

Ridding Syria of a despot

Contributed by Elliott Abrams
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While the monarchies of the Middle East have a fighting chance to reform and survive, the region's fake republics have been falling like dominoes — and Syria is next.

The ingredients that brought down Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia were replicated in Egypt and Libya: repression, vast corruption and family rule. All are starkly present in Syria, where the succession Egyptians and Tunisians feared, father to son, took place years ago and the police state has claimed thousands of victims. Every Arab "republic" has been a republic of fear, but only Saddam Hussein's Iraq surpassed the Assads' Syria in number of victims. The regime may cling to power for a while by shooting protesting citizens, but its ultimate demise is certain.

The Arab monarchies, especially Jordan and Morocco, are more legitimate than the false republics, with their stolen elections, regime-dominated courts and rubber-stamp parliaments. Unlike the "republics," the monarchies do not have histories of bloody repression and jails filled with political prisoners. The question is whether the kings, emirs and sheiks will end their corruption and shift toward genuine constitutional monarchies in which power is shared between throne and people.

For the "republics," however, reform is impossible. Force is the only way to stay in power. When Bashar al-Assad inherited power in 2000, there was widespread hope of a Damascus Spring — an end to the bloody repression that characterized the rule of his father, Hafez (which reached its apex in 1982, when he had an estimated 25,000 protesters in Hama killed). Bashar, the thinking went, had lived in London and wanted to modernize Syria. But when he had himself "elected" president with 97.2 percent of the vote, the writing was on the wall. Some still suggested that Bashar's hoped-for reforms were held back by hard-line forces around him, but over time, his consolidation of personal power, the growing number of Syrian political prisoners and murders in Lebanon made this excuse obscene. The U.N. special tribunal may find the Assad regime, Hezbollah or both guilty of the 2005 murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. The car-bomb killings of Lebanese journalists and politicians who criticized the Syrian regime have one address: Assad's palace.

The demise of this murderous clan is in America's interest. The Assad regime made Syria the pathway for jihadists from around the world to enter Iraq to fight and kill Americans. Long a haven for terrorists, Syria still allows the Hamas leadership, among other Palestinian terrorist groups, to live and work in Damascus. Moreover, a government dominated by Syria's Sunni majority — the Assad clan is from the tiny Alawite minority — would never have the close relations with Hezbollah and Iran that Assad maintains; it would seek to reintegrate into the Arab world. Iran will lose its close Arab ally, and its land bridge to Hezbollah, when Assad falls.

Since the wave of Mideast revolts has spread to Syria, Assad is responding the only way he knows: by killing. What should be our response?

First, the strongest and most frequent denunciations, preferably not only from the White House but also from people such as Sen. John Kerry, who has repeatedly visited Assad and spoken of improving relations with his regime. All those who were taken in by Assad should be loudest in denouncing his bloody repression.

Second, we should prosecute Syria in every available multilateral forum, including the U.N. Security Council and the Human Rights Council. Others should refer Assad to the International Criminal Court. With blood flowing, there should be no delays; this is the moment to call for special sessions and action to prevent more killing. Even if these bodies do not act, the attention should give heart to Syrian demonstrators.

Third, we should ask the new governments in Egypt and Tunisia to immediately call Arab League sessions to debate the violence in Syria. Libya was expelled; let's demand that Syria be, too.

Fourth, press the Europeans to speak and act against Syria's regime. U.S. sanctions against Syria are strong and probably cannot be increased effectively now, but the European Union has far more trade and investment. The French have spoken out and may be willing to take the lead again.

None of these steps will bring down Assad's regime; only the courage of young Syrians can do that. But we must not repeat the wavering and delays that characterized the U.S. response in Egypt. We must be clear that we view Syria's despicable regime as unsalvageable, which suggests a fifth step: recalling the American ambassador from

Syria. The Obama administration erred badly by sending an envoy — in a recess appointment — for this move was understood in the region as a reduction of U.S. pressure on Syria despite its increasingly dominant role in Lebanon. We should pull our ambassador, as we did in Libya, and unveil a hard-hitting political and human rights campaign against a bloody regime whose people want it gone. Our principles alone should lead us to this position, but the memory of thousands of American soldiers killed in Iraq with the help of the Assad regime demands that we do all we can to help the Syrian people free themselves of that evil dictatorship.

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