

Security Council Showdown on Syria

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An interview by *Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org*

Amid a surge of violence in Syria, the UN Security Council will discuss Tuesday whether to pass a resolution (Reuters) supporting the Arab League's plan, which calls for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to step down to defuse a ten-month-old uprising against his regime. Russia is opposed to the resolution being pushed by the United States, France, and Britain. Syria expert Andrew J. Tabler says that "if we don't get an agreed resolution, then the situation will be very much like it was during the Cold War." Without a UN resolution, Tabler warns, regional and global powers may start a proxy war by betting on different factions inside Syria, thereby worsening the situation. But even if the Security Council does pass a resolution, Tabler says there is no guarantee that the Assad regime would abide by it.

GWERTZMAN: Is the fighting escalating out of control in Syria between the government and the rebel forces?

TABLER: Yes, the violence is escalating. What you can see in the videos that come out of Syria every day is that the areas of protest have expanded. The new phenomenon is that you have more people getting them armed.

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They come primarily from two groupings: Some are defectors from the military who join the Free Syrian Army, which has been around since the summer. Then you have others who are calling themselves Free Syrian Army but are local people who are armed and essentially are civil defense units who are helping to protect the protesters from sniper fire and other military efforts from the regime's loyal forces. And it's that latter civil group which has grown in the scope of their activities, particularly in border areas near Lebanon and Zabdani on the Syrian-Lebanese frontier.

Those areas are outside government control. This is because in that area you are able to smuggle weapons across the border from Lebanon, and also because the Free Syrian Army's been able to raid arms depots to secure weapons to destroy tanks and other heavy armor. The regime's been unable to reassert its control. The situation is rapidly deteriorating. In many parts of the country, there is virtually a full-armed insurrection [for] which the regime has had to send in the military in full force to deal with. It doesn't mean that the regime isn't able to recapture some of those areas, but it hasn't recaptured all of them. Now the insurrections are in the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, and that's not good news for the regime.

GWERTZMAN: The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, has declared that Moscow will not support any Security Council resolution aimed at changing the leadership in Syria. Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is attending Security Council talks on Tuesday to urge some action on Syria, along with the French and British foreign ministers. It looks like an old-fashioned Cold War confrontation.

TABLER: It does indeed. In the coming days, if we don't get an agreed resolution, then the situation will be very much like it was during the Cold War. When you have the United Nations locked up, it's very easy to get into a proxy struggle where you have different powers in the region or even globally betting on certain factions inside the country. And that could be where we're heading. But it's hard to avoid that even if we do have a resolution.

The resolution draft currently being circulated that was drafted by Morocco essentially enshrines the Arab League plan for a peaceful transition in Syria over several months in which President Bashar al-Assad steps down. But there's no guarantee that the Assad regime, even if it were passed by the Council, would go along with it. It probably wouldn't, and we'd still be in the same position.

GWERTZMAN: The Russians keep pointing to Libya as a big mistake on their part because they did not use their veto to block the Security Council from passing a resolution that led to NATO forces helping rebels overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi. The Russians and the Chinese abstained. That is what the Russians have said they won't allow in Syria, right?

TABLER: That's exactly right. The Russians think that the United States drove a truck through the loopholes of the resolution. There are a lot of reasons why Russia may be contrary right now. They have presidential elections on March 4. Vladimir Putin, Russia's strongman, has his own protest movement to deal with, and the Russians have their close ties over years with Syria. And I'm sure that some of Moscow's resistance is due to spite. It will be very interesting to see if the United States and Russia are able to come to some sort of agreement on Syria in the coming days. It doesn't look very promising at the moment.

GWERTZMAN: It would seem that if the United States and Russia can't reach a deal on this issue, the whole "reset policy" of the Obama administration will come under question.

TABLER: It has broad implications. You could try to identify some things that the Russians would want to trade for their vote. The Russians might also look at the Syrian situation and realize they are betting on a losing horse, which the Turks and the Arabs already have come to realize.

But it's just too early to tell. Regardless of what is passed, the situation in Syria is deteriorating, and it's hard to know how to arrest the situation other than watching what happens on the ground and seeing what the Syrian opposition can muster in the coming months. It's going to be quite bloody for some time.

GWERTZMAN: When this opposition movement arose in Syria in March 2011, there were a lot of expectations that some kind of deal would be worked out by the Assad regime with the protestors without any violence, and that there'd be some changes in the laws to make for a more open society. Why did Assad, after making some promises initially, renege on them?

TABLER: Many businessmen in Damascus are betting publicly with the regime, and echoing the regime's line, so to speak, but are privately aiding the opposition against the regime.

There were a lot of people around him, like his longtime aide Bouthaina Shaaban, who were making these promises, but they didn't really ever come out of Assad's mouth. He has talked about making some changes to the constitution, having a referendum, and so on. In the end, he continues to try and shoot his way out of the crisis, which undermines his political credibility.

He never had a lot of credibility for reform anyway. In eleven years, he only opened up a couple of banks and some

insurance companies. That's not reform. Those are procedural changes. The whole situation fits into a larger pattern of Assad saying he will do one thing, but simply does the opposite or does nothing, and Syrians just weren't having any more of it.

GWERTZMAN: Who's running the country's security forces?

TABLER: Everyone reports to the Assad family, but you have various branches of the security forces that report to different high-ranking Allawite officials, some of whom are sanctioned by the United States and some of whom are not. Most of the major security figures are now sanctioned by the United States, by the European Union, and by the Arab League, but that has not stopped the killing.

GWERTZMAN: Does that include Assad's brother?

TABLER: His brother Maher al-Assad is sanctioned, but that is as a brigade commander of the Fourth Armored Division. We have other officials who are related to him, such as Assef Shawkat [deputy chief of staff], who is Bashar's brother-in-law. There is Rami Makhlouf, said to be the richest man in Syria, who is Bashar's first cousin. You have Abdul Fatah Qudsiyah, General Jamil Hassan and Mohammed Dib Zeitoun, major commanders of the security services, and they're already sanctioned, and they report to the Assad family. Thus far, sanctioning them has not worked.

GWERTZMAN: What do you hear from some of your old acquaintances in Damascus? What is the atmosphere like?

TABLER: Very bad. Many businessmen in Damascus are betting publicly with the regime and echoing the regime's line, so to speak, but are privately aiding the opposition. This is something that has grown over time, but still you have a lot of people who are holdouts, who continue to support the regime. You have journalists who continue, despite saying privately that they're not with the regime, to write articles that support the regime's position. I think they're just afraid of what's going to happen if the regime is not able to hold on.

GWERTZMAN: Are other Arab countries that have had their revolutions, like Egypt and Tunisia, wholeheartedly in favor of an overthrow of regime in Syria?

TABLER: The Tunisians have actually recognized the Syrian National Council as the representative of the Syrian people. Egypt is not as supportive. They are very much wrapped up in their internal situation at the moment.

What's been really interesting is the role of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which have been really front and center, as well as the Emirates, on pressuring the Assad regime at the Arab League. It seems that they would like to hitch their stars to the revolution, but of course the Syrian media has pointed out the irony in this. But politically--with the exception of Lebanon and sometimes Iraq and Algeria--most of the Arab world seems to be firmly against the Assad regime.

GWERTZMAN: How much of the Saudi opposition is based on their hopes to weaken Iranian influence in the region?

TABLER: Their position is based primarily on the killing on the ground and watching Assad try to do the same thing over and over again, and just coming up with the same bloody result. But of course, strategically, this is something that Saudi Arabia as well as other countries such as Turkey and even the United States all recognize, which is that strategically, the Assad regime's departure would be a serious blow to Iranian influence in the region. That's not lost on anyone. If you ever wanted to reorient Syria away from the Shiite crescent or the Iranian axis, this would be a good way to do it.

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 \(http://www.newcitystaging.com/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria\)](http://www.newcitystaging.com/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria). ❖

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