

Al-Assad in Complete Denial

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet/\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet/)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet/\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet/)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



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The Barbara Walters interview with Bashar al-Assad underscores how completely he has lost his grip on the reality of the violence in his country.

President Bashar al-Assad's interview with ABC's Barbara Walters portrays a Syrian leader in complete denial of the situation in his country. For months, the Assad regime has argued that it was the only thing that stood between Syria, the region and chaos.

But with the gap between the regime's perception of reality and that of the Syrian people and opposition (backed up by literally thousands of online videos and journalist reports), Assad's negotiated exit seems unlikely. The longer Assad holds on, the bloodier and more sectarian the conflict will become. The question for policymakers in Washington, Brussels, Ankara and the Arab World is how to develop a concerted plan to oust Assad in the fastest way possible.

In many ways, Assad's portrayal of the conflict is nothing new. For months, the Assad regime has used a "basis of reality" argument that worked, at least at first, in most Western capitals and beyond. When Walters challenged Assad on the video clips, Assad quickly questioned if she had "verified" their content. Confirming information, like the use of shelling or cannon fire, is hard in Syria for journalists and embassies alike.

What is new, however, is that scores of journalists have braved the regime's security nets and ventured over the border from Lebanon and Jordan to shoot their own footage, perhaps the best example of which is CBS' Clarissa Ward's undercover reportage from Syria that aired in the last few days.

In the past you had to go drive long hours and brave countless checkpoints to reach protests. Now it only takes a ten minute drive around Damascus to find Syrians demanding an end to the slaughter and the Assad regime. When this is backed up by literally thousands of videos of the regime firing on protestors, the picture of what's really going on in Syria is much clearer.

Blaming unrest in Syria on foreign conspiracies and plots is standard practice by Assad. But what his interview shows is that he now includes the United Nations among those sowing discord. He has said that the United Nations and its reporting on Syria is "not credible." Until now, Assad has felt reasonably protected by Russian and Chinese vetoes of measures against Syria at the United Nations Security Council. By thumbing his nose at the organization as a whole, he risks making the Russian support for his regime increasingly untenable as the United States and the European Union push for new U.N. action.

For U.S. policymakers, Assad's interview presents a more fundamental challenge. In response to Walters' question if Washington had any "misconceptions" of the Assad regime, Assad said that "We don't kill our people...No government in the world kills its people, unless it's led by a crazy person."

It's now clear that Assad meets his own definition of crazy. This is nothing new -- a hallmark of Bashar al-Assad's rule is saying one thing and doing another, a repeated pattern that has driven his own people into the streets. The challenge now for policymakers is how to develop a strategy with the Syrian opposition to usher Assad from power sooner rather than later.

Until now, policymakers have held out hopes Assad will be removed via a coup or "see the light" and leave the country. Assad's responses to the interview indicate this will be a long shot at best. In light of this, the United States and its allies need now to develop a strategy with the Syrian opposition -- which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with in exile yesterday -- to put the regime into dilemmas that will help hasten its departure. These include civil resistance strategies, as well as coordinated sanctions and possible "humanitarian corridors", as put forward by Foreign Minister Juppe of France recently, that will help squeeze the Assad regime and its supporters and give those who oppose the Syrian regime a place to run as the conflict unfolds.

This would best be facilitated through the creation of a contact group of countries on Syria involving the United States, the EU, Turkey and representatives from the Arab League. The international community must work off the same sheet if Assad is to leave anytime soon.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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