

Syria Protests Call for Strong U.S. Stance

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Brief Analysis

March 24 marked the sixth straight day of protests against Syria's Bashar al-Asad regime in and around the southern city of Deraa, where the regime crackdown thus far has claimed at least sixteen lives, with unconfirmed reports putting that number much higher. As the death toll mounts, the issue of the moment is whether the protests, unprecedented under Asad and the largest since those that sparked the Hama massacre of 1982, could spread to other parts of Syria on Friday, March 25, when dissidents are calling for a "Day of Rage."

To date, Washington has only condemned the continuing protests and vicious repression. Given Syria's bad track record on domestic reform, however, the United States needs to develop clear benchmarks and time lines on domestic reforms, complete with negative consequences, if Washington hopes to achieve U.S. policy goals of universal rights for Syrians and, eventually, a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty.

Background

The residents of Deraa, part of a key Sunni constituency traditionally loyal to the Asad regime, have engaged in protests since March 15. The protests were instigated when security officials arrested a group of children ages ten to fourteen for scrawling "The people want the fall of the regime" on a wall -- a slogan seen widely in Cairo's Tahrir Square. After failing to convince the regime to release the children, their families flooded the streets of Deraa to demand their release. The regime responded with force on March 18, killing six and injuring scores of others.

On March 21, the regime sent a delegation of high-level officials native to Deraa, including Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, to engage with local tribal leaders and quell the violence. While the children were released and Deraa's governor was sacked, the regime continued to use force to disperse demonstrators on March 22, killing another six. High numbers of unconfirmed deaths, ranging between thirty and a hundred, may owe to the regime's refusal of medical treatment for wounded protestors holed up in Deraa's Omari mosque. While the protests have been non-Islamist in nature, on March 23 protestors also chanted, "No to Iran, No to Hizballah -- We want a leader who fears God!" The latter of these slogans constituted a reference to the Asad family's roots in the Alawite faith, a heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam that dominates the Syrian regime.

Perhaps more notable than the scale of the protests is the protestors' demographic base. This month's protests broke out in Syria's southern Houran region, whose tribal Sunni population has been -- as in the city of Deraa --

traditionally loyal to the Asad regime. Elsewhere in the country, for hundreds of years, tensions have flared between Syria's Alawite community and its Sunni majority. The flash point for this simmering conflict occurred in February 1982, when the Sunni-based Muslim Brotherhood threw the Asad regime's security forces out of the northern Syrian city of Hama. The regime responded by shelling the city, killing an estimated 30,000 people and arresting thousands of suspected Muslim Brotherhood supporters all across Syria, many of whose whereabouts remain unknown to this day.

To stabilize the regime, Bashar's father, Hafiz, enacted two major measures. First, he changed the justification for the country's Emergency Law, which had been enacted in March 1963 due to domestic instability, to Syria's state of war with Israel. This reasoning boosted regime support among the country's majority Sunni population, which has traditionally sided with the Palestinian cause. Second, Asad gave his regime a veneer of Sunni legitimacy by co-opting tribal Sunnis from the Houran region and the Jazeera region of eastern Syria to join the regime's core of Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, and Christians; these four groups collectively make up about a quarter of the Syrian population.

This week's protests in Deraa threaten to crack that Sunni veneer. There are signs that Jazeerites may be joining the fray as well. Following sporadic protests in the region's capital city of Deir Ez Zour last week, Ali Aissa Ubadi, claiming to represent sixty tribes announced a "rebellion against the (Asad) regime" on March 22.

Will It Spread?

With the regime returning the bodies of the dead to their families for burial, there is intense speculation as to whether the protests in and around Deraa will escalate. With each funeral, the risk of anti-regime violence increases, threatening to set the Houran region on fire and further erode a key base of support for the regime among the country's majority Sunni population.

Speculation is also intense that the protests could spread to other parts of Syria following the March 25 Friday prayers, including major cities in western Syria. On March 22-24, sporadic but small protests have occurred in Baniyas, Damascus, and Homs, but thus far have not led to the same kind of violence currently raging in Deraa. Speculation that Syria's historically oppressed Kurdish population, which has animosity toward the regime, would rise up on March 21 in celebration of Nairouz, the Kurdish New Year, proved unfounded.

In an attempt to quell the uprising, Bouthaina Shaaban, a key political advisor to President Asad, announced on March 24 that the regime would form a committee to "study" the ending of the forty-seven-year Emergency Law in Syria -- a key demand of protestors in Deraa and throughout Syria. Shaaban also announced that the regime would soon issue a draft for a political parties law, increase workers salaries, and take measures to alleviate unemployment in Syria.

It remains unclear if such steps will be enough to satisfy protestors in Deraa or people across Syria. One reason to the contrary is that the Syrian people may not believe Shaaban, especially given that previous promises by the regime to enact the same reforms have gone unfulfilled. During the last Baath Party conference in June 2005, Shaaban, then minister of expatriates and conference spokesperson, promised the very same measures would be reviewed -- to no avail.

Escalating protests could weaken the Asad regime's stability, though raging protests may not bring it down altogether. Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, where the militaries have some degree of independence from the regime, the minority networks around the Asad regime overlap between the military and the security bodies. A number of Syrian military officers hail from the Houran region, which could threaten Sunni representation in the military. But the fear by Alawites and other minorities that a fall of the Asad regime would lead to a massacre by vengeful Sunnis could protect the Asad regime from military defections that were necessary to ending regime rule in Tunisia and

Egypt.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The unrest has deep implications for U.S. policy. The Obama administration has based its Syria policy on facilitating peace talks between Syria and Israel. A major cog in that premise was that a large part of Asad's legitimacy rested on his piecemeal effort to "reform" Syria. This week's protests have called that legitimacy into serious question. The question now remains as to how -- or whether -- a minority leader with a narrowing domestic base and severely compromised domestic legitimacy rooted in a proven inability to launch real reforms will be able to abandon Syria's state of war with Israel.

Over the last two years, the Obama administration has kept U.S. sanctions on Syria in place, but has not introduced new "negative incentives" or pressures to cajole Asad into changing his policies. The hope behind this position has been that peace talks between Syria and Israel were imminent. So far, those efforts, however sincere, have not borne fruit. While attempts to focus on the Syria track should not be abandoned, the time has come for Washington to develop a hybrid policy in two senses: first, by denouncing human rights abuses in Syria as well as promoting the peace process, and second, by introducing negative incentives into the mix of engaging Syria. More than anything, this week's protests show that Asad only truly changes tack when he is under pressure and facing dilemmas.

Thus far, the Asad regime has refused to accept Washington's criticism of its record on human rights and democracy. This month's protests provide Washington with the opportunity to reiterate calls for universal freedoms -- whether Damascus likes it or not. On March 24, the State Department condemned the "Syrian government's brutal repression of demonstrations, in particular the violence and killings of civilians at the hands of security forces," and also said, "Those responsible for the violence must be held accountable." To achieve this, and to ensure that Asad follows through with his promises to enact domestic reforms, the United States 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 at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria (Lawrence Hill, 2011). ❖

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