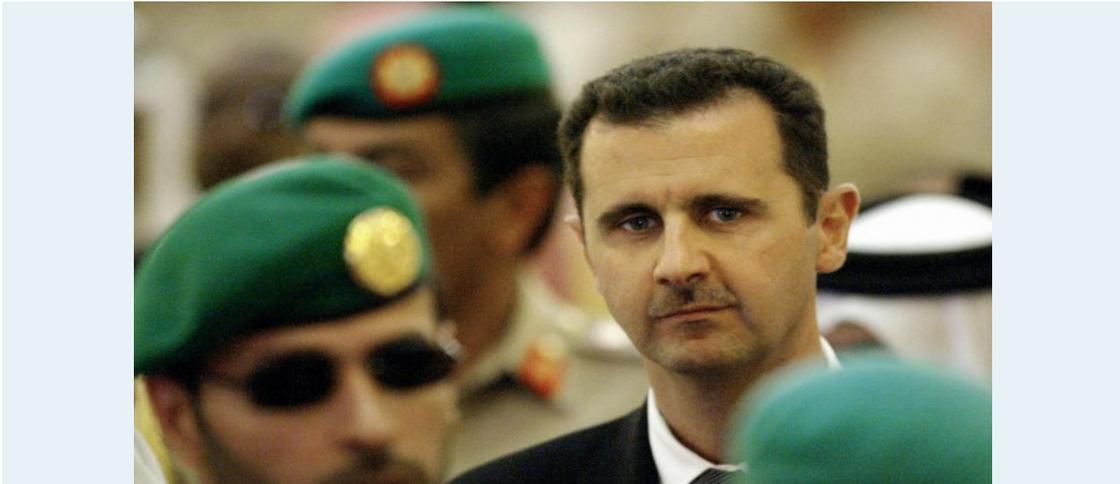


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Assad's Departure No Guarantee of Change for Syria, Say Experts

By Aron Lamm

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File photo Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from August 2005. (Hassan Ammar/AFP/Getty Images)

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has pressure coming at him from all sides to stop spilling the blood of protesters and step down. Yet for eight months he has stubbornly clung to power and Syria remains in a deadlock.

On Tuesday—amid reports that 16 more people, including four children, died at the hands of the regime—the United Nations again condemned the regime, in a resolution passed by the General Assembly's Human Rights Committee. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan also reiterated his appeal to al-Assad to step down “for the welfare of your own people and the region.” The White House had repeatedly told Assad his time has passed and the Arab League's attempts to broker a solution have fallen flat.

Syrian U.N. Ambassador Bashar Jafaari called Tuesday's resolution part of a U.S.-led plot to topple the Assad government.

While the focus is squarely on al-Assad, one question being considered is how much of a difference his resignation would really make. Does he still in fact rule Syria?

“Just because you are on the throne does not mean you are actually in power,” Nikolaos van Dam, Dutch scholar, author of several books on Syria, and former ambassador to Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, among other places, told The Epoch Times.

“It is similar to the situation under his father [Hafez al-Assad]. [In charge] is a group of officers and security personnel who have very close ties and the same background,” he said.

Bashar al-Assad came to power as the anointed successor to his father, but his background in the West and manners misled many people into believing that he was more liberal than he turned out to be, or that he had more space to make changes than he did, van Dam says.

“The officers needed him and he needed them. But he did not earn his seat like his father, by winning it in a struggle. So it is a different situation.”

Nevertheless, says van Dam, as president, if he disagreed, he could have stepped down. “It would be rather strange to be president and not be responsible for your own deeds.”

Bruce Jentleson, professor of Public Policy and Political Science, and former senior adviser to the State Department, is of a similar opinion. “Power in Syria is more opaque than it was in Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya. While more than a figurehead, Bashar al-Assad doesn’t sit as much at the apex of power as Mubarak, Ben Ali, or Gadhafi did,” he said. “Syria could be left with Assadism without Assad.”

Thus, removing al-Assad from power may not automatically open up the process of change, he argues.

It may also prove desperately hard to do for anyone outside of the strong and well-armed Alawite minority elite that rule Syria, according to van Dam. He sees three possible main scenarios for transition in Syria.

One is a coup from within, by someone reform-minded who is far enough removed from power not to fear going down with al-Assad, but still close enough to have the muscle to do it.

Only people with power and arms could perform a successful coup in Syria. But it’s easier said than done.

— *Nikolaos van Dam, Syria scholar*

“Only people with power and arms could perform a successful coup in Syria. But it’s easier said than done. If you start contemplating it and taking people into confidence, you may be executed the next day,” he said.

The second scenario is that al-Assad agrees to step down and leaves the country, which would require guarantees that he will not be prosecuted.

The third is civil war, and this is by far the worst scenario, says van Dam. “The outcome is unknown, and it will be damaging for society for generations to come. You will have only losers in the end. Nobody wants this, especially not the mostly peaceful demonstrators,” he said.

A civil war also runs a high risk of destabilizing the entire region, according to observers. Lebanon in particular is often mentioned, but also Iraq and even Turkey may get drawn into it, van Dam said.

Another group that has been mentioned as influential is what Jentleson calls al-Assad’s “business cronies;” businessmen, many of them members of the al-Assad family, who have made a lot of money by colluding with the government. Despite their economic power, they may not have much political influence, however, according to van Dam. And it’s hard to know which way they would swing if the regime showed signs of going down.

“They want to be safe. They cooperated with the regime out of self-interest. The regime has many supporters, but how many of them support it out of conviction? The businessmen are probably afraid of the alternatives. What if a Sunni regime that discriminates against Alawites would come to power?” asks van Dam.

Regardless of what happens within the regime, van Dam thinks that the rest of the world has locked itself in a dangerous position by simply declaring the Assad regime illegitimate and proposing sanctions, for lack of other means of exerting pressure.

“The EU has not even tried to negotiate with al-Assad. Having only sanctions cuts off your ability to influence. Sanctions killed 300,000 people in Iraq, and it didn’t help. Imagine that the regime stays in power for several years, then what? It is better to be pragmatic and avoid bloodshed,” he says.

In his view, the Arab League is probably the best chance for a peaceful resolution at this point. Although they have not been successful so far, he thinks they have a greater chance at convincing their Arab brothers than the West does.

Overall, the situation doesn’t look good for Syria. “It is hard to be optimistic,” said the former ambassador.