

Why Syria's Regime Is Doomed

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dec 21, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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An interview by *Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org*

Amid mounting violence that has killed more than five thousand in Syria, it is "almost inevitable" the regime of President Bashar al-Assad will collapse, says Dennis Ross, a former senior Middle East adviser to President Obama. "When a regime is entirely dependent on coercion that is not succeeding, you know that that's a regime that's not going to be around for an extended period," Ross says. The best hope for the country is an opposition movement led by the Syrian National Council, he says, describing it as non-sectarian and inclusive.

GWERTZMAN: Even though the Syrians have now accepted an Arab League proposal to send observers to Syria, the killing continues. It seems astounding that some five thousand people have been killed in the nine months of the uprising. How important is Syria to the evolving Middle East?

ROSS: One needs to look at it from a variety of different perspectives. First, if you look at it just from what I could describe as the Arab Awakening, what you're seeing is a leader [Bashar al-Assad] who, in the face of his people's peaceful desire for change, decided that the right answer was to engage in a kind of "killing machine," to quote the Saudi king. What you're seeing is someone who is resisting change and is prepared to use all the means at his disposal to kill his own citizens to resist that change. It is a measure of how this region has changed that the Arab League voted for sanctions.

GWERTZMAN: Did the Arab League sanctions surprise you?

ROSS: Although that is something that would have been literally unthinkable even a year ago, it's another reminder of the realities of the region. It was impossible for those in the Arab League to look like they would do nothing in the face of a regime killing its citizens the way the Syrian regime was doing. The first point is to put it in the context of the Arab Awakening, both in terms of what it says about a regime trying to hold on, but also what it says about others in the region who realize that you can't simply be passive in the face of that.

GWERTZMAN: It has been reported that the Iranians are very concerned about what's happening in Syria, its closest Arab ally. Is that the case?

ROSS: There is no doubt that the Iranians see the Syrian regime as a critical ally and vehicle to providing arms and a connection to Hezbollah in Lebanon. What happens in Syria is critical to the overall balance of power in the region as it relates to Iran. So the Iranians have been doing everything they could to support the Syrian regime as it tries to

hold on. That has added to why Iran is so discredited in the region right now.

It's not just that it's out of step with what's going on in the area as a whole, as people make it clear that they have a voice, and they have demands, and they want their voices heard. Iran obviously has very little interest in having its own citizens speak out, but Iran also is utterly determined to try to keep a regime in power in Damascus that serves Iran's interests even though it is so destructive to the interests of the Syrian people.

GWERTZMAN: The Gulf Cooperation Council has now moved closer together over the Syrian issue and has voiced concerns about Iran. I guess the Saudis are pushing that because they seem very concerned about Iran, right?

ROSS: Yes. There are probably two aspects to it. Bear in mind that the most severe crackdown in terms of killing by the Syrian regime was during Ramadan. And for the Saudis in particular to sit aside and not become more vocal in response to the Syrian regime doing that during Ramadan would have been unthinkable. And that's actually when King Abdullah used the term "killing machine" to describe what was going on...[I]t's the regime itself that is sharpening the sectarian divide and is increasingly responsible for the sectarian conflict.

GWERTZMAN: When the Assad regime goes -- and it seems almost inevitable that it will go -- it is going to be a major loss for Iran. The Saudis and others in the Gulf Cooperation Council see it through that lens. Do we have any idea who would succeed Assad?

ROSS: This is a regime that is entirely dependent on coercion, and the coercion is failing, and when a regime is entirely dependent on coercion that is not succeeding, you know that that's a regime that's not going to be around for an extended period. I would say in answer to your question on succession, if you look at the Syrian National Council (SNC), if you look at local coordination committees, you know they represent a cross section of Syria.

One interesting thing about the opposition is that it's not sectarian. The Assad regime is trying to create the impression that it's the opposition that's sectarian and the reality is that it's the regime itself that is sharpening the sectarian divide and is increasingly responsible for the sectarian conflict.

GWERTZMAN: When there were the first demonstrations in Syria in Daraa in March, many experts in the region thought Assad would make some reforms and that would quiet things down. Why did he become so hard line?

ROSS: One of the great paradoxes is that he had presented himself to be avant garde, a reformer, a modern person, and he had convinced many that that was his persona and identity. Had that actually been the case, he would have actually been given the benefit of the doubt by the Syrian public.

In the very beginning, because he had cultivated an image of being modern and he had created the impression that he was opening up Syria, had he actually made reforms and acted on them and shown that he was truly determined to modernize Syria, both politically and economically, he could have succeeded. You asked the question why the crackdown. At the end of the day, the image he'd created about being a modernizer was purely an image and didn't reflect reality.

Some people speculate that his brother, Maher, who heads the Republican Guard, pushed him into it.

I don't buy it. He presided over a very corrupt regime that depended on operating a certain way, and really opening it up is what would have threatened it, and that's what he wasn't prepared to do. That's what he wasn't prepared to countenance.

GWERTZMAN: Now Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah has come out strongly in support of the Syrian regime. Is he going to be discredited too?

ROSS: He already has been, not necessarily with the Shiites in Lebanon, but throughout the region. Compare the image of Nasrallah after 2006 with what it is today. In 2006, after the war with the Israelis, he was seen as the

embodiment of resistance, and he was a hero throughout the area, across sectarian lines.

The consequence of the sanctions is really biting and making it clear that you're not going to have a future in Syria so long as this regime is there.

Today he's seen as purely a sectarian leader, and you see his picture being burned in Syria. He had tried to present himself as having a kind of purity, of being associated with justice, and how he is seen today is much more as a narrow sectarian leader and an Iranian tool. The idea that he could somehow be the embodiment of social justice when he supports the killing of innocents in Syria is something that has unmasked him.

GWERTZMAN: What's the U.S. position in all this? Is there much the United States can do?

ROSS: The United States has been active in terms of working to build the pressure on the Syrian regime, add to the isolation, make it clear there's a price to be paid economically. Clearly there are those within Syria who, for a long time, felt they were part of a social compact with the regime. The regime offered them a piece of the pie and stability. Today, the regime offers them no stability and there's no pie. The consequence of the sanctions is really biting and making it clear that you're not going to have a future in Syria so long as this regime is there.

The key for us and others is, increasingly, not only to talk about the inevitability that Assad's going to be gone, but the inevitability that the opposition -- and I would say increasingly as identified and led by the SNC -- represents the future. The more it becomes clear that that's the way the world sees the SNC, the more it will resonate within Syria itself. And those who aren't certain about what the future will be can take some comfort from a group that is not sectarian, that is inclusive, that realizes that the future for Syria needs to be a future characterized by tolerance, inclusion, and basically progress.

GWERTZMAN: There were reports early on that Christians in Syria were alarmed. They were concerned that the Islamists would take over and make it tough on them. That seemed to ease, or am I wrong?

ROSS: The balance is shifting there. There's no doubt that for a while there was deep concern among the Christian community. One of the reasons to want to see the process of change accelerated and to see this regime leave is [that] the longer it goes on, the more violent the situation in Syria is going to become. The demonstrations against the regime were originally peaceful.

There is increasing violence now because, frankly, you have a regime that declared war on its own citizens, and there are those who are looking at how you can defend that within Syria. The SNC is trying to continue to emphasize a nonviolent approach. You have a regime that makes it increasingly difficult to minimize the violence within Syria.

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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