

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

*Center for Preventive Action*

## *POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 9*

*Date:* October 24, 2011  
*From:* Elliott Abrams  
*Re:* American Options in Syria

With each month, the level of violence in Syria rises. Bashar al-Assad's regime has killed just short of three thousand citizens, and with defections from the army growing, it appears the population is starting to fight back. A full-scale civil war, with the Alawite minority regime fighting for its life against an armed rebellion by forces based in the Sunni majority population, seems increasingly plausible.

The goals of U.S. policy should be to end the violence, bring down the Assad regime, and lay the bases for a stable democratic system with protection for the Alawite, Kurdish, and Christian minorities. It is a tall order. The Obama administration has already abandoned the goal of regime reform, and rightly so: there is no basis in Assad regime behavior for sustaining a belief that he could lead a transition to democracy. Instead, the American, European, and Turkish goal is the end of Assad family rule. But how can U.S. policymakers attain that goal in as short a period and with as little additional violence as possible?

The answer is a strategy aimed at both weakening the regime's support bases and encouraging the opposition to demonstrate that it seeks a nonsectarian and democratic Syria.

### *ISOLATING THE ASSADS*

The regime's support rests in the Alawite community, the Alawite-led security forces, and the business community (Sunni as well as Alawite). Syria's population is 74 percent Sunni Muslim, while the Assad regime is Alawite—an offshoot of Shiite Islam often considered heretical by orthodox Sunnis—that comprises only 10 percent or 15 percent of Syrians. The best-armed and best-trained divisions of the Syrian army are Alawite.

The United States' first goal should be to isolate the Assad family and its closest cronies from the rest of the Alawite community, which largely has not shared in the riches Assad has dispensed to close supporters. While all Alawites fear

vengeance against their entire community should Assad fall, there are varying degrees of loyalty to the Assads. The United States should continue to press the many groups now opposing the regime to present a united face. They have begun to do so, forming a 140-member Syrian National Council in early October 2011. And the council must clarify the kind of Syria it wishes to build, both by repeatedly affirming its commitment to equal treatment of all Syrians without regard to sect or religious belief and by including Alawites and other non-Sunnis prominently in its ranks. The council should be loud and passionate in its denunciation of any violence against Alawite citizens or communities, which is likely to grow if gun battles between the regime and the opposition increase. The council should pledge that post-Assad Syria will protect all minorities—the Alawites, the Kurds, and the very nervous Christian communities. They should agree now to an international role in providing these protections and guarantees. The more detailed these pledges are, and the more publicity and international support they get, the more good they will do inside Syria.

As for the military and police, Western and Turkish officials should pressure the Alawite generals in the Syrian army to separate themselves from the regime. They should argue that the generals can salvage their community's post-Assad future as well as their own by refusing now to kill their fellow citizens. The U.S. military has no ties to these men, but it can be assumed that the Turks, Jordanians, and perhaps the French have useful channels for carrying such messages. "Why sacrifice yourself for the Assad mafia that is doomed anyway?" is what they should be emphasizing, along with, "Be a survivor." Here statements from the Syrian National Council can also help. The council should make clear that there will be no wholesale purges of Alawite officers, but there will be punishment in Syria and via the International Criminal Court (ICC) of officers involved in killing peaceful demonstrators.

#### *TURNING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY*

A second step should be to turn the business community against the regime. To date, the business leadership—Sunni, Christian, and Alawite—is on the fence. The United States and its partners must lead them to view the Assads as an irredeemable liability whose continuation in power will only bring more of the economic pain Syria is already experiencing. Already this year, foreign direct investment and tourism are both down by more than half, and exports by two-thirds. If Assad stays in power, they must come to understand, this will only get worse. The United States is "sanctioned out" when it comes to Syria; there is almost no trade or investment. It is critical that the European Union (EU) cut off the Syrian economy, and indeed this is beginning to happen. Europe bought 95 percent of Syria's oil exports, thereby providing the regime with about one-third of its overall hard currency earnings, but the EU has now banned the importation of Syrian oil and any new investments in Syria's oil industry. The closer and faster the EU moves toward a total ban on trade with Syria the better, as both the signal and actual damage to Syria's economic elites will be greater.

This would be economic warfare against the regime, and the more allies are involved in that war, the more effective it will be. Turkey has announced that it will impose its own sanctions, and if those are heavy, the political, psychological, and economic effects will be considerable. Clearly then the United States and EU should press the Turks to undertake sanctions that are far more than symbolic. They should also press the Gulf oil producers to stop all further investment in Syria. The wider U.S. financial sanctions are, the larger the justification for the Gulf states to tell their banks to avoid Damascus.

#### *DEALING WITH VIOLENCE*

The United States will need to adopt a policy going forward on three more difficult issues. The first is what to do if a serious military struggle—a civil war—begins. Estimates vary as to how many men have defected from the Syrian army and whether they have any real capacity to fight the official forces. The United States should encourage defections but should not encourage violence in any form. Yet if a military opposition comes into existence and fights the regime, U.S.

policymakers will not want to see that opposition crushed. Thus, the United States should not discourage other governments from assisting the rebels if they wish to do so. Nor should it try to stop other groups—for example, Sunni tribes living on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border areas—from assisting brethren inside Syria. If violence and refugee flows escalate greatly, the United States will need to discuss no-fly zones or safe havens along Syria's borders with Syria's neighbors and its NATO allies.

### *THE FUTURE OF ASSAD*

A second issue is the future of the Assad family itself. It should not be assumed that Assad will fight to the finish. Were he to conclude at some point that his continued rule is untenable or at least in real doubt, he might well seek a safe haven for his family. This would be hard to guarantee due to the existence of the ICC, but it is worth pursuing. If some nation offers Assad a haven, the United States should not attempt to stand in the way, and indeed should encourage him to take it. Many other cases have demonstrated that justice may be long delayed or never achieved; nevertheless, the Syrian people could advance toward their own goals in the meantime.

A third issue is whether the United States and its allies should pursue or agree to an Alawite regime without Bashar al-Assad at its top. A palace coup could present the United States with this alternative to the current situation, but it should not be an American goal. The Assad regime has lost the consent of the governed, and it is difficult to see how a replacement Alawite regime would be able to regain this consent. It would be led by too many officials deeply complicit in the abuses of the old regime, and would by definition remain a minority ruling a majority Sunni country. As such a regime could not win a free election, it would have to rule by force—especially with the Sunni populace now clamoring for more rights and already engaged in fighting for them. That would mean continued turmoil and violence in Syria. An Alawite replacement regime that removed the Assad clan from power and was clearly only a transitional step to democracy could be useful in ending the violence and providing a way forward, but only if it is clearly limited in time and ambitions. Those in charge would need to demonstrate their good faith—and their short timetable—to the populace and to the international alliance now sanctioning and criticizing Syria, but this would not be impossible. An end to government violence, timetables for elections, and the inclusion of opposition leaders in a transitional government would show positive intent.

### *AN AMERICAN GAIN*

The end of the Assad regime would be a great gain for the United States. The regime is a bloody dictatorship that is host to Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups, Iran's only Arab ally, the route through which Iran arms Hezbollah, and a permanent threat to Lebanon's sovereignty and internal peace. Moreover, by doing its best to assist jihadis seeking to fight Americans in Iraq, it was complicit in the deaths of many Americans soldiers and the wounding of far more. As the regime fights its own populace and clings to power, effective sanctions and vigorous diplomacy can help shorten its life and lay the foundations for a determined effort to build a democratic state in its place.

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