

Syria: One Step Forward, One Step Back

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

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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.

 Brief Analysis

Washington should immediately warn the Asad regime that any resort to large-scale violent suppression of protestors will be met with immediate measures by the United States and the international community.

In the face of mounting public protests throughout Syria, the Bashar al-Asad regime yesterday canceled the forty-eight-year-old Emergency Law that permitted the regime to arrest and detain citizens indefinitely without charge. It also abolished the dreaded state security court and announced it will allow peaceful protests -- but only with government permission. Yet, overnight, the Syrian secret police arrested a popular opposition figure, Mahmoud Issa, who was taken from his home in the city of Homs.

Asad's concessions are unlikely to satisfy the protestors, as a number of other laws -- as well as the introduction of a new "anti-terrorism" law -- allow the regime to continue its brutal oppression. Furthermore, the regime's track record on following through on other promised political reforms, including a new political parties law, has been extremely poor.

Indeed, more demonstrations have been reported today, and opponents of the government are calling for the fall of the Asad regime. Signs are increasing that the regime is preparing for a brutal crackdown: particularly alarming was yesterday's announcement on Syrian TV that blamed the spiraling protests on Salafists bent on establishing an Islamic emirate -- the same accusation used by the Asad regime to carry out the Hama massacre of February 1982, when an estimated 10,000 people were killed.

Washington should immediately warn the Asad regime that any resort to large-scale violent suppression of protestors will be met with immediate measures by the United States and the international community. It should also work with Western and regional allies to hold Syria accountable before the UN Human Rights Commission for the regime's violent crackdown. But the United States should also push the Asad regime to implement its promised reforms, with clear metrics for measuring them.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Institute's [Program on Arab Politics \(template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#)



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