

Syria's Regional Allies Condemn Asad's Tactics -- But Not Asad

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 Brief Analysis

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Neighboring states vying for influence in an increasingly unstable Syria are calling for President Bashar al-Asad to listen to his people. On August 27, Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi declared that Asad should heed the "legitimate demands" of Syrians. A day later, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that "immediately silencing guns and heeding public demands" is the regime's "only way out."

Both announcements -- along with the Arab League's dispatch of Secretary-General Nabil al-Araby to Damascus with a plan to relieve the crisis and demands that Asad stop the bloodshed -- are a clear indication that Syria's allies are growing increasingly concerned over Asad's policy of trying to shoot his way out of trouble. The Alawite-dominated regime's decision to wait until Ramadan to launch a bloody crackdown on the Sunni-majority city of Hama, where Bashar's father carried out one of the region's bloodiest massacres in 1982, has received particularly heavy criticism.

Yet Syria's neighboring allies are still suggesting reform rather than adopting the Western view that Asad must go. Tehran would like a top-down process that preserves both Asad's grip on power and the "resistance axis." For its part, Ankara has thus far bet on both sides, urging Asad to reform while helping the Syrian opposition organize in Turkey. Yet with President Abdullah Gul stating yesterday that Ankara had lost its confidence in the regime, Turkey now seems to be hedging its bets on Asad.

As the crackdown continues, regional powers are increasingly likely to view Syria as another Lebanon: that is, an arena for contesting power. Before the Asad family seized control in 1970, Syria's geography -- much trumpeted by the regime as a strategic asset -- was its greatest liability, as various states took advantage of the country's insecurity and sponsored numerous coups. If history repeats itself and regional political jockeying turns toward potential military action, Syrian protestors will likely expand their calls for U.S. intervention as well, especially given NATO's defeat of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi. Although the Obama administration has repeatedly stated that such action in Syria remains "off the table," Washington could soon find itself drawn into an emerging regional battleground where military intervention with allies at the right moment might be key to not only ending the bloodshed, but also decisively breaking the Syria-Iran nexus.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's [Program on Arab Politics \(/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3F3SID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3F3SID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria \(http://www.chicagoreviewpress.com/catalog/showBook.cfm?ISBN=1569768439\)](http://www.chicagoreviewpress.com/catalog/showBook.cfm?ISBN=1569768439). ❖

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