

# A Multifaceted Response to Syria's Brutality

by Radwan Ziadeh

## SUMMARY

Since coming to power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad has tried to present himself as a reformer by pushing for economic modernization while maintaining the most repressive aspects of his father's regime in the political realm.

Assad initially responded to protests with a combination of insincere reforms and brute force, but when these measures failed to placate protestors, the government escalated violence to an extreme degree that has cost Assad his legitimacy to rule.

Reports of defections by rank-and-file members suggest that the military could potentially play a decisive role in the Syrian uprising as it did in Tunisia and Egypt.

Although the U.S. has limited leverage unilaterally, there are nonetheless steps that can be taken in concert with the international community to ease Assad out of power.

These should include continuing to pressure Syria through the UN Human Rights Council, encouraging tough European sanctions and a trade embargo, and working with Turkey to facilitate a transition of power.

As nonviolent uprisings began to sweep across the Middle East, Syria initially appeared to have missed the democratic wave pulsating through the region. Although Syrians suffer from many of the same grievances that ail the rest of the Arab world, the pervasiveness and brutality of the country's security apparatus deterred people from rising up against their government. Once citizens overcame this barrier of fear, however, large-scale demonstrations erupted around the country, posing the greatest threat to Bashar al-Assad's regime since he came to power. The young leader, who earlier boasted of his immunity to this democratic contagion, responded with a combination of brute force and insincere reforms that recalled the failed tactics of now-deposed autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt. Just as in those countries, such measures have only hardened the resolve of protesters. In turn, the Syrian regime has escalated its crackdown to a degree rivaled only by the Libyan leadership. In doing so, Assad has lost the legitimacy to rule. Unfortunately, the United States has yet to take steps that are commensurate with the severity of the violence. The U.S. leverage with Syria may be limited, but there are nonetheless steps that Washington can take, in coordination with the international community, to help ease Assad out of power.

## THE FALLACY OF THE "YOUNG REFORMER"

When Bashar al-Assad came to power, he cultivated an image of himself as a young, reform-oriented leader that has persisted until today despite his consistent track record of brutal dictatorship. At his inaugural address in 2000, Assad emphasized the importance of openness and modernization, setting the tone for the first six months of his presidency. This initial period saw an unprecedented opening of political space as opposition leaders—many of whom had recently been released from prison—openly debated the country's problems and called for increased freedoms. However, when it became apparent that the opposition was ultimately too weak to support Assad against hard-line forces within the regime, he abruptly put an end to this so-called "Damascus Spring," choosing instead to perpetuate the Alawite dominated authoritarian structure he inherited from his father Hafez al-Assad.

At the June 2005 Baath Party congress, the president once again raised the prospect of reform by suggesting that the regime would reconsider the 1963 Emergency Law, pass a new political parties law, and transition from a socialist to a "social market" economy. Such rhetoric encouraged the fractured opposition to come together and draft the Damascus Declaration in October 2005, which openly excoriated the regime and called for the

*“What began as a protest about local grievances transformed into a national uprising in pursuit of dignity.”*

lifting of the emergency law, free elections, civil and political liberties, and a solution to the Kurdish problem. But once again, the regime abandoned political liberalization and brutally cracked down on the opposition.

In short, every attempt at political reform was reversed and met with a greater degree of repression. Instead, the Assad regime has pursued the “Chinese model” of reform in which economic modernization is supported while political liberalization is ignored or even undermined. During his first seven-year term, Assad oversaw the opening of private banks and universities, the establishment of a stock exchange, the liberalization of foreign currency laws and trade barriers, and the reduction of fuel subsidies. Yet these economic efforts have only benefited those close to the regime—particularly a small clique of family members—creating a culture of corruption and extreme inequality that has proven disastrous for other Arab leaders.

Given Assad’s relative youth and short period of rule in comparison with the aging autocrats of the region, many wrongly argued that the Syrian leader was immune to the protests sweeping the Arab world. Yet by maintaining the most repressive aspects of the previous regime, Assad is viewed by many Syrians as simply a continuation of his father. At the same time, Assad has removed many individuals who had been prominent during his father’s administration, significantly narrowing his base of support. This combination of brutal force and marginalization of regime supporters has left Assad in a tenuous position.

## **REVOLUTION IN WAITING**

While the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt inspired similar protest movements throughout the Middle East, Syria initially remained relatively quiet. The regime’s powerful security apparatus and strict intolerance for dissent were strong deterrents against organized, large-scale demonstrations. Although protests were held weekly in February, their small numbers made it easy for security forces to arrest or disperse the demonstrators.

But on March 18, when residents in the southern city of Deraa rose up en masse to decry police brutality, they broke through this barrier of fear. The use of violence against these protesters fueled popular anger in cities across Syria, and the next few weeks witnessed demonstrations from coastal Lattakia to Kurdish Qamishli in the north. What began as a protest about local grievances transformed into a national uprising in pursuit of dignity.

After more than a week of silence, President Assad addressed the nation in a highly anticipated speech. Rather than lifting the country’s emergency law as expected, Assad cast the protests as an outside plot to destabilize the country, hoping that the specter of external threats and sectarian warfare would unify the country as it has in the past. In resisting calls for reform, however, the president lost the support of many.

As the protesters have increased in number, their demands have altered: initial calls for reforms within the government have given way to demands

for regime change. In a conciliatory gesture, the regime announced it would grant citizenship to thousands of Kurdish inhabitants, but protests continue, even in predominantly Kurdish cities. The president also replaced his cabinet and repealed the emergency law. Yet none of the new cabinet members have a record of real reform, and the emergency law was immediately replaced with a requirement that protesters register before holding demonstrations. Moreover, existing Syrian legislation gives security forces immunity from prosecution for any crime committed in the line of duty—a de facto blank check for brutality.

It is obvious that the government has no sincere intention to reform, particularly as security forces continue to open fire on protesters. On April 25, the Syrian army entered Deraa, confirming the militarization of this conflict. Since then, security forces have made more than a thousand arrests across the country, raiding houses and arresting men under 40. Over 600 people have been killed in Syria since March 18, only emboldening more people to rise up. Demonstrations have grown in number daily and have recently expanded to major cities like Damascus and Aleppo. Assad has lost the trust of the majority of the Syrian people; the only real option now is his removal from power.

### THE ARMY'S CRITICAL ROLE

In Tunisia and Egypt, the role of the military was crucial in determining the fate of uprisings. In Syria, as well, the military is the only institution that has the capability to lead a democratic transition. The sight of tanks rolling into Deraa might lead one to assume that the army is entrenched within the regime. Indeed, the military's 4th division is led by Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher, an especially despised figure amongst the public. However, there have been increasing reports of rank-and-file soldiers refusing to shoot on protesters and ultimately defecting from the 5th division. Moreover, the Syrian people respect the army and distinguish between the brutality of the security forces, which perpetrated the 1982 Hama massacre, and the army, which is seen as securing the nation's unity.

As such, it is important to closely monitor the behavior of the army as developments unfold. In particular, current Minister of Defense General Ali Habib and Chief of Staff General Dawud Rajha could play a positive role in the days to come. As members of the Alawite and Christian communities—both minority groups that fear the repercussions of majority rule if Assad were to fall—their potential defections could inspire these communities to abandon the regime. Moreover, the two leaders are viewed as military men with no links to the security apparatus. This relative neutrality could enable them to negotiate a transition of power.

### STRAINED RELATIONS, LIMITED LEVERAGE

In the face of such flagrant human rights violations, what role—if any—can the United States play in Syria? Unlike in Egypt and Yemen, where the U.S. has harnessed its friendships to push for the ouster of increasingly

*“ Existing Syrian legislation gives security forces immunity from prosecution for any crime committed in the line of duty—a de facto blank check for brutality. ”*

*“ This view of Syria as a strategic linchpin in the region may explain why the U.S. has taken a more cautious approach in responding to the uprising there. ”*

illegitimate autocrats, Washington has limited leverage with Syria. For years the U.S.-Syria relationship has been riddled with tension. Syria's close alliance with Iran, rejection of Israel, support for Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups, and interference in Lebanon, have consistently put it at odds with the United States. The Bush administration pursued a policy of isolation and pressure in the hopes of changing Syria's behavior. However, harsh economic sanctions and the recall of the U.S. Ambassador had little impact.

By the time Barack Obama came to power, many policymakers had concluded that cautious engagement with Syria was crucial to achieving broader goals in the Middle East. Indeed, from Islamic extremism to stability in Lebanon to Iran's nuclear ambitions, Syria plays an important role in resolving the major problems in the region. In particular, the Obama administration believed that if they could advance talks between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights, Iran would grow increasingly isolated and there would also be progress on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This view of Syria as a strategic linchpin in the region may explain why the U.S. has taken a more cautious approach in responding to the uprising there. To be sure, the Obama administration has consistently deplored the Syrian government's brutal repression of demonstrations and called on President Assad to advance a meaningful reform agenda. The U.S. has also frozen the assets of three Syrian officials and Syria's intelligence service, although the impact of these sanctions is minimal given the limited economic relationship between the two countries. On the multilateral front, Washington pushed for the United Nations Human Rights Council to hold a special session on Syria where member states adopted a resolution calling for a mission to investigate human rights abuses in the country.

Nonetheless, the administration has seemed reluctant to take bold steps, particularly in comparison to its stance on Egypt and Libya. A week after protests erupted in Deraa, Hillary Clinton referred to Assad as a “reformer” and categorically ruled out a military intervention in Syria. And despite the fact that violence has escalated to levels unseen in the region outside of Libya, President Obama has yet to make a televised speech condemning the regime or calling on Bashar al-Assad to cede power.

Although Assad has continued to pursue policies that clash with American interests, the United States—as well as Israel—fears that the alternative could be significantly worse. However, Tunisia and Egypt have witnessed relatively peaceful transitions thus far, despite similar misconceptions about the strongmen in those countries. Syria's democratic future looks especially precarious because of the country's ethnic and religious diversity. With a demographic makeup roughly similar to that of Iraq, there are legitimate fears that the overthrow of Assad will lead to sectarian warfare. Yet if anything, this uprising has only unified the country in pursuit of basic rights and freedoms.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While the Obama administration is correct in acknowledging its limited leverage with Syria, the U.S. should use its position as a global leader to mobilize the international community much as it did in Libya. In particular, the United States, in concert with its allies, should:

- ***Have President Obama make a live, televised statement calling on Bashar al-Assad to step down immediately.*** Despite the escalation of violence, the United States has only issued written statements condemning the Syrian regime, and none have demanded that Assad step down. In contrast, Obama made three televised statements pushing for an immediate transition in Egypt and seven public remarks or speeches on Libya. Such bold, public rhetoric affects the will of the protesters, who are closely following the response of the international community and that of the U.S. in particular.
- ***Continue to pressure Syria at the United Nations Human Rights Council.*** The administration should be commended for playing a key role in the adoption of an UN HRC resolution condemning Syria. Now, the U.S. must follow up on the mission that investigates Syria's human rights violations and ensure that it completes its report. This report will enable the U.S. to work with other nations to refer Assad to the International Criminal Court. Currently, Russia and China oppose a strong UN Security Council resolution, but a damning report from the UN HRC may help convince them otherwise. The United States has announced that it will oppose Syria's candidacy for a seat on the HRC; it should also encourage a democratic Asian country to compete for the seat. If the seat is uncontested, Syria could gain membership by default. While the UN HRC has limited influence, these measures provide an alternative for sending an important message to protesters that they have the support of the international community.
- ***Encourage EU leaders to impose targeted sanctions on officials responsible for violence, including Bashar al-Assad, as well as a trade embargo and the suspension of aid.*** Such a move will send a strong message and encourage others to defect. Although the U.S. has already imposed targeted sanctions, their impact is negligible. In contrast, Europe is Syria's main trading partner and provides Syria with substantial loans each year. EU sanctions will cause significant damage to the already battered economy and ultimately persuade those on the fence to abandon the regime. There is already evidence that Assad's base of support is not as large as claimed. For example, Deraa has become the focal point of the uprisings despite the fact that it is home to the vice president, deputy minister of foreign affairs, and the head of the military intelligence branch. Also, protests have been taking place around Refai and Al-Hassan Mosque in Damascus, which are generally frequented by Sunni business elites—a segment of the population that is supposedly in support of Assad.

“ *Bold, public rhetoric affects the will of the protesters, who are closely following the response of the international community and that of the U.S. in particular.* ”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Radwan Ziadeh is the Director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies and a visiting scholar at George Washington University. His most recent book is *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations, and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).

## ABOUT POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

## ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF SERIES

POMED Policy Briefs are short analysis pieces for U.S. policymakers on issues of core relevance to democratic development in the Middle East and North Africa. The briefs feature leading American, European, and regional authors from academia, think tanks, practitioner organizations, and human rights groups. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Project on Middle East Democracy. To check out the latest in the series, please visit our web site at [www.pomed.org](http://www.pomed.org)

- ***Harness the role of the Ambassador to identify credible civil society activists and opposition leaders.*** After almost six years of a diplomatic boycott, the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus arrived in January. The administration should take advantage of his presence in the country to meet with reformers, which will belie Assad's argument that there is no viable alternative to his leadership.
- ***Work with Turkey to arrange for a transfer of power.*** In recent years, Turkey and Syria have grown increasingly close. Since protests broke out, the Turkish government has sent officials to Damascus twice to encourage the Syrian regime to reform with no result. While Turkey has a strong relationship with Assad, it is also deeply concerned with stability on its borders. Last week, nearly 250 Syrians escaped to Turkey seeking refuge. With no visa requirements between the two countries, a protracted government assault on civilians could lead to an influx of Syrian refugees into southeastern Turkey. The U.S. should outline the potential negative repercussions for Turkey if Assad remains in power, which may compel the Turkish government to push for a transition, particularly if it is able to play a lead role in brokering the accord.

## CONCLUSION

The alarming level of violence used to quell protests in Syria has rendered Bashar al-Assad unfit to rule. The United States has understood the importance of supporting democracy movements throughout the Middle East. Yet in Syria, cowed by the fear of instability, the Obama administration has not taken sufficiently bold steps to enable the uprising to succeed. While the U.S. has limited leverage unilaterally, it can have a positive impact if it works in coordination with the international community. The Syrian people are desperately looking for help from the outside world. The United States should stand by its commitment to support protesters across the region, and heed the demands of the Syrian people.