



## **Policy Forum Report on Syria**

*September 26, 2011*

### **Background**

On September 26, 2011, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key young leaders from the Washington policymaking community and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss developments in Syria. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

### **Current Situation and Challenges**

The Syrian regime continues to torture and kill civilians, including extra-judicial executions of prisoners. While the uprising continues to grow, and more people are secretly donating funds to the resistance, the majority of the Syrian elites appear to be refraining from action, with the intent of joining whichever side wins. Motivating factors need to be found for them to fully realize what is happening and support the uprising. There have been some military defections to the resistance, though most other protestors have remained nonviolent. Some Syrians have begun to advocate for international assistance and protection of civilians in the face of the humanitarian crisis, but others fear international interference. The situation has exacerbated economic hardships, with unemployment estimated to be between 15-30%, tourism—a sector which was growing and generated more than 6 percent of Syria's gross domestic product in 2000—has become nearly non-existent, and revenue from oil is declining. In contrast to Libya, the Syrian opposition is less unified, and it is less clear what would replace the current regime if it falls. Coupled with armed military defectors beginning to join the revolution, this opens the possibility of a post-revolution civil war.

### **Role of Sectarianism**

Religious and ethnic divisions have not played a large role in the uprising to date—for example, resistance groups such as the Damascus Declaration have included both Muslims and Christians, and both Arabs and Kurds. Encouragingly, the Muslim Brotherhood, considered by many to be the most radical party in the country, has started a political program to create a secular country that respects diversity within Syria. Syria does not have a history of radical sectarianism—however, neither did Iraq. While Syrian Muslim-Christian relations have historically been peaceful, some Christians are concerned about their future prospects if the regime falls, as are Shias and Alawites (the currently-ruling sect). Preventing religious or ethnic discrimination should be a priority for any post-Assad regime.

### **International Community**

International condemnation of the Syrian government is growing, even from traditional allies such as Iranian President Ahmadinejad. However, action by the international community has been tempered by factors such as Syria's critical geopolitical position which heightens fears of instability; its absence of internationally-attractive resources (unlike Libya and Iraq); the "late" blooming of Syria's uprising after considerable international attention and resources had already been directed to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya; and no international consensus on what to do.

Two key questions in this situation are (1) how to pressure the Syrian leadership without harming civilians and (2) how to secure international support, especially from the Arab League. Some discussants advocated the establishment of a no-fly zone as well as a buffer zone, believing such would lead to a swift fall of the regime. Others pointed out the weakness of that same reasoning as it related to Libya. Moreover, international support from countries such as Russia and China and organizations such as the Arab League would be needed for such a move to have any chance of succeeding. In addition, it was noted that Syrians need to assume complete responsibility for bringing down the Assad regime in order to ensure post-revolution sovereignty. Other discussants preferred

non-military options such as setting up international committees of investigation and finding ways to bring free media into the country—options that would be less dependent on achieving a broad international consensus.

On Oct. 4, Russia and China vetoed the European-drafted UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria. This reflects the lack of consensus at the UN Security Council, which will make any international action difficult. Because Syria isn't one of the 117 states to have ratified the Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction, unless there is a UN Security Council Resolution. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League have not taken decisive action with regard to Syria.

Turkey may be able to play a constructive role in any international effort to address the situation, given its status as a liberal secular/Muslim nation. The Turkish Prime Minister condemned the Syrian crackdown, visited a Syrian refugee camp and is applying pressure for a weapons embargo. However, Turkey has also announced that it will only participate in a military intervention if it has the support of the Arab League and the Syrian people.

### **US Role**

The United States has condemned the actions of the Syrian government, and President Obama has called for President Assad's resignation. US diplomats in Syria have also met with Syrian opposition figures, drawing condemnation from the Syrian government. Syrian revolutionaries want at least moral support from the U.S. for the uprising. Despite a general suspicion of the United States in the region, "likes" and comments on the US Embassy website and Facebook page have increased, with even normally critical voices wanting to engage Americans in discussion.

Sanctions have long been used by the United States as a tool to pressure the Syrian government—for example, US purchases of Syrian oil have been prohibited since 2001. A recent new US sanctions bill (S. 1472: Syria Sanctions Act of 2011), if implemented, would also impose sanctions on oil companies selling oil to Syria. However, it seems that many in Congress would prefer that any action relating to Syria be led by the Obama administration rather than Congressional legislation. Challenges posed by sanctions include the risk of adversely impacting Syrian civilians and of the sanctions being rendered ineffective if not accompanied by a broad international consensus. With regard to the first challenge, some have argued that the Syrian people have not benefitted much from Syrian oil revenue to date, and thus would be relatively unaffected by additional oil sanctions. The second challenge has proved to be more difficult. While Canada and the EU have agreed to cooperate with sanctions, China and Russia have not. There is evidence that existing sanctions are having some effect, however, with the Syrian government experiencing financial difficulties and countries whose trade with Syria is being hurt joining the call for change. However, more needs to be done.

Because the United States does not have the same leverage in Syria as it does in Egypt and Yemen (and has even less throughout the region after opposing the bid for Palestinian statehood at the UN), it is particularly important that America seeks the cooperation of other key players in the international community—namely the Arab League, the OIC, Turkey, China, and Russia—in pressuring the Assad regime to accept meaningful change that will benefit its citizens.

\*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that addresses identity-based conflicts which escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government in advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.