Annan plan -- hardly a good start for "dialogue" intended to produce a "Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, plural political system" -- is to accelerate the work of the Friends "core group." In the face of continuing evasion by the regime, the United States and others should begin concerted planning for more forceful measures, including military assistance to elements of the armed opposition and contingency preparations for armed intervention.

Andrew J. Tabler is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria \(/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria\)](#). ❖

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