

Opposition in Syria Dying with a Dissident

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

Mar 10, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

Reports from Damascus say Syria's leading dissident is on his deathbed. Riad Seif, 62 and suffering from prostate cancer, has spent the last year in Adra prison as punishment for attending a meeting of pro-democracy groups in Damascus. Syrian President Bashar Assad has prohibited him from seeking treatment abroad, a restriction Seif once called "a slow death sentence."

Seif is the most respected member of Syria's dwindling secular, democratic opposition to the iron-fisted rule of Assad and his Alawite clan. As the Obama administration prepares to resume diplomatic engagement with Damascus, Seif's plight is a poignant reminder of the abysmal state of human rights in Syria. His biography illustrates why it would be a mistake for Washington to sweep human rights under the rug.

A former member of parliament, Seif devoted much of the last two decades to criticizing the Assad regime. A garment trader by profession -- at one time he held the license to manufacture Adidas in Syria -- his fortunes changed after he was elected to parliament in 1994 and, in contrast to virtually all of his colleagues, embarked on a public campaign against corruption and for political and economic reforms.

His efforts to change Syria cost him personally and professionally. In 1996, two years after his election, Seif's 21-year-old son, Iyad, died under what Seif later described as "mysterious circumstances." Then, after Seif published a high-profile study on economic stagnation in Syria, the regime charged him with tax evasion and levied fines in excess of \$2 million, leaving him bankrupt. Refusing to bow to pressure, Seif ran for parliament again in 1998. Remarkably, he won.

During his second term, Seif wrote and distributed a scathing report on the common practice in Syria of granting mobile-phone monopolies to regime cronies, implicating, most notably, Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf. Then in 2000, Seif gave a speech demanding an end to Assad's "political monopoly." In response, the government arranged to strip him of his parliamentary immunity. He was tried and sentenced to five years in prison. Amnesty International calls him a prisoner of conscience.

Even behind bars, Seif was undeterred. In 2005, he coauthored the Damascus Declaration, which called for political pluralism, an end to the hated Emergency Law and a new Syrian constitution limiting the powers of the president. Seif eventually was released but had been out of prison for less than two years when he was sent back to Adra in February 2008.

Seif's case offers the Obama administration an opportunity to connect directly with the cause of human rights, which resonates deeply in Syria and throughout the Middle East. During the George W. Bush era, the White House devoted at least rhetorical importance to the cause: Bush publicly mentioned Seif at least three times. Today, some suggest that sidelining human rights may be the sort of "confidence-building measure" toward Damascus that helps create an environment conducive to Israel-Syria peace talks. That would be a mistake. In its most recent annual assessment, Freedom House gave Syria its worst rating on political liberties. The trend, its report said, was getting worse.

Pressing for peace over human rights is a false choice. To the contrary, Washington might be able to demand respect for human rights in exchange for playing a role in negotiations with Israel over the return of the Golan Heights and a permanent peace deal with Israel.

During his inaugural address, President Obama said his administration sought a "new way forward" with the Muslim world, "based on mutual interest and mutual respect." If Washington is really committed to change, this formulation should apply not only to Middle Eastern leaders, but to people such as Riad Seif, who share our values and reside in authoritarian states like Syria.

David Schenker is director of the [Program on Arab politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)