

U.S. Leadership Needed to Protect the Syrian People from the Syrian Regime

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Brief Analysis

If Washington is not going to compel Asad to step down, the least it can do is help protect those Syrians brave enough to continue to call for change themselves.

Today, the Asad regime crossed another red line. According to reports from Beirut, Syria dispatched troops into neighboring Lebanon to chase down and shoot eight defecting soldiers and other protestors in the border town of Masharee al-Qaa. Additional reports say that Syrian troops went into the Lebanese town of al-Doura, kidnapped two, killed one, and wounded a child. Through these actions, the Asad regime once again reminded the world that its brutal repression of its citizens is not a domestic issue but a threat to (in UN language) "international peace and security."

This is not the first time agents of the Syrian government have tracked down regime opponents in foreign countries -- after all, that is what the FBI accuses the Syrian embassy in Washington of doing, albeit less violently, here in the United States. Nor is this the first time Syria has entered Lebanon with this goal, as UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon noted in a report to the Security Council delivered today. But these new attacks are the most brazen, deadly, and threatening yet. In light of today's events, no neighbor of Syria -- Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, or Israel -- can be sure that agents of the Asad regime will not transgress its borders to hunt for regime opponents.

It is time for the Obama administration to take the lead in organizing international protection for the embattled Syrian people. Already, more Syrians have died at the hands of their despotic ruler than was the case in Libya when the United States endorsed the call for humanitarian intervention in that country. This fact -- not the absence of Arab League endorsement or the inability to overcome Russian and Chinese vetoes at the Security Council -- should govern the direction of U.S. policy. And when this fact is combined with the strategic opportunity of contributing to the demise of Iran's premier Arab ally, Washington should be working overtime to act in defense of the Syrian people.

Efforts to provide protection can take many forms, including the following:

- Asking the UN secretary-general to dispatch teams from the UN rapporteur on human rights to set up an ongoing presence at sites along Syria's borders, and to formally request that Syria admit the entry of UN personnel to assess the internal human rights situation.
- Working with diplomatic partners to reintroduce a UN Security Council resolution that calls for the dispatch of human rights monitors into Syria, this time building a public case that would shame Russia and China into abstention.
- Organizing, with likeminded states, the dispatch of humanitarian workers (e.g., Red Cross/Crescent personnel) to establish protection zones along Syria's borders. These zones would be weapons-free safe areas for Syrians fleeing the brutality of their regime. The Turks have already helpfully raised the idea of protecting Syrian refugees; Washington should urgently work with Ankara on this and begin discussions with other neighboring states.
- Coordinating, with embassies of likeminded states, the rotating deployment of diplomats to monitor border crossings.
- Calling on the Lebanese government to end all measures that effectively assist Syria in cracking down on dissidents, such as permitting agents operating from the Syrian embassy in Beirut to harass and even kidnap Syrians inside Lebanese territory, and taking no action to prevent Syrian border incursions. Given that U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces is already heavily focused on border security, Washington should urgently send a team to the area to assess whether U.S. aid is being used to support that goal.
- Convening urgent talks with likeminded governments -- especially those that played a role in the implementation of the security aspects of Security Council Resolution 1701 after the 2006 Lebanon war -- on ways to implement existing council resolutions designed to bolster border security between Syria and Lebanon. Without active measures from third parties, nothing on this score will happen. Indeed, as the secretary-general noted in his report today, the Syria-Lebanon border demarcation committee has never even met.

None of these suggestions requires the deployment of U.S. troops to the Syrian arena. But all of them require U.S. leadership. In this regard, the Obama administration moved in the right direction by adding its voice to the international call for Bashar al-Asad to step aside. If Washington is not going to compel him to heed that call, the least it can do is help protect those Syrians brave enough to continue to call for change themselves.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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