

Cranking Up Pressure on Syria

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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An Interview by *Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org*

Despite objections from the international community, as well as Turkey's stern warning that Syria should end its five-month crackdown (NYT) on protesters, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad continues to press on with brutal attacks around the country. What's needed to stop Assad is concerted international pressure, which is what the Obama administration is pushing for, says Syria expert Andrew J. Tabler. He says that at this point, any gestures Assad makes toward reform are no longer credible, and the international community should invoke tough sanctions against Syria's oil exports, 96 percent of which are purchased Europe. He also notes that the Saudis, in particular, are concerned about the potential for Iran to increase its backing of Assad against the opposition.

GWERTZMAN: President Barack Obama recently spoke by phone with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain to discuss the situation in Syria. All three countries have strongly opposed the crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad, but nothing much has happened beyond a lot of rhetoric. Should Washington be doing more?

TABLER: Washington is doing more behind the scenes. All of this is being driven by the fact that talking to [Assad] about his crackdown is not working. Probably the most recent example of that is Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus last week, where he gave [Assad] yet another message to stop the killing. What we have is the Syrian army continuing to go into major cities and also what appears to be a naval attack on protesters in Latakia, Syria's main port. There's been a convergence in views that Bashar doesn't have a plan to get out of this other than shooting his way out.

GWERTZMAN: What is Washington doing, specifically?

TABLER: Washington has been on a diplomatic offensive, and the United States has gone throughout Europe and talked to all the major allies. As you mentioned, President Obama talked with Cameron as well as King Abdullah. Those [talks] will continue because the U.S. government recognizes that what works with Syria is concerted multilateral pressure. This is what drove Syrian forces out of Lebanon in April 2005 [after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri]. The second thing that is effective with the Syrians are sanctions, which have affected their economy greatly. That's why you have seen Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushing on targeting Syrian oil exports and the financing of those exports. These moves will be combined with the stronger language, which has evolved over the last couple of days, [in order to] get the international community on the same page in terms of what to do

about the Assad regime.

GWERTZMAN: Unlike Arab countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where the army did not go along with the political leaders, Syrian security forces seem closely aligned with Assad. What will persuade Assad to change, short of military intervention?

TABLER: The protesters have come a long way. They used to be far more divided than they are now. They still have not congealed; this is not necessarily unusual in the face of these kinds of events. If they did create a formal, linear structure, the regime would probably try to decapitate it. There is the question of the military intervention. This is where the fact that the Assad regime is a minority Alawite-dominated regime comes into play, because the networks of minorities around the Assad regime penetrate the army and the security services and make it very hard for the army to act as a separate body, to come in, in the name of national interests, and oust the ruling family, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt. But if Alawites and other minorities who are in the high command decide that the Assads are essentially flushing their fortunes down the drain, they could take another route, and we could see the military intervening in that way. But it's far from clear that that's going to happen.

GWERTZMAN: The Sunnis, Syria's the majority population, have not really broken with the Assad regime, at least the business community. Is there any change in that? Damascus is described as still quiet -- or is that not true?

TABLER: It isn't true. There have been protests in the environs of Damascus and a big crackdown there [on August 14]. More importantly, the business community and folks in Damascus are, privately, extremely critical of the regime. The question is: When do the turn words into action? That's where the opposition coming up with a structure and also a plan about what to do could help with encouraging elite Sunni-bourgeoisie defections that we've all been talking about. We'll have to see what role the bourgeoisie plays in all of this going forward.

GWERTZMAN: Assad has talked about reforms, but nothing much has taken hold, it seems. What could he do?

TABLER: The problem Assad has now is twofold: He's in a dictator's dilemma. He's doubling down with his security solution -- or tripling down or quadrupling down -- because he believes that works. The problem now is that even if he launches true reforms that would democratize the country and lead to a democratic transition, it would undermine the very people in the security services and the army on which he's relying to keep order because they would lose power and influence. So, he's in a real jam. The other reason he's in a real jam is he didn't reform effectively for eleven years, and he has instead tried to shoot his way out, which continues to this day. No one believes him when he talks about reform. And why would they? Whatever process he could launch probably would not attract the kind of mass appeal necessary to get him out of this crisis politically.

GWERTZMAN: Most of the opposition's would-be leaders are overseas right now. Do they have any coordinated view of what kind of deal Assad would accept in exchange for quitting?

TABLER: Most of those who are in exile coordinate with those on the ground in Syria. So, there is some overlap between the exiles and the domestic opposition. They're trying to close ranks and come up with a plan for a post-Assad Syria. That's hard work. That's what they're working on at the moment. The United States and Turkey, which hosted a number of conferences, and the Arab countries, will become involved in this process as people try to look toward a Syria without Assad.

GWERTZMAN: The Turkish foreign minister had two days of talks with Assad last week. What is the Turkish analysis of the situation?

TABLER: I was just in Turkey, and the Turkish analysis is basically this: They don't see Assad making the changes to not only save his regime but also to stabilize his situation. On the other hand, they also recognize that the opposition still needs to do a lot of work. That's one reason they're allowing these conferences to be hosted in Turkey. But, in the

end, Turkey seems unwilling to do two things that could be effective. One is the use of military force, as they did in 1998, which was very successful in getting Hafez al-Assad to expel Abdullah Ocalan [a leader of the Turkish PKK]. The Turks threatened to invade Syria because Damascus had hosted Ocalan. When the Turks threatened to invade, Assad expelled him. [That] allowed for the warming of Turkish-Syrian ties.

The second thing is that they seem unwilling to leverage their soft power with Syria concerning trade and economy, I think because of the truck traffic that crosses Syria on the way to the Gulf. The problem is that if the Turks come out hard against Assad, Syria could close off those avenues, and that will cost the members of the AKP [Turkey's ruling party] one of its major areas of support, from the industries that rely on the trucking traffic.

GWERTZMAN: Is there also a strategic element bothering the Saudis? How would you describe Iran's influence in Syria? Many believe the Saudis are angry because they fear the Iranians are gaining in influence.

TABLER: The Iranians have played an instrumental role in the crackdown, technically, in terms of advice and Internet technology, to track those on Facebook and Twitter. But also, Abdullah can very clearly see that Assad is relying upon Iran more and more, in addition to his normal alliance, in terms of support for Hezbollah [in Lebanon]. The Saudis very much see the region in these terms, and they're determined to roll back Iranian influence. They saw [Assad] as moving too far in the Iranian direction.

That plays out in Lebanon as well.

We'll have to watch that very closely, because as this gets worse, Assad could try and stoke the coals of tension with Israel or inside of Lebanon.

GWERTZMAN: If Hillary Clinton asked you for advice right now, would you tell her to continue using rhetoric but do nothing more concrete?

TABLER: Concerted multilateral pressure works with Syria, but you need something to back it up. That comes in the area of the sanctions on the Syrian oil as well as intermediate steps to stop the purchase of Syrian crude. Oil accounts for about 28 to 33 percent of Syrian exports. The revenues directly accrue to the state. Targeting these exports -- 96 percent of them are purchased in Europe -- will cripple the regime. It will cause it to borrow more money from the bourgeoisie. It will cause it to run down its reserves by borrowing from the central bank. But, unlike in the case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where the lions' share of revenue came from oil production, it will not have as large of a ripple effect on society. So, this is something that is doable. On August 2 the Senate introduced a bill that will be debated as soon as the recess ends that deals with Syrian energy. A lot of our leverage will come from there in the coming month.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria \(http://www.newcitystaging.com/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria\)](http://www.newcitystaging.com/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria). ❖

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