

Syria Teeters on the Edge

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Brief Analysis

Washington must at minimum take a clear position with regard to Damascus and human rights -- which could prove a key point of consensus in the international response to the regime's brutal suppression of Syrian demands for democratic reform.

After three weeks and more than 200 deaths, the uprisings against Syria's Asad regime appear to be gaining momentum. In recent days, the protests spread to the coastal city of Baniyas and, more important, to Aleppo. Smaller demonstrations have even occurred at Damascus University.

The Aleppo protests pose a significant challenge to the regime. The second-largest city in Syria, Aleppo has been a traditional flashpoint of Sunni-Alawite tension. Historically, the city has also been known as a repository of support for Syria's Muslim Brotherhood. In 1982, Aleppo, along with Hama, bore the brunt of the regime's brutal crackdown against Islamists.

Damascus has employed a variety of strategies in its attempt to crush the demonstrations. Reports surfaced this week that the *shabbiha* (literally "ghosts") -- armed plainclothes Alawite regime supporters -- have been deployed against protesters along the coast. These groups have also reportedly been used to enforce discipline among the ranks of Syria's military and security services. The use of the *shabbiha* to suppress demonstrations in mixed Sunni-Alawite coastal cities threatens to set off internecine strife.

The period following this Friday's *jumuah* prayers promises to be the most significant challenge to the regime yet. If the government's approach so far is any indication, it will undoubtedly be a bloody day.

The United States has long held concerns about what would replace the regime in the event of a collapse, and Washington will undoubtedly be hesitant to cast its lot with Syria's historically divided opposition. Nevertheless, it will be important for the administration to be on record regarding the consequences for the regime should the atrocities continue. Specifically, Washington should issue a strong public warning before Friday that the regime will be held accountable should it respond violently to peaceful demonstrations.

In the likely event that the Asad regime does use excessive force to quash demonstrations, the administration should take the opportunity to immediately bring Damascus before the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. At the same time, it should be prepared to roll out unilateral and multilateral measures to impose a price on the regime for its actions. In this regard, the White House should issue an executive order targeting those regime officials most directly responsible for the current violence against civilians. And per the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, Washington should also suspend all U.S. investment in Syria. On the multilateral front, the administration should be working closely with France to establish an effective sanctions regime -- including diplomatic isolation -- against the Asad clique.

Regardless of its concerns about what comes next, Washington must at minimum take a clear position with regard to Damascus and human rights -- which could prove a key point of consensus in the international response to the regime's brutal suppression of Syrian demands for democratic reform.

David Schenker is director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(/template102.php?](/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

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