

# Diplomacy to Remove Assad Gains Momentum

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Brief Analysis

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**Obama's brief, but pointed, focus on the Middle East during his State of the Union address was clear in its determination that Washington will use all diplomatic means available to further the toppling of Bashar al-Assad's regime of terror.**

**P**resident Obama's State of the Union address Tuesday evening had much to say about the economy, but relatively little about foreign policy. Yet one line from that brief section stands out: "And in Syria, I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change can't be reversed, and that human dignity can't be denied."

This sentence, which puts the United States firmly behind the demise of Bashar al-Assad's regime, is all the more striking because it followed so closely upon the president's description of Qadhafi as "gone." Beyond the mere fact of singling out Syria's government for such dishonorable mention, Obama's statement used two very specific words that loom large in a context where every word reflected deliberate decision. First was his use of "soon," indicating an assessment that Assad does not have much time left in power. Second was "regime," indicating an official U.S. expectation that not just Assad personally but his whole ruling clique must also go.

Equally significant were the president's next lines, which suggest that Washington is planning diplomatic rather than direct physical intervention in the Syrian crisis. Affirming that "we have a huge stake in the outcome" of "this incredible transformation" in the Arab region, President Obama nonetheless acknowledged that "its end remains

uncertain" and that "it is ultimately up to the people of the region to decide their own fate." Even so, he asserted that the United States will "stand against violence and intimidation" and "support policies that lead to strong and stable democracies."

And, in fact, U.S. and international diplomacy aimed at removing Assad is quickly gaining momentum. An Arab League ministerial meeting on January 22 found that the Syrian government's "partial progress" was "not enough" and urged the establishment within two months of a "national unity government" based on a "serious political dialogue" with the opposition -- all under the authority of a vice president, rather than President Assad. Not surprisingly, the Assad regime rejected this plan, arguing that it went beyond the Arab League's authority, violated Syrian sovereignty, and represented "a conspiratorial scheme hatched against Syria" for foreign intervention "led by the Qatari government."

At the same time, the League's report mandates an immediate referral of its plan to the UN Security Council. Qatar's prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Hamad bin Jassim, and Arab League secretary Nabil al-Araby are delegated with this task. In anticipation of this maneuver, intense behind-the-scenes Security Council consultations are now underway.

Over the last few days, Western countries led by France have drafted a Security Council resolution, with senior U.S. diplomats involved in these discussions in both Paris and New York. The draft demands that Syria cooperate fully with the UN high commissioner for human rights and the special Commission of Inquiry of the UN Human Rights Council, and allow "full access for humanitarian relief." It requests the UN secretary-general to support the appointment of a new Arab League special envoy to Syria, which media reports speculate could be Egypt's Mohammed ElBaradei, to supplement the largely ineffective Arab League monitoring mission in that strife-torn country. And, should the Assad regime fail to comply, the draft "encourages all States" to adopt political and economic sanctions similar to those outlined by the Arab League last November, including cutting ties with Syria's central bank.

Significantly, the absence of mandatory sanctions from this draft resolution is calculated to help secure the necessary Russian support (or at least abstention) in the Security Council. Senior U.S. diplomats were recently in Moscow to press the proposal. And although Russia has resisted further Security Council action on Syria, invoking the recent Libyan intervention as an unacceptable precedent, there are reasons beyond the mere absence of sanctions to suspect that Moscow's policy may soon shift in a more favorable direction. Arab media report rumors that Russian economic and military interests in Syria may be privately guaranteed both by outside powers and by the Syrian opposition, and that Russia may be quietly designated to offer Assad asylum. Most of all, Russia may accept assurances that this relatively mild resolution will hold off military intervention against the tottering Syrian regime until a relatively friendly replacement takes over. None of this is certain, but the odds appear to be increasing every day.

This newly active U.S. diplomacy on behalf of an early end to Assad's vicious and hostile dictatorship deserves every encouragement. At the same time, Washington should start planning for practical, internationally coordinated humanitarian steps to protect the vulnerable Syrian population -- and preparing for the possibility of other forms of intervention, should a quick transition in Damascus prove unattainable.

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