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The Syrian Regime: Protests at Home and Criticism from Abroad

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As the month of Ramadan begins, the internal crisis in Syria is intensifying. Reports of the mass murder of civilians and allegations of crimes against humanity by Bashar al-Asad's regime are multiplying. The number of participants in Friday protest rallies seems to have crossed the one million mark and reflects a central trend: the strengthening of the protest movement and the worsening of the crisis in Syria. It may well be that during Ramadan, Islam's month of fasting, a critical mass of protesters will form, meaning that Asad's regime may not only face a serious threat from the blood-soaked turmoil, but that perhaps as a result of the chain reaction his days are numbered.

The protests that began in March 2011 in the town of Daraa involved no more than a few thousand people. Afterward, the protests spread to other Syrian cities and the number of participants rose steadily, from thousands to tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands to one million or more. The steady rise in the number of protesters and their growing motivation and courage in bringing down the regime are part of an ongoing process of creating a critical mass of protesters.

The protests encompass a wide range of Syrian population groups, including minorities that have only recently begun to participate actively in the protests, such as Kurds and Christians, and Syrian majority groups of Sunni Muslims. Consequently, there is growing pressure on the Alawis, the power base supporting the regime, to turn their back on the Asad family and join in the demonstrations. According to various Western estimates, it is only a matter of time before the Alawis cross over to the protesters' side. Should that in fact occur, not only may they be able to prevent revenge attacks on the community when the day comes for having formerly collaborated with the Asad regime, but such a development may also significantly shorten the road to the collapse of the regime.

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The protesters and opposition groups have heightened the pressure on the Alawis, at times with outright threats, to participate in the anti-Asad demonstrations. Although there is a tendency to view the Alawis as a uniform group, reality is much more complex. Among the Alawis there are many who automatically support the regime, but there are many others who acknowledge the tyranny and corruption of the regime and have even suffered at its hands and therefore oppose it. Presumably the latter group will at some point support the protesters, but it is less likely, especially in the near future, that they will take an active part in the demonstrations. The fear among the Alawis is twofold: not only do they fear the response of Asad's regime should they join the protests, but they also fear the majority of Syria's Sunni Muslim civilians when considering the day after the fall of Asad's regime. The pressure by the protesters and the opposition on the Alawis and supporters of the regime is particularly evident in the Syrian army and security services and the ruling Baath party. These institutions are the power base of support for the regime, and some of the Alawis in them are particularly dominant. Since the outbreak of the demonstrations, the number of deserters from the Syrian army has grown slowly but steadily. At the same time, the opposition's demand to abolish the law giving exclusivity to the Baath party has become one of its threshold demands.

Additional pressure affecting the fate of the regime, joining Syria's heightening internal protests, is the involvement of international entities and nations. Syrian opposition elements are systematically working in different arenas in the world to enlist support for their struggle against the regime; efforts are directed to the US and the EU as well as Russia and China. It appears that the Syrian opposition's primary success in recruiting support for their struggle in the Middle East is in Turkey, which hosts Syrian opposition groups and allows them to act from Turkish soil via the media against Asad's regime.

Despite the close cooperation between Turkey and Syria in recent years, the outbreak of the protest and the Asad regime's violent means of suppressing it have led to an estrangement between the countries. Turkey is still not calling for Asad to step down, but has denounced the events in Hama as an atrocity and has not ruled out the possibility of military intervention in Syria. Turkey, as well as other nations in the international community, is not thrilled by the military intervention option, but is worried about the protest trickling over to the Kurdish population on Turkish soil as well as a large wave of refugees, which Turkey would find difficult to handle.

The situation in Syria has also positioned Turkey against Iran. Unlike Turkey, Iran is actively supporting the Asad regime and is helping it suppress the turmoil. Despite the unnatural link between Asad's secular regime and the ayatollahs in Iran, the strategic relations between Syria and Iran have for many years provided mutual gain to the two nations. The fall of Asad would represent a blow to the Iranian regime. While Turkey too invested much into its relations with Bashar al-Asad and is therefore likewise not happy

with developments in Syria, its cooperation with opposition elements is preparing it for the day after. It is doubtful if the situation in Syria would drag Turkey and Iran in to a direct confrontation, but the lack of stability in Syria is already presenting Turkey and Iran with some dilemmas and will continue to create points of friction between them should the unrest intensify.

In conclusion, protests in Syria and their violent suppression are growing, as is international criticism of the regime. The UN Security Council statement denouncing Syria for widespread violations of human rights and use of force against civilians is evidence of the fact that the internal protests will also be accompanied by growing pressure on the regime from the outside. Such external pressure encourages the opposition to continue to act, damages the Asad regime on the cognitive level, and could also have operational ramifications. In the Middle East, the two key nations with which Syria had close relations in recent years are operating in opposition to one another: Turkey is pressuring Asad to implement extensive reforms and is working together with the opposition, while Iran continues actively to support Asad's regime and its suppressive moves. The chances that Turkey's policy will succeed seem brighter than those of Iran's, which in turn could generate greater influence for Turkey in Syria on the day after, with all the strategic implications of such a state of affairs.

