

# Time for Assad to Go

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**For reasons of morality, and in the interest of containing the violence in Syria, the international community must accelerate Assad's departure.**

**E**very day brings new horrors in Syria. The Assad regime has declared war on its own citizens, with the death toll rising into the thousands. Whether in Homs or Hama or Daraa or Idlib or other cities and villages, the Syrian civilian population faces indiscriminate fire from the tanks, artillery, mortars and heavy machine guns of the Syrian security forces.

Not given the choice of limiting their actions to peaceful demonstrations, it is small wonder that opposition to the Assad regime has become more violent. In truth, if Syria is to be spared a destructive and destabilizing civil war, the only hope is to accelerate the departure of Bashar Assad.

It is easier to speak of his departure than to produce it. Indeed, there is no single step that will guarantee it, but there are a series of actions that could accelerate his departure. Though the isolation of the Assad regime and the sanctions against it have weakened the Syrian president, they have not undermined his hold on power. Several actions will be needed:

- First, it is necessary to keep the pressure on the Russians to change their posture. Propping up Assad might preserve the Russian position in Syria for the time being, but it will undermine it over time. No successor leadership in Syria is going to want ties to the Russians, whose veto at the U.N. Security Council has been seen in Syria and throughout the Middle East as giving the Assad regime a license to kill.

Unless the Russians change course and are able to take credit for producing the end of the Assad regime, they will see their position deteriorate both in Syria and in the region more generally.

## Russians a Key Player

aving Arab leaders remind the Russians of this could produce a change, and it is vital. Assad and those who

Support him in the security establishment see the Russians as their insurance policy -- a protector in the U.N. and an impediment to external intervention. Change that perception, and the balance of power is likely to shift inside Syria.

- Second, it is time to raise the status of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the formal Syrian opposition. It must increasingly be seen as the recognized successor to the Assad regime -- or at least the vehicle for managing the transition to a new and inclusive leadership.

Withholding recognition of the council as the alternative to Assad made sense as a way to encourage its leaders to overcome petty rivalries and develop a coherent, non-sectarian plan for shaping the future of Syria. Last week, when the "Friends of Syria" -- a group that includes the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey and a number of Arab countries -- met in Tunis, international leaders treated the SNC as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Though a step in the right direction, more will need to be done to create an aura of inevitability about the SNC as the alternative to Assad.

## Buttressing Opposition

That, too, is likely to have an effect on those who continue to back Assad or fear an alternative to him. Clearly, the opposition council will have to create greater coordination with those who are deserting from the Syrian military and make up what is known as the Free Syrian Army as it challenges the regime and tries to protect the Syrian public. Raising the international standing of the SNC could assist that effort.

- Third, it is necessary to reach out to the Alawite community that makes up 12% of the Syrian population but represents the backbone of the security establishment. Assad has become an exclusively sectarian leader, seeking to convey that if he goes, Alawites will be decimated by a radical Sunni onslaught.

It is essential to find ways of communicating with key Alawites and making clear that Assad is not the key to their salvation but the greatest threat to their survival. The longer he stays, the more violent the breakdown in Syria will become. The outreach to the Alawites must be consistent, involve Sunnis forswearing vengeance against Alawites, and reassurance from the SNC and the "Friends of Syria" about how the transition will be managed to preserve the unity and non-sectarian nature of Syria's future.

- Last, more must be done to play on Assad's fears. Sanctions and isolation alone won't make him leave. He must see that the balance of power is shifting against him. Assad is no Moammar Gadhafi. He won't go underground and try to lead an uprising. He must see that options he thought would not be considered are on the table.

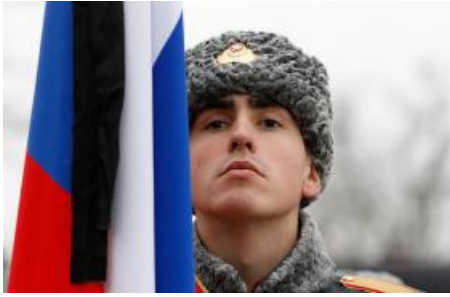
Creating humanitarian corridors or safe areas for civilians, though difficult to implement, needs to be on the table and developed as a real possibility. Arming the Free Syrian Army when it lacks clear organization and is highly localized raises a number of troubling questions about who would be armed and what could take shape in Syria. But there is help short of arms that could alter the realities on the ground, such as blocking the communications of Assad's forces and facilitating those of the Free Syrian Army. Moreover, given the behavior of Assad's forces, lethal assistance managed in a coherent way through Jordan and Turkey should not be ruled out.

For reasons of morality and the interest of not seeing violence in Syria build and expand outward, it is essential to try to accelerate the departure of Bashar Assad.

*Ambassador Dennis Ross, the counselor at The Washington Institute, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the central region at the National Security Council.* ❖

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