

# Bolstering the Arab League Mission to Syria

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Brief Analysis

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## The conflict in Syria that some expected to simmer down is in fact boiling, and the Arab League delegation must be enhanced accordingly.

**T**he conflict in Syria that some expected to simmer down is in fact boiling. This morning, suicide attackers detonated car bombs outside a regime security installation and the headquarters of the State Security Directorate, which has played a central role in suppressing the ten-month-old uprising. This is the latest episode in a sharp spike in fatalities following the regime's acceptance last Monday of an Arab League protocol to withdraw security and army forces from major cities and deploy Arab observers to Syria. By some estimates, more than 200 have died over the past week alone, marking the bloodiest episode in the Syrian uprising and the entire Arab Spring outside Libya.

It is difficult to see how the Arab League mission that arrived in Damascus yesterday will be able to stem the violence and test Bashar al-Assad's commitment to the end the bloodshed -- at least as currently configured. Although the team's exact composition remains unknown, press reports indicate an observer force of only 150 by month's end -- a paltry number given the hundreds of areas facing unrest, and a far cry from the 500 discussed during negotiations with the regime. (In comparison, the 1998 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observer mission to Kosovo, an area only one-tenth Syria's size, numbered 2,000.)

The ground rules for the observer mission are also unclear. In the name of "securing access" for team members per the protocol, the Assad regime will likely handle the delegation as it does groups of visiting journalists or ambassadors, escorting them to staged areas that distort or obscure the actual situation on the ground. Such methods will not get to the bottom of anything that is happening in Syria. Also raising eyebrows is the mission's leader, former Sudanese military intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Muhammad Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, who coordinated between the Sudanese government, the UN, and African Union peacekeepers in Darfur -- certainly not an exemplary case of protecting civilians.

Although the Arab League observer mission is an important and unprecedented step, it will only work -- and, ultimately, serve U.S. policy -- if it fulfills the protocol's seven-point plan "for getting acquainted with the reality of the situation" in Syria. This includes observing the withdrawal of security forces from cities, the release of political prisoners, and uninterrupted access of monitors and journalists throughout the country. Anything short of this would be a mere whitewash of what is now a slow-motion civilian massacre.

Accordingly, Washington should press the league to bolster the delegation. It should also work with National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, which have trained scores of civilian Arab human-rights monitors, to give the league a list of such individuals who could be rapidly dispatched to Syria.

Concerning ground rules, Washington should also press the league to ensure that monitor access throughout the country (including to prisons, detention centers, police stations, and hospitals) is completely unfettered. Mission members are only obligated to coordinate with Syrian authorities, not obtain their permission. Interviews with Syrian civilians and other individuals should be conducted without regime minders of any kind, and the mission should make efforts to follow up with those interviewed to ensure that Damascus is honoring its agreement not to "punish or pressure any person and his family in any way" for contacting monitors.

Last, but certainly not least, the United States should press the mission to immediately deploy to conflict areas. The bloodbath currently underway in Idlib province would provide a quick test of the mission's ability to effectively investigate, as well as its willingness to accelerate the arrival of monitors in Syria.

The Obama administration has warned that the "international community will take additional steps to pressure the Assad regime to stop its crackdown." With the carnage continuing unabated, Washington needs to move its policy beyond observing and highlighting abuses in the hope of shaming the regime into halting its crackdown. Instead, it should work toward a plan that would prevent such atrocities from occurring in the first place.

For example, the Syrian opposition has urged Turkey to establish a buffer zone along its frontier, especially in Idlib, but Ankara seems reticent to do so on its own. Accordingly, the United States should look for ways to work with Turkey on establishing such safe havens and ensuring humanitarian protection for populations fleeing the carnage. And given that Ankara has repeatedly demanded a UN resolution for any intervention in Syria, Washington should continue bringing the regime's killing of civilians to the Security Council's attention. Although Russia and China have until now used their vetoes to protect Assad, the regime's ultimate inability to implement the Arab League agreement could make Moscow's position increasingly untenable, especially as it faces its own pro-democracy protests at home. Finally, Washington should explore alternative alliance structures that Ankara might find acceptable for future humanitarian action in Syria.

*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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