

A New Resistance, with New Results

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Given the minority-driven nature of the Assad regime's crackdown, ultimate change is most likely to come from below.

Syrria's president, Bashar al-Assad, has remained atop his regime longer than other embattled Middle East dictators for two main reasons: first, he's ruthless enough to shoot his way out of the Syrian uprising; and second, as in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, minority dominance galvanizes his regime against splits between the ruling family and the military. Unfortunately for Assad, however, his regime is collapsing under the weight of generational change that is a product of the very brutality his regime rules by.

For months, Assad's security forces and armed forces, as well as armed gangs called Shabiha led by members of Assad's minority Alawite sect, have used live fire, snipers and heavy weapons to terrorize Syrian protesters, kill an estimated 7,000 people and torture thousands of others. The Assad regime -- which, 30 years ago this month, slaughtered tens of thousands of people in the city of Hama -- is simply far more brutal than Serbia's Milosevic or Egypt's Mubarak regimes. By keeping daily death tolls on average below a few dozen a day, Assad has yet to trip alarms that would garner international intervention.

Change from the top is unpredictable. Whereas in Egypt and Tunisia the military was capable of acting independently to oust ruling families who were running failing systems, the leadership of the Syrian military and security services largely hail from Assad's Alawite sect, other heterodox Shiite offshoots such as Druze, and Christians. Therefore, ousting Assad would risk the collapse of the minority's privileged status and possible short- and long-term retribution from Syria's majority Sunni population, which has borne the brunt of the regime's crackdown. The draft resolution under consideration by the U.N. Security Council, watered down to gain the abstention of Assad's patron, Russia, is designed to put Syria's minority elite into a dilemma. But our lack of understanding of the regime's core makes the U.N. bid quite a gamble.

Ultimate change is much more likely to come from below. In contrast to the situation in 1982, regime opponents

aren't cowed: their numbers are simply far too high and continue to swell. In the 10 years after the Hama massacre, Syrians stayed home out of fear, and a population boom began, making Syria among the 20 fastest-growing nations. Today it is one of the youngest populations in the Middle East. The Syrian Awakening, like so many uprisings and revolutions elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, presents, perhaps, the best example of authoritarian regime karma.

But the question remains: Will the international community stand by and do nothing, as it did in 1982? And if not, what can it do to help Syrians end the 40-plus years of the Assad family's brutal and incompetent rule and bring about a leadership capable of dealing with the needs of the next generation?

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=254) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=254>). ❖

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