

How Will Assad Fall?

Contributed by Elliott Abrams
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It is easy to say that with Qaddafi gone, the next vicious regime to fall is that of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished, but realists and pessimists have rightly asked "how exactly does that happen?"

That's a fair question, because the Assad regime has yet to crack and none of the previous models—Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—can work the same way in Syria. In my view, there are two possibilities that head the list.

One possibility is that the army will split, largely on sectarian lines. The New York Times reports today as follows:

There were reports that dozens of soldiers, possibly encouraged by the rout in Libya of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, had deserted their positions in a village near Homs, the country's third-largest city, and also on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus, to join the five-month-old popular uprising against Mr. Assad and his Baath Party. Activists said that since the uprising started in mid-March, most such desertions have taken place in the eastern tribal area of Deir al-Zour, bordering Iraq; in the northwestern province of Idlib; and in towns around Homs and Damascus. The Free Officers of Syria, a group of soldiers and officers who left the army last month in protest of the crackdown and say that they now represent defectors, published an online statement saying that "large" defections were reported in Harasta, another suburb of Damascus and that armed troops loyal to the government were chasing those defectors.

There have been numerous other reports about defections in the Army (from Reuters, for example) but it is difficult to assess whether they have yet reached a significant size. If the demonstrations grow, I assume the numbers of defectors will grow as Sunni troops refuse to shoot peaceful and unarmed Sunni demonstrators.

But there is another possibility, that the Alawite "Establishment," civilian and military, will remove Bashar from power in a kind of "palace coup." This would only happen, I believe, if the economic and financial sanctions grow stronger and stronger and demonstrations continue. Removing Bashar might then appear to the Alawite generals and "business leaders" (i.e., Assad cronies) as the only way to settle things down and end the rebellion. They could call for some sort of government of national salvation, schedule elections, denounce Bashar, and send a new foreign minister to negotiate an end to the sanctions.

I doubt the demonstrators would accept such a cosmetic change, and we should reject it as well. It would mean the regime is beginning to collapse, and it would be very much in the interest of the United States for it to collapse entirely. We should not rescue it, nor any remnant of it.

There are other possibilities: perhaps the Sunni and Christian business community will turn against Assad if sanctions are tough enough, and will help bring him down. Perhaps over time hundreds of thousands will flee to Turkey, giving the Turks the incentive they need to bring Bashar down. All these possibilities make it clear that the pressure should be increased: more sanctions, more isolation, more denunciations of regime violence. Meanwhile we should be reaching out privately to the business community, Sunni, Christian, and Alawi, and to the generals to say it is time to switch sides and prepare for the post-Assad future. Change in Syria never had a chance of being a "velvet revolution" because of the brutality of the Assad clan, but anything the United States, the EU, and Arab allies can do to shorten the period of violence and bring change faster will be a great favor to the people of Syria. Elliott Abrams - Elliott Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Formerly deputy national security adviser on Middle East affairs in the George W. Bush administration, Abrams was also an assistant secretary of state for UN affairs, human rights, and Latin America in the Reagan administration. Abrams blogs at Pressure Points.