

It's Time Bashar Followed Through on His Word

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

With anti-Asad regime protests in Syria raging for a seventh straight day, with reports of significant numbers killed, the United States should consider designating under Treasury Department sanctions Maher al-Asad, Bashar's brother and head of the elite units of the Republican Guard.

Anti-Asad regime protests in Syria raged for a seventh straight day on March 25, with reports of significant numbers killed. While the center of the protests continues to be in the southern Syrian city of Deraa, protests have spread to major western Syrian cities of Damascus, Homs, Latakia, and Hama. Despite promises yesterday by Bouthaina Shaaban, political advisor to President Bashar al-Asad, that live ammunition would not be used, confirmed press reports say security forces continue to gun down protesters.

Shaaban also promised the regime would study lifting the country's forty-seven-year-old emergency law, which allows the regime to arrest individuals without charge and detain them indefinitely, and passing a new political parties law. Since both laws have been under "study" for nearly a decade -- and the implementation was promised in the last Ba'ath Party Conference of 2005 -- nothing is holding up both moves except President Bashar al-Asad following through on his word.

The protests continue to be a major challenge to the regime in two respects. First, mounting deaths in and around Deraa will continue to erode regime support in an area traditionally loyal to the Asad family. Second, the spreading of protests to other cities and violent repression by security forces threaten to crack the regime's Sunni legitimacy even further, which will further narrow the Alawite-dominated regime's base.

Asad now faces a dilemma: If he implements the reforms announced yesterday, he boosts his legitimacy among all Syrians, including the Sunni majority. But doing so will cut off the corruption that benefits the minority networks that dominate the regime's security services and armed forces.

The United States should push Bashar to follow through. Washington should publicly pressure the regime to respect human rights and political freedoms, and institute rule of law in the country. Washington's best means to pressure Damascus are U.S. sanctions, specifically Treasury department designations of regime members found responsible for human rights abuses during the regime's crackdown. It should also work with Western allies and Turkey to pressure Asad diplomatically to institute domestic reforms with clear benchmarks and timetables as a peaceful path out of the crisis. By holding the Asad regime accountable for its commitments, Washington has the best hope for influencing Asad's domestic policies for the better, avoiding further bloodshed, and fostering a real peace between Syria and Israel.

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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