

Arab Rebellions, American Responses: An Interim Assessment

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On September 19, 2011, Andrew J. Tabler, Robert Satloff, and Margaret Scobey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Tabler is the Next Generation fellow at the Institute and author of the new book ***In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*** (</templateC04.php?CID=254>) (Lawrence Hill, 2011). Dr. Satloff is the Institute's executive director. His most recent article -- "***Hang*** [by a Thread.](/templateC06.php?CID=1708)" (</templateC06.php?CID=1708>) an examination of the increasingly fragile Egypt-Israel peace treaty -- appears in the current issue of Jerusalem Report. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; Ambassador Scobey's remarks were off the record.

Andrew J. Tabler

The Obama administration's incremental response to the Syrian uprisings has been the product of a widespread and longstanding misconception that Washington holds no leverage over Damascus. Yet the U.S. government can take significant measures to uphold its declaration that President Bashar al-Asad must step down.

History has shown that concerted multilateral pressure is the most effective tool for influencing Damascus. Accordingly, Washington should engage its allies in constructing a clear strategy for bringing down the Asad regime and achieving American objectives in a post-Asad Syria. This must be done assertively but also carefully so that Asad cannot spin the protests as being part of a foreign conspiracy. Specifically, Washington should:

- Work with the European Union to target Syria with further sanctions while taking care, as much as possible, not to harm the Syrian people. These efforts should focus on depleting Syria's approximately \$17 billion in known foreign currency reserves. In addition to oil, the 20 percent corporate tax on Syrian business groups is a substantial source of regime revenue. The United States and EU should target these trading conglomerates with

comprehensive sanctions. The timing of these measures is important as well. For example, the EU has wisely refrained from sanctioning Syrian imports of petroleum products. These imports, subsidized by the Syrian regime, will contribute to the depletion of state coffers in the short to medium term.

- Work with the Syrian opposition and its allies to ensure that regime atrocities are highlighted in the international arena, putting Asad in the uncomfortable position of having to repeatedly defend his actions in the court of world opinion.
- Acknowledge the fact that Asad himself holds ultimate power in Syria. The image of him as a modernizing leader held back by the old guard has been proven false.

Regarding a post-Asad Syria, disunity among the opposition is a concern, but not a dire one. Although opposition activists have not yet unified around a single revolutionary document, they have issued a set of promising core principles. And while Syrian youth activists have focused on bringing down the regime, old-guard opposition figures -- especially those in exile, and distanced from the regime and its pressures -- will play an important role in formulating a strategic plan for life after Asad. The potential for future problems will depend on the opposition's ability to respect the outcome of voted decisions rather than splintering off into factions.

No clear candidate to lead a post-Asad Syria has yet emerged. The Alawite community is still betting on Asad, and the military is dominated by officers loyal to his family, making it an unlikely source of future political leadership. Some opposition figures have mentioned former defense minister Ali Habib Mahmoud, an Alawite, as a potential leader, but his stance toward the regime is increasingly unclear. Given the probability that the opposition will attempt an alliance with the Sunni business class, a leader may surface from that sect, but it remains to be seen who will take on the risk of stepping into that spotlight.

Robert Satloff

Although critics note that the U.S. response to this year's Arab uprisings has been inconsistent, there is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that it differed from country to country. The more relevant question is whether U.S. actions and words have advanced the national interest. While the United States has reacted wisely and effectively in some respects, the list of areas in which it has not performed well is, regrettably, longer.

On the positive side, Washington played an important role in supporting the relatively peaceful first phase of Egypt's transition, in engineering change in Libya at minimal cost, and in changing the international context of the Syrian uprising by issuing a public call for Asad's resignation.

On the negative side, President Obama's pivotal May 19 "Arab Spring" speech was a lost opportunity, distracting international attention away from changes within Arab countries and toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Second, the administration has not seemed to grasp the strategic significance of the potential for change in Syria; while Washington's rhetorical shift was welcome, the Libya venture seems to have exhausted its willingness for more assertive action. Third, Washington has permitted relations with its remaining Middle East pillars -- Saudi Arabia and Israel -- to fray in recent months, resulting in a lack of common efforts to promote change that advances mutual interests in the region (with Bahrain as a prime example). And with Egypt, the administration has lost its focus after the heady days of February, devoting apparently little high-level engagement -- except in emergencies -- to preventing worst-case outcomes in the country's domestic political transition and regional relationships.

The situation is not too late to repair. Important remedial measures include:

- Defining a clear strategy to align U.S. support of political change in Arab countries with the broad range of U.S. interests in the Middle East: namely, combating Iranian influence and nuclear proliferation, promoting

democratic change, countering extremism, protecting the free flow of oil, bolstering Israeli security, and building a lasting Arab-Israeli peace.

- Engaging maturely and directly with the Egyptian leadership and people regarding the gravity of the major decisions currently on their national agenda. Egyptians need to understand that their actions -- on issues ranging from electoral choices to peace with Israel -- will have consequences.
- Renewing and upgrading dialogue with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Israel regarding the near- and longer-term implications of regional change and the manner in which each party can shape it to advance common national interests.
- Clarifying -- both publicly and in private -- U.S. red lines for unacceptable behavior. Notwithstanding Turkey's willingness to maintain certain defense relationships with the United States, Washington's silence following Ankara's recent threats to both Israel and legitimate commercial activity in the eastern Mediterranean only invites further outrageous behavior.
- Maintaining focus on building a stable and democratic Iraq. The failure of democracy in Baghdad would have negative repercussions on all other democratic experiments throughout the region.

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

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