

In Syria, Destroying the Country to Save the Regime?

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

May 11, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.

The Syrian government has stepped up its campaign to quash a seven-week uprising, reportedly using tanks to fire on cities. At least twenty people and two Syrian soldiers died in the latest clashes. Larisa Epatko of PBS NewsHour asked Andrew J. Tabler, a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics, about the government's actions.

NEWSHOUR: Why is the government escalating the crackdown now?

ANDREW TABLER: Because they know it's a make or break moment. They want to negotiate from a position of strength. And that strength would be people going back to their homes, but people aren't doing that.

The regime has used extreme force in Daraa and now Homs, where there have been reports of shelling. This means a new phase of the crackdown and that we might be getting closer to the events of February 1982 when large parts of the city of Hama [were] leveled by the military in response to a revolt. In a sense, they are heading on a trajectory where they would almost have to destroy the country to save the regime.

NEWSHOUR: What are the tactics of the government?

TABLER: Basically, to use outright repression to cut off the protests and gain the upper hand. Now they're talking about instituting reforms, but the only problem is, the *New York Times* reports (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhoulf.html?_r=2&ref=basharalassad) that if Assad institutes these reforms, it means his undoing. Assad's family hails from the Alawite sect, and these minorities are in key positions of the secret forces and the army, so they're involved in the crackdown. To come up with a political solution, there have to be political reforms, but that means undermining the minority base of the government. This is why the Obama administration is taking a more aggressive stance. More measures might be coming out in the coming days in the realm of Treasury Department [designations] of Syrian officials. There are rumors this could include designations of President Assad himself.

The economy of the country has ground to a halt, so the sanctions would have an increasingly large effect. Syria has the reserves to survive it, but the question is how long. The French are coming close to saying the Assad government must go. This is far from over.

NEWSHOUR: How is the government finding and arresting people?

TABLER: They're doing house-to-house sweeps. They're using technology provided by Iran to monitor cell phones

and emails. They have a firewall made by a European company that allows them to monitor people, the activities of Syrians. Members of the security forces, usually younger ones with foreign language skills, are doing the monitoring.

The protest leaders are not from the traditional opposition, so the regime has to go after these people who have gone into hiding. They've been uploading videos via satellite phones, so they're desperately asking for refill cards to recharge the credit on their phones in order to upload videos. You have a traditional opposition also, but this is a narrow group of people. It's unclear to what degree the opposition would agree to talk to the government at all, or if it just wants the government's fall.

NEWSHOUR: In the face of this crackdown, how are the protesters able to continue?

TABLER: The protesters have been resilient. They know that if they leave the squares or stop they'll lose their leverage on Assad. One week you might see thousands, another week hundreds scattered throughout the country. It's unclear how this will play out. But it won't look like Cairo or Tunisia; it will be a long process. What makes this alarming is a lot of powers could be at play -- Iranians are worried about the fall of the Assad regime -- not just the arms flow to Hezbollah, but Syria manufactures the missiles paid for by Iran, which they want on hand if there is a war with Israel. On the other hand, it doesn't seem like the regime will tip over -- at least very easily.

The opposition is organized, but has less practice working together than in Egypt. There you had a separate military to step in, where the senior command hails from the same Alawite minority as the president. Everyone's trying to figure out where this is going. Many in the Syrian opposition want President Obama to make a public statement to boost the opposition's cause. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)