



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 17, 2012

## With Increasing Conflict in Syria, Talk of “Intervention” Escalates

For nearly a year Syria, which borders Iraq, has been besieged by the same type of uprising that led to the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in nearby Egypt. But while the protests in Syria began on the same day as those in Egypt, with protesters demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad and a major government overhaul, thus far Assad has been able to hold on to power with the violent assistance of his military.



As reported by [Reuters News](#), over the last month hundreds of Syrian citizens have been reported killed as government forces try desperately to crush both peaceful protests and armed resistance to Assad’s rule. In the past week, according to Reuters, “gunfire by pro-Assad militiamen killed five people, including a woman, and wounded nine in the restive city of Homs, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. A sniper later shot dead a 16-year-old girl there.”

Apparently, not even government soldiers are solidly behind Assad. So far at least a score of soldiers have defected over to the opposition, and British civil rights monitors reported that five other soldiers were killed as they attempted to change sides during a clash with Assad opponents in the northwestern province of Idlib.

And on January 16 [USA Today](#) reported that a member of Syria’s own parliament, Imad Ghalioun, had jumped ship and joined the opposition to Assad’s rule. Ghalioun, who represents city of Homs, which has seen some of the worst violence during the uprising, said the residents of his city “are under siege and the city is disaster-stricken. There is no electricity, piles of garbage fill the streets.... The sounds of shelling all night terrify children.” He said the Syrian people “are living their worst period.”

Thus far, a plan by the Arab League to put an end to the violence has failed to slow the spread of civil unrest. The Arab plan supposedly called for Assad’s forces to withdraw the military from cities, and for the government to begin dialoguing with leaders of the opposition.

Since the start of the uprising, government forces have killed more than 5,000 people, the United Nations estimated, and Syrian officials said that some 2,000 of their soldiers have also died. On January 15 alone, 32 civilians were reported killed in the conflict.

As noted by the [New York Times](#), discussion concerning Syria’s plight centers not so much on the



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possible collapse of Assad's government as it does on the likelihood of a full-blown civil war, which some within the country say "has already begun, with the government losing control over some regions and its authority ebbing in the suburbs of the capital and parts of major cities like Homs and Hama." According to the *Times*, even Damascus, which has remained mostly peaceful over the past months, "has been carved up with checkpoints and its residents have been frightened by the sounds of gunfire." As one Western observer visiting the area told the *Times*, "There's absolutely no sign of light. If anything, it's darker than ever. And I don't know where it's going to end. I can't tell you. I don't think anyone can."

While in a recent speech Assad declared confidently that "we will defeat this conspiracy without any doubt," one member of the opposition warned that each day Syrian factions "are closer to fighting each other." He added that Assad "has divided Syrians into two groups — one with him, one against him — and the coming days will bring more blood into the streets."

With most eyes on Iran at the moment, and the tracks of U.S. military forces leaving Iraq still fresh, as of yet there have been no aggressive discussions about Western (read: U.S.) military intervention into this latest Middle East nation on the verge of toppling. The United States, the European Union, and the Arab League have all announced economic sanctions against Syria, but talk of UN "peace efforts" via military intervention has been met with resistance, most notably by China and Russia, which have their own agenda in the region. [VOA News](#) noted that Russia is a particularly high-profile ally of Assad, and Russian officials have insisted that any action taken by the UN Security Council should not target just Assad's government, but also the opposition movement.

Nonetheless, UN rhetoric concerning Syria has been more pronounced of late, with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon using a speech on "democracy" in the Arab world to call on Assad to "stop the violence. Stop killing your people. The path of repression is a dead end." Ban declared that the "old order" of family dynasties and one-man rule was a thing of the past in the Middle East, meaning that, in his mind, the future of the region would most likely include a lot more international "peacekeeping" efforts.

During a stop-off in Abu Dhabi, Ban had words for the UN Security Council, saying that he hoped it could handle Syria "in a coherent manner and with a sense of gravity." He added that the "casualties have reached such an unacceptable stage we cannot let the situation continue this way."

Meanwhile, U.S. foreign policy analysts were adding their own ideas on how the next phase of America's involvement in the region might look, with the Council on Foreign Relations' resident Middle East "expert," Steven Cook, offering his pitch for U.S. involvement in Syria. Writing in [The Atlantic](#), Cook began by discounting the similarities of a Syrian invasion to U.S. "intervention" in Iraq. "Unlike Saddam at the time of the invasion, Assad is engaged in the mass killing of his own people," he wrote, and "unlike Operation Iraqi Freedom, there is a chance that the Arab League would support a humanitarian intervention in Syria, and any military operations could be undertaken multilaterally."

Suggesting that action against Assad could be taken without UN sanction (ignoring congressional authorization completely), Cook warned: "If there is no intervention and political will to stop Assad's crimes remains absent, the world will once again have to answer for standing on the sidelines of a mass murder."

Connecting Syria's plight to action in Iran, Cook pointed out the possibility that "bringing down Assad would advance the long-standing American goal of isolating Iran," adding that a "post-Assad



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government in Damascus would not likely look to Iran for support, but instead to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. That would be a net benefit for Washington and others looking to limit Iran's influence in the Arab world."

By contrast, over at [Foreign Policy](#) magazine, another Middle East wonk, Mark Lynch, argued against military intervention in Syria, not because it would be morally wrong or unconstitutional, but because of the possibility of failure. "Risky, costly foreign policy decisions can not simply be taken to express moral outrage," wrote Lynch. "They need to have a serious chance of success."

Lynch warned that military intervention in Syria "has little prospect of success, a high risk of disastrous failure, and a near-certainty of escalation which should make the experience of Iraq weigh extremely heavily on anyone contemplating such an intervention. There is no magic number of deaths at which the U.S. must embark on a self-defeating and foolish adventure."



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