The Degrading of Syria's Regime

by Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)**

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An Interview by Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org

The Obama administration believes that the regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria is now in a "downward trajectory" because of the violence against its own people and the failure to undertake reforms, says Andrew J. Tabler, a former journalist in Syria. But the regime's decline also poses new hurdles for U.S. efforts to engage Syria, break its ties with Iran, and promote peace with Israel, he says. Because of the Internet and some loosening of ties with foreign countries, the "genie is out of the bottle," he says. "The problem with the Assad regime is that the genie is now just way too big for the bottle." He says unlike Tunisia and Egypt, where the army helped overthrow the leader, the security forces in Syria will remain loyal to Assad. Any change will be the result of Sunnis, who comprise the majority of the population, taking over from the Alawites led by Assad.

GWERTZMAN: With the violent crackdowns in Syria lately and the statements of condemnation from Washington, does this wreck whatever chance there was for an early U.S.-Syrian rapprochement?

TABLER: Yes it does, and for the foreseeable future. For the last two and a half years, Washington's primary approach to Syria was that of engagement based primarily on facilitating Israel-Syria peace talks. Obviously, those are now off the table. What has happened is that the list of issues for the United States with Syria was, first, peace talks and the last, a distant fifth, was human rights. Now the priorities have been inverted. We now have almost more people in the Syrian regime designated under U.S. sanctions for human rights abuses than we do for their regional behavior. And this is a fundamental shift.

Previously, there was a belief in Washington that President Bashar al-Assad had considerable legitimacy in his country -- not just because he resisted Israel and supported Hezbollah, but because he had enacted reforms in the country. Obviously, this is not true. He does not hold a tremendous amount of legitimacy in his country now. That fact undermines a serious precondition for there to be a treaty between Israel and Syria. We all wonder how it is that the Bashar al-Assad who gave the speech on March 30, who blamed the protests on foreign conspiracies -- both from Israel and the United States -- is going to turn around on a dime now and sign on a dotted line with Israel. I just don't think that's going to happen, and I don't think the Israelis are going to throw them a lifeline either.

GWERTZMAN: When these protests began in March, the Syrian regime through its spokesman Bouthaina Shaaban issued statements saying that Assad was going to throw out the emergency law and reform things. There was a great PR effort, it seemed at that time, to rally support around the president. But it didn't work, did it?

TABLER: In June of 2005, at the end of the Ba'ath Party conference, [Bouthaina Shaaban] made virtually the same promises that she made in the days leading up to Bashar al-Assad's March 30 speech, concerning a reconsideration of the emergency law, considering [the] political parties law, and a whole host of other reforms. Nothing happened in the end -- and this is the problem with the Assad regime. It promises to reform, and then it doesn't get around to doing so, because Bashar prefers to rule through ambiguity. This is the hallmark of his rule, and one of the main reasons why people finally have moved out into the streets.

While he hasn't reformed the country, the country has globalized over time. There has been zero political reform, but at the same time you allow more Internet into the country, more imported goods, Syrians can travel without an exit permit, which they had to obtain under Hafez al-Assad. Now, the problem with the Assad regime is that the genie is just way too big for the bottle. The Bashar al-Assad regime spent eleven years not reforming. They didn't make the bottle bigger, and now it's very hard for them to contain the fears and aspirations of the Syrian people. This is their dilemma.

GWERTZMAN: Bashar al-Assad was an eye doctor in London, married to a Syrian, Asma Assad, who was brought up in England. And then out of the blue almost, he was drafted to become the president when his father, Hafez, passed away. There's been a lot of talk about his brother, Maher, who apparently runs the security forces that crushed that rebellion over the weekend in the north. Talk about the family -- who's in charge, really?

TABLER: Assad has an increasingly narrow minority base, because his Sunni support and legitimacy has cracked away as a result of the protests.

Bashar al-Assad and the Assad family are completely in control of Syria. That's why the United States, as well as other countries, has been engaging him for the past two and a half years. He consolidated his power in the early days of his rule. The inaction in terms of enacting reforms was initially blamed on the old guard, who were left over from Hafez al-Assad's regime. Well, they're long gone now, and what has come to be is that Bashar and his brother, as well as a number of other security chiefs rule Syria with an iron fist. They're completely in charge of the country. What's very important here is that Bashar al-Assad himself, in his speech on March 30, the only real speech during this whole uprising, mocked the notion that he was being held back by anyone from reforming.

He said, "Many people asked me about people around me holding me back from reforming." He said, "I will tell you that no one is holding me back from reforming -- we have our plans, and we're going to implement them. It's just going to take time." He's not being held back by anyone, this is the way he rules. And unfortunately, the Syrian people have reached a point that they've had to go out into the streets and protest for the last fourteen weeks in order to show that indeed they want change in their country, not just in terms of a change in his behavior: They want the fall of the regime.

GWERTZMAN: Is there anything in particular that the protesters want? Is it his overthrow primarily?

TABLER: Initially the protests were largely over the situation in Dara'a -- the torture of children who had been arrested for scrawling on a wall "the people want the fall of the regime," the same slogan as in Cairo. And so that got people out into the streets, and they were demanding that the children be returned, and they were also complaining about a number of issues, including the emergency law in the country, and the oppressive nature of the state, as well as corruption -- which has skyrocketed under Bashar al-Assad. In response to this protest, the regime began its bloody crackdown. Initially, they killed six -- now fourteen weeks later, they've killed over 1,400. In response to that crackdown and Bashar's lack of reform, the people now are demanding the fall of the regime. Over time, the demands have moved from halting torture of children to demands that Bashar go.

GWERTZMAN: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said the other day that Bashar's legitimacy was now in question. Is the United States taking the position that it really can't deal with Syria as long as he's in charge?

TABLER: This is a dilemma for the United States because it is accepted in Washington that the regime is on a downward trajectory -- that the regime faces a fundamental dilemma: that the reforms and changes that would be necessary would involve power-sharing between the minority Alawite government in Damascus, which is led by the Assads, and the Sunni majority in the country. Those political changes Bashar is not capable of, especially now that he is so reliant on the generals and the security chiefs that are Alawites, and the military and the army, for suppressing the uprising. What to do about that is a matter of debate. And that's what's currently going on in Washington -- to try to understand that if something is broken in Syria, and the regime is on a downward trajectory, what should Washington do?

This problem exists in terms of dealing with the regime's immediate behavior of killing protesters, as well as what to do with a regime that has never been an ally of the United States, and has increasingly problematic regional behavior [involving the secret nuclear reactor bombed by Israel], Lebanon, Hezbollah, weapons transfers, and so on. And now, Assad has an increasingly narrow minority base, because his Sunni support and legitimacy has cracked away as a result of the protests. This is going to be a regime that is increasingly reliant on Iran. The goal of the United States has been, and will continue to be, to break the resistance axis of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Previously, we had thought that would be achievable via a peace treaty between Israel and Syria. Now, policymakers have to consider that they're going to have to deal with a different government in Damascus, eventually, and that a Sunni-led government in Damascus would create that "break." How you get there is another thing.

GWERTZMAN: Are there any obvious Sunni political leaders? We talk about the Sunni business class. Is there a political class too?

TABLER: No, the Syrian opposition until now has been very careful not to be easily identified and decapitated. So you have a protest, you have traditional opposition leaders in the country, then you have the protesters themselves on the ground who are being driven by local leaders, as well as Internet activists, and what they call local coordinating committees. So, a little over two weeks ago, in Antalya, Turkey, there was a conference in which the opposition agreed on common principles -- but one leader has not emerged from that pack. This is not unusual for movements such as these in their early stages, because they are very careful not to become vulnerable to the Assad regime's crackdown.

From the opposition conference has emerged a number of principles that the opposition believes the Syrian people can rally around. There is a recognition that the collapse of the Assad regime would not look like what happened in Cairo or in Tunisia -- where you had a dramatic event in a central square, and the military intervening to oust the ruling family. The minority networks of Alawites, Druze, Ismailis around the Assad family command the security services and the army. They're not going to throw out the ruling family for the same change in Syria, it would look very different. It's going to take a much longer time as the regime continues to degrade. The building of the opposition will take some time -- and we will have to see who emerges from that pack, and who offers a viable alternative to Assad in the weeks ahead.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics. ❖

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