

Syria: The Battle for Democracy and Change

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Brief Analysis

On October 14, 2011, Robert S. Ford and Andrew J. Tabler addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria and a career member of the senior foreign service, joined the discussion from Damascus via Skype. He has visited cities under siege by Syrian security forces and heads Washington's outreach to the opposition. Mr. Tabler, the Next Generation fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics, is author of the recently published book [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria \(/templateC04.php?CID=254\)](/templateC04.php?CID=254) (Lawrence Hill). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

AMBASSADOR ROBERT S. FORD

The Syrian protest movement remains very large, widespread, and predominantly peaceful. Yet violence is on the rise, most notably in Hama, Dayr al-Zawr, Latakia, and around Homs. The Local Coordination Committees (LCC) are trying to keep protests peaceful, but as the regime continues to arrest and kill demonstrators, calls to take up arms have become more common.

Some protestors have even indicated support for foreign military intervention, including one who carried a "Where's NATO?" sign during a recent march. Yet politically prominent activists, including LCC leaders, state that while international observers are welcome, military intervention is not. The real concern is that escalating violence will spur the regime to respond with more repression, outgunning the opposition and creating an even bloodier, possibly sectarian conflict.

Indeed, sectarian violence is an increasing worry. Many Syrian minorities are apprehensive about the possibility of change, fearing repetition of the situation in Iraq, where escalating violence led to further minority suffering. Yet civil war is not inevitable. Protestors are conscious of the sectarian concerns and are calling for unity among the people. And the recent assassination of Kurdish leader Mishaal al-Tammo has galvanized many Kurds to back the

demonstrators. Even the regime's own Alawite sect is not united in support for Damascus; in fact, many Alawites are active members of the opposition. A few weeks ago in Homs, three Alawi clerics issued a statement calling on the community to distance itself from the regime and support democratic transition.

As the conflict drags on and the economy continues to suffer, more and more Syrians, Alawites included, will rethink their positions. Dissatisfaction is growing among the Sunni merchant class, a key regime pillar. From shopkeepers to business elites, the economic situation is terrible. The International Monetary Fund has predicted a 2 percent economic contraction in 2011, and in many sectors the figure will be even higher. As Syrians save money in preparation for protracted instability, consumption of goods from electronics to food has drastically decreased. Homs, the country's third-largest city, is essentially at a standstill. In addition, business families are beginning to rethink their close ties to the regime after seeing their names appear on an increasing number of international sanctions lists.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to play a pernicious role in Syria. In addition to political support, Tehran has given the regime advice on repressive security techniques, social media control, and internet censorship. It has even provided equipment to facilitate the repression.

Amid these developments, international pressure on the Syrian regime is mounting. Despite their vetoes at the UN Security Council, Russia and China have expressly stated that their patience with Bashar al-Asad is not unlimited. As Damascus continues to balk at implementing reforms, Moscow and Beijing will be unable to argue indefinitely that Asad will come through.

In response to the current situation, the U.S. government advocates the following:

- Acknowledgement of the fact that any nominal regime reforms will have little impact on the ground. Few protestors would accept dialogue with the government at this point, meaning that it would be almost impossible to find any notable Syrian political figure willing to advocate such talks.
- Continued nonviolence among protestors. The United States should of course persist in urging the Syrian government to halt repression, allow peaceful marches, release political prisoners, and honor the basic freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Syria supported at the UN. Yet because the opposition does not have the military capability to overthrow the regime by force, it must focus on garnering political and diplomatic support, which entails remaining peaceful.
- The deployment of a UN fact-finding mission to investigate the extent to which armed militias are operating in the country, as this information is currently unavailable.
- A larger international media presence in Syria, along with increased international monitoring capabilities, both of which would give a better sense of the situation on the ground. These provisions were included in the recently vetoed Security Council resolution.
- Increased freedom of movement for foreign journalists in Syria.
- Encouraging the opposition to offer a concrete, viable proposal for a post-Asad Syria. Developing consensus around a specific political and economic plan would help persuade Sunni business elites and other Syrians still on the fence to defect from the regime. The creation of the Syrian National Council is encouraging in this regard, but the opposition must still improve its organizational and outreach efforts.
- The development of a concerted, multilateral response with international partners -- including the European Union, Arab League, and Turkey -- to pressure the Syrian government into ceasing repression. Recent EU sanctions on the Commercial Bank of Syria are a positive step, and Washington will continue to work with the UN despite the Security Council vetoes by Russia and China. Unilateral steps will be taken as well; more U.S. sanctions against Syria can be

expected in the coming weeks.

In short, the United States will continue to work multilaterally to convey a clear message to the Asad regime and the protest movement -- namely, that the international community is watching the repression in Syria with grave disapproval as well as concern for the well-being of civilians. At the same time, the process of political change and decisionmaking must ultimately be led by Syrians. This concept was difficult for the United States to grasp in Iraq. Yet a Syrian-led process is necessary even if it is more difficult, slower, and less controllable than we would like.

ANDREW J. TABLER

Given that concerted multilateral pressure is the most effective means of influencing Damascus, the U.S. government's response to the regime's repression has been constructive. Washington and the EU have worked together on sanctions, leading to a European ban on purchases of Syrian oil effective November 15. The EU consumes 90 percent of Syrian oil exports, so this act will drastically decrease the funds available to Asad.

Yet Russia and China's recent Security Council veto has stymied further multilateral efforts, despite the fact that the resolution in question had been watered down to the point of lacking any real impact. Meanwhile, protestors continue to lose their lives, and the potential for escalating armed conflict is rising.

Accordingly, the United States should take the following steps:

- Focus its energies on the goal of bringing down the Asad regime, which will require more multilateral pressure. In particular, the EU should target the Central Bank of Syria.
- Work with the Syrian opposition on techniques for civil resistance, especially general strikes. Although some such incidents have already occurred, widespread strikes would create more opportunities to highlight how Asad and his supporters are at odds with human rights and free expression.
- Aid the opposition in developing a plan for a post-Asad Syria. Such a plan would help break key Damascus and Aleppo elites away from the regime. The opposition has made tremendous progress in organization and planning, and although the United States cannot lead the process, it can facilitate the work of Syrian democrats.
- Prepare for the worst. The United States should not delineate which measures are off the table, but instead undertake an all-encompassing discussion of policy options should events turn toward a wider conflict in which the opposition would be substantially outgunned.
- Develop a contact group of countries that support democracy in Syria in order to coordinate a coherent policy message and brainstorm future policy options.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Rebecca Gruskin. ❖

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