

# WebMemo



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## Preparing for a Post-Assad Syria

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On January 10, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad defiantly threatened to crush the popular uprising against his brutal dictatorship with an “iron fist.” Syria has been engulfed in intensifying political violence that has claimed the lives of more than 5,000 people, most of them nonviolent protesters demanding basic human rights. Nearly 10 months after “Arab Spring” protesters first flooded the streets of Syria, the regime’s systematic attacks against peaceful demonstrations have provoked an armed rebellion, which could soon morph into a sectarian civil war.

As Syria continues to boil, the best assistance that the United States can give to ease the suffering of Syrians is to help speed the fall of the Assad regime, which has adamantly rejected long-overdue political reforms or political compromise with the opposition. Washington should work with its European allies, Turkey, and willing Arab states to escalate sanctions on the Damascus regime, provide humanitarian relief to Syrian refugees, and provide diplomatic and economic support for the Syrian opposition. But Washington should hold back from a direct military intervention, which is likely to create more problems than it solves.

**Stopping Assad’s Killing Machine.** The Assad regime has killed more of its own people than any Middle Eastern government outside Iran and Libya, but it has failed to quell the growing rebellion against it. Syria’s “Arab Spring” will not be a

rerun of Libya’s experience. Assad enjoys more foreign support than the isolated Muammar Qadhafi did and can count on a Russian veto to block a U.N.-supported intervention. But Qadhafi had the benefit of a huge war chest skimmed from Libya’s enormous oil wealth. Assad’s regime has much fewer financial resources, which makes it more vulnerable to economic sanctions.

Syria’s disjointed opposition is even more disorganized than the fractious Libyan opposition. It has slowly cobbled together an ad hoc coalition of opposition groups drawing support from Syria’s complex mosaic of ethnic and religious minorities, but it has failed to gain recognition from other countries, except for Libya. The Syrian National Council, a loose umbrella group, nominally represents a diverse set of rival groups united only by their opposition to the regime. The Alawite-dominated regime charges that the opposition is infused with a radical Sunni Islamist agenda in order to stoke fears in the minority Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities about the prospects for religious persecution and mass reprisals.

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Turkey has given sanctuary and limited support to the Syrian opposition after turning against its former ally in Damascus. Ankara has also imposed an arms embargo on Syria and floated the idea of creating a buffer zone in Syrian territory to provide a safe haven for internally displaced refugees. Ankara has cultivated ties with the Syrian opposition and will play a pivotal role in Syria's future.

**U.S. Policy Lagging Behind.** The Obama Administration has been behind the curve in addressing the Syrian crisis. It entered office determined to engage the hostile Assad regime and initially soft-pedaled its criticism of the regime's violent crackdown. But the Administration's diplomatic engagement strategy disastrously failed, earning only the contempt of Syria's tyrannical regime, which ordered its thugs to attack the U.S. embassy in Damascus and threaten the U.S. ambassador, who was temporarily called back to Washington.<sup>1</sup>

The Administration imposed three rounds of incrementally escalating sanctions before President Obama finally called for Assad to step down in August. The Administration tilted toward the opposition but predicated its support on the opposition remaining nonviolent, despite intensifying attacks from Syria's army and four powerful internal security forces. This stance established a false equivalence between regime violence and protesters defending themselves.

Washington should not lecture Syrian opposition leaders, who have courageously taken great personal risks to overthrow Assad, on not defending themselves. There is little chance of genuine change in Syria unless opposition forces grow powerful enough to defeat the intimidation tactics of the regime and can encourage further defections to undermine it. The United States should not engage in wishful thinking about negotiating a political deal with a detested regime whose authority is based on coercion.

Beyond the humanitarian interest, the United States has a strong interest in reducing terrorist

threats to Americans and U.S. allies, containing Iran, and shoring up regional stability. The Assad regime has a long record of supporting a wide range of terrorist groups that is second only to Iran, its close ally. Tehran has propped up Assad by deploying Revolutionary Guards to advise and assist Syrian security forces. Assad's downfall would not only weaken Iran, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups but also eliminate a deadly threat to Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan.

To help expedite the fall of the regime, the United States should work with allies, especially Turkey, to tighten sanctions against Syria. The EU, which accounts for about 90 percent of Syrian oil exports, banned imports of Syrian oil in November. Escalating sanctions could exacerbate Syria's economic situation and peel away support for the regime by encouraging the defection of the urban Sunni merchant class, which has been an important pillar of Assad's support.

U.S. security cooperation with Israel is now even more important, because the Assad regime could lash out at Israel and provoke a regional conflict in a desperate attempt to defuse Syria's internal crisis. Growing sectarian tensions could also spill over into Lebanon and Iraq, which is one more reason that U.S. troops should have been stationed in Iraq longer. Washington should encourage the Baghdad government to establish ties with the Syrian opposition and end its diplomatic support for the Assad regime within Arab League debates.

Washington should also explore whether elements within the opposition coalition could be reliable partners committed to building a free Syria rather than just substituting one dictatorship for another, in the case of Islamist extremists. If so, the United States should greatly expand its economic, diplomatic, and political support for the opposition coalition or various components within it. Washington should also encourage the opposition to seek greater unity and rally around an inclusive non-sectarian political agenda, which could expand

1. See James Phillips, "Time for the Obama Administration to Support Freedom in Syria," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3219, April 8, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/04/time-for-the-obama-administration-to-support-freedom-in-syria>.

its support among non-Sunni minority groups and promote further defections from the regime.

A U.N.-sponsored humanitarian intervention is unlikely. Russia has strongly supported Assad, its most important Arab ally, and yesterday made clear that it would use its Security Council veto to block U.N. support for a military intervention. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe has proposed deploying military forces to create a “humanitarian corridor” for moving food, medicine, and aid into Syria. Under the current circumstances, it is not in the vital national interests of the U.S. to employ military forces to engage in this effort. On the other hand, the U.S. should be supportive of humanitarian efforts undertaken by individual nations.

**The Coming Collapse.** The Obama Administration should focus on expediting the fall of the Assad

regime through non-military means, not on restraining the opposition from defending itself against a predatory regime. Syria’s faltering economy, weakened further through multilateral sanctions, will increasingly erode the Assad regime’s narrow base of support and undermine its ability to finance the repression of its own people. Eventually the regime will implode if the opposition coalition can reassure nervous Alawite, Christian, and Druze minorities and the Sunni mercantile elites that they would be better off under an inclusive representative government than under the current regime.

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