

# Promoting Democracy in Syria:

## Options for U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

**F**LYNT LEVERETT

There are two main avenues by which the United States can encourage greater openness, democratization, and economic reform in Syria: an externally driven approach (e.g., supporting external opposition forces), or a strategy of engagement with the Syrian government and civil society. Historically, the latter strategy has had an impressive record of success elsewhere, particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc. The U.S. diplomatic strategy during the 1980s allowed Eastern Europe to make a soft landing following the fall of the Communist bloc, largely because it encouraged totalitarian regimes there to open up and permit genuine democratization. The key to that strategy lay in engaging both the regimes and civil society organizations.

The commitments that the United States made during the Helsinki process -- which began in the 1970s and eventually led to the formation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe -- motivated the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries to sign on to progressive standards of human rights and internal governance. This in turn empowered civil society activists to challenge governments in those countries and hold them accountable to the standards that they had accepted. The United States used a similar strategy of encouraging civil society activists in Latin America.

In contrast, the strategy of relying on external opposition has an unbroken record of failure. With all due respect to the Cuban exiles in Miami, their work for change in Cuba has done very little to improve the political situation and the lives of ordinary Cubans. The exile strategy for regime change did not work in Iraq either; direct foreign intervention was required to meet that goal. Moreover, since the fall of Saddam Husayn's regime, the coalition's over-reliance on returning exiles has become one of several factors that have created a serious risk of strategic failure in Iraq. Regarding Iran, although Washington has not formally adopted a policy of regime change there, backing an external opposition movement would in any case decrease the chances for real democratic openness.

Similarly, the Syrian expatriate opposition movement is an inadequate base for changing the political environment in Syria itself. Moreover, the most plausible alternative to the current regime would not be a democracy, but rather an Islamic state run by the Muslim Brotherhood -- ironically, the same group that former president Hafiz al-Asad brutally suppressed twenty years ago. The United States must be willing to engage the current regime on its primary policy objectives: encouraging greater openness and ending Syrian ties to foreign terrorist organizations. An indefinite, open-ended approach to regime change will not attain these objectives. Instead, international support should be directed toward the very vigorous and courageous opposition cadres who are working for minority rights within Syria. In addition, restrictions should be lifted from the Bush administration's Middle East Partnership Initiative to allow money to flow to active nongovernmental organizations in Syria. For example, the microlending bank sponsored by President Bashar al-Asad's wife deserves foreign support.

There is a sense of clear disappointment and failed promise surrounding President Asad. Although he seems

genuinely interested in taking Syria in a different direction, he is constrained by local factors. In order to help overcome these constraints, Washington should engage him and the people around him. By passing the Syria Accountability Act, Congress gave the Bush administration more sticks, but carrots are also needed to bring about change.

FARID GHADRY

Every dictatorship has an Achilles heel; in Syria, it is the public itself. The fact that 5 percent of the Syrian population controls the rest of the country is both a mathematical anomaly and a political tragedy. The Reform Party of Syria has asked all Syrian opposition parties to join a democratic coalition and create a cohesive plan to return to Syria and peacefully bring about regime change. RPS is holding a conference with numerous Syrian groups, with two aims in mind: developing a democratic government for all Syrians (men and women alike) and pursuing peaceful means of change. Although this coalition has used an external podium to express its hopes for Syria, it is not an external force. RPS is entirely different from the Iraqi National Congress (INC) in that it seeks to encourage peaceful change from within Syrian society. It has also learned from the INC experience the importance of a broad-based leadership that cannot be accused of promoting the interests of any one person. The cynical view -- that Syrian democratic forces are simply trying to ride into power with Washington's help -- betrays a lack of faith in democracy as a goal cherished in Syria as elsewhere. People throughout Syria and the Arab world have repeatedly expressed their eagerness for democracy.

Unfortunately, the present-day Middle East is completely different from the Eastern Europe of the 1980s. For example, the communist regimes in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and other Soviet bloc countries did not incite Germans to commit suicide bombings. Asking authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to willingly move toward democracy is unrealistic. The ideology of the Ba'ath Party is focused on pan-Arabism and the promotion of a greater Syria, which are inherently aggressive aims.

The events of September 11, 2001, have caused a shift in U.S. foreign policy. Previously, a policy of sticks and carrots toward problem states like Syria seemed appropriate. Now, however, the situation looks different. The issue of security has become even more crucial, and the regimes that sponsor terrorists and breed suicide bombings have become a serious threat. If Syria were a democracy, it would not have sent fighters into Iraq, supported Hizballah in Lebanon, or worked with al-Qaeda, as numerous reports have alleged.

No one is denying the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood or the rise of Islamism in Syria. Yet, to deny the possibility of a third democratic alternative is to adopt the Ba'athist mindset. In recent meetings with Arab and Kurdish tribal leaders in Bulgaria, RPS found that democracy was a priority. Thousands of their tribesmen have been stripped of their Syrian nationality because of the Asad regime and its hostility towards minorities.

The United States is taking major steps to promote democracy in the Middle East, as the Iraq example shows. If Washington's rhetoric regarding democratization is to be taken more seriously, however, it will need to come from every level of the government, including politicians, career diplomats, and intelligence officers. The United States should also rescind the immunity it grants to authoritarian regimes and offer its support to grassroots democratic opposition movements like that in Syria. Working for a democratic Syria is the only way to achieve peace, security, and stability in the Middle East.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Joyce Karam.

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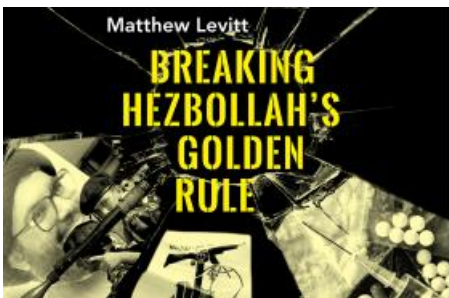
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