

Syria's Turn

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Mar 15, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The outbreak of anti-regime protests in Damascus offers the Obama administration an opportunity to reiterate America's call for universal freedoms and to push for change in a country that consistently aligns itself against Washington.

A rare public protest took place in Damascus on March 15, with demonstrators demanding that President Bashar Assad end the country's state of emergency and release political prisoners. Protests in the Syrian cities of Dera, Dair Ez Zour, and Aleppo were reported as well.

The protests, organized by the Facebook group "The Syrian Revolution 2011 against Bashar al-Assad" and captured on cell phone video, showed demonstrators marching in the Harika and Hamiddya area of the Old City of Damascus while chanting, "Freedom," and "The Syrian people will not fall." The number of protesters was estimated to be between 200 and 350, although the exact figure is unknown. The crowds were dispersed by plainclothes police and Baath party supporters. Another rally is scheduled for March 16 at noon in front of Syria's Interior Ministry.

The protests show that recent predictions of the Assad regime's immunity to the popular protests sweeping the Arab world were premature. For decades Syria's Assad regime has ranked among the region's most repressive: the state of emergency was imposed after the Baath party seized power in 1963.

The regime has become even more repressive in the last two years, even while the Obama administration has attempted to engage diplomatically with Damascus, with particular emphasis on reviving stalled Syria-Israel peace talks.

If there was ever a case where the United States was looking for political change, Syria, along with Iran, fits the bill. The Obama administration recently dispatched Robert Ford as Washington's first ambassador to Damascus since February 2005 to press on Syria's regional and domestic policies.

Thus far the Assad regime has refused to accept Washington's criticism of its record on human rights and democracy. Today's protests provide Ford with an opportunity to reiterate Washington's calls for universal freedoms -- whether Damascus likes it or not.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Institute's [Program on Arab Politics \(template102.php?](#)

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