

CRISIS IN SYRIA

How the most violent uprising of the Arab Spring could change the balance of power in the Middle East

BY PATRICIA SMITH

The toll has been staggering. In the year since protests sparked by the Arab Spring began in Syria, more than 8,500 Syrians have been killed and thousands more are missing. Entire neighborhoods have been destroyed by government shelling.

As the dead pile up and diplomacy fails to stem the violence, the upheaval in Syria threatens to spill beyond the country's borders and alter the power balance in a volatile region of critical interest to the United States.

So far, the Arab Spring revolutions have overthrown authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. But a regime change in Syria could have much wider ripple effects.

"In Syria, if the regime is toppled, we have a totally new landscape," says Olivier Roy, a Middle East historian.

That possibility is prompting both hope and fear: hope that the days are numbered for a regime that has long been a thorn in Washington's side, and fear about what will take its place and whether it will lead to further instability.

Syria is a dictatorship ruled by President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited power from his equally authoritarian father in 1999. The Assad family, the ruling elite, and the military leadership are all Alawites, a minority Shiite sect that makes up about 12 percent of Syria's population (see *Who's Who in*



Syria). About 75 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, and they make up the backbone of the opposition.

Firing on Civilians

The upheaval in Syria began in March 2011, when residents of the small city of Dara'a took to the streets to protest the torture of students who had put up antigovernment graffiti. The government responded with force, and demonstrations quickly spread across the country. Assad has since overseen a series of crackdowns, sending tanks into cities as security forces opened fire on demonstrators.

In February, government troops surrounded part of the city of Homs, turning heavy weaponry on apartment buildings

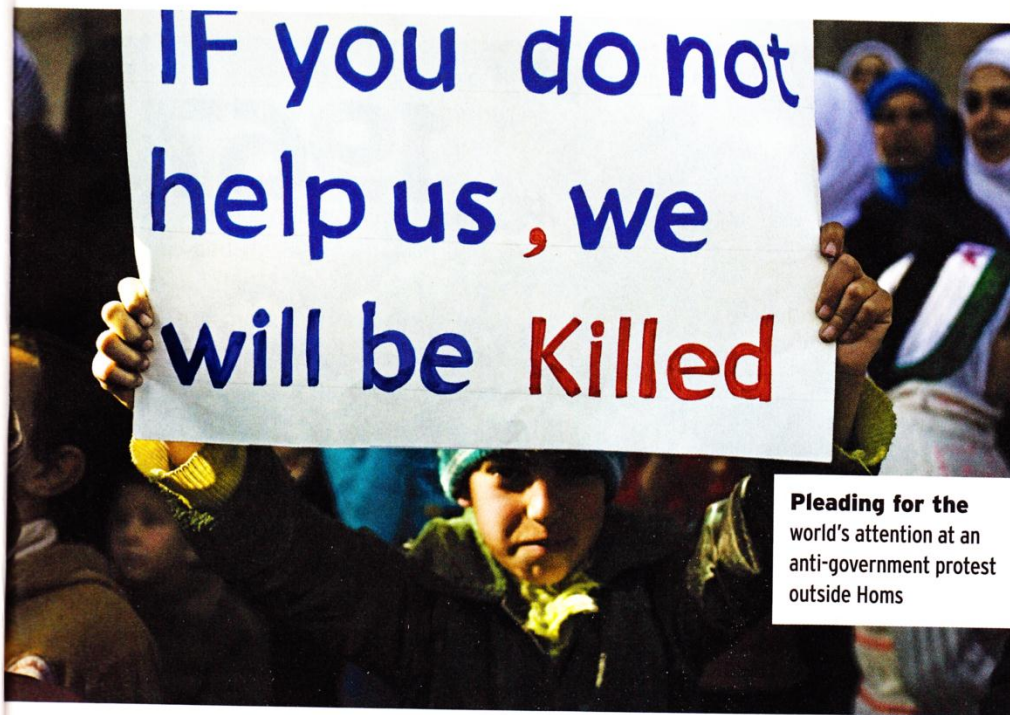
and killing many civilians. The army wouldn't allow food or medical supplies in or the wounded to get out.

"Please tell the world they must help us," 20-year-old Abdel Majid told *The Sunday Times* of London.

The United Nations and the Arab League have condemned the crackdown. In February, a U.N. report said the Syrian government's actions amounted to crimes against humanity.

"It is time to stop the killing of Syrian citizens by their own government," said President Barack Obama, who has called for Assad to relinquish power.

Despite the international pressure, the Syrian regime has advantages that are helping it hang on. It commands overwhelming firepower, including



Pleading for the world's attention at an anti-government protest outside Homs

tanks, heavy artillery, helicopter gunships, and warplanes. The country's officer corps and intelligence service are dominated by Alawites, who fear they face annihilation if Assad is ousted. And in a police state like Syria, a large network of informants helps the secret police track events.

In comparison, the opposition has only light weapons, including a few mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. It has no organized command structure.

Impact on Iran

One reason Syria is so important is that the outcome could have a serious impact on Iran and its Shiite Muslim regime. Syria is one of Iran's closest allies. And it's through Syria that Iran funnels money and weapons to militant Muslim groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, which the U.S. considers terrorist organizations. Assad's fall—and the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Syria—would be a major defeat for Iran, and a boon to the U.S. and Israel because it would cut off a major supply line to terrorist groups.

Given all that, some are asking why the U.S. isn't intervening—especially when the U.S. helped Libyan rebels overthrow longtime dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi last year.

After a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and with an election looming in the fall, the Obama administration has so far ruled out direct military intervention or arming Syrian opposition groups, despite calls to do so from Republican presidential candidates like Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich.

For one thing, it's not clear exactly who the opposition is. The worry is that what started as a protest movement has morphed into what Steven Heydemann at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington describes as "a dangerous and uncoordinated array of armed opposition fighters." There are also concerns that extremists with links to Al Qaeda are trying to exploit the turmoil.

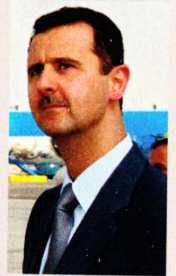
The longer Assad holds on to power, the more people will die. That is bound to make any political transition a bloody one, with a higher risk of revenge killings and attacks against those minorities, including Alawites and Christians, who have supported the government.

"The window for a peaceful transition is closing," says an Obama administration official. "It's now more a question of what happens after he falls." ●

With reporting by Neil MacFarquhar, David E. Sanger, and Steven Erlanger of The Times.

Who's Who in Syria

BASHAR AL-ASSAD, Syria's dictatorial president (*below*), inherited the post in 1999 from his father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled ruthlessly after he took power in a 1970 coup. Despite initial hopes that the younger Assad might allow democratic reforms, he has cracked down on dissent as harshly as his father.



ALAWITES are a Shiite

Muslim sect that makes up just 12 percent of the population but controls all the levers of power. (The vast majority of Shiites in Syria are Alawites.) Assad is an Alawite, as are most of the ruling elite, including military officers.

SUNNI MUSLIMS account for 75 percent of Syria's population and are the backbone of the opposition.

CHRISTIANS make up 10 percent of Syria's population. Minority groups like Christians and Alawites—who have supported the Assad regime—fear what will happen if Assad falls and Sunnis come to power.

THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY is the main opposition group in Syria; its goal is to force Assad from power. It's a hodgepodge of activists, armed militants, and defectors from Syria's military. Estimates of its size range from 20,000 to 40,000 fighters. So far, the U.S. and its allies have not offered military support.