

Russia Should Help Syrians

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The Arab Spring exploded on the world stage when very few had expected it. Perhaps that is why the Arab autocrats who reigned supreme for decades — as well as the leading global powers who remained on the sidelines or even supported the autocratic regimes — have been scrambling to formulate policies to deal with the surge of popular activism that has rocked the longstanding regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria.

Russia is a longtime ally of the Assad family, and Syria has been the Kremlin's closest ally in the Middle East. That is why a perceived shift in Moscow's position on the Syrian crackdown has been noted and is being followed closely in the Arab world. The internal affairs of a state automatically become international when it starts slaughtering its own citizens.

For most of its history, Syria has been poor, underdeveloped and has lacked the freedoms that the people envy in their small neighbor Lebanon, for example. Syrian President Bashar Assad, for all his promises of reform, has failed to recognize that people cannot make use of ideology in their daily lives.

Syrians are striving to be free from arbitrary harassment by security services and corrupt public institutions. They seek basic freedoms and rights, including freedom from fear. The Russian people reached the same conclusion decades ago.

Russia's support of the United Nations Security Council statement on Aug. 3 condemning the widespread violation of human rights in Syria and the use of force against civilians is a step in the right direction. So, too, is the implicit warning President Dmitry Medvedev issued to Assad about a "sad fate" awaiting him if he does not implement reforms and make peace with the opposition.

Russia's reluctance up to that point to join in condemning Assad's actions was based, to a large extent, on what it viewed as an abuse of the Security Council's resolutions on Libya. The Kremlin's historic alliance with Syria and aversion to interference in the internal affairs of other countries, even when there are clear violations of international human rights, may well have played a part in its initial position as well.

But Moscow should not let the Libyan situation taint its outlook or decision making on Syria. The Syrian people's quest for dignity and liberty has been sustained and unflinching for the five months since the civil unrest began. They have no armed forces or organized militias, nor have the people received outside support to help their cause. An estimated 2,000 people, including children, have been killed by their own government and more than 10,000 have been detained, many of them tortured, for peacefully demanding an end to repression. Tanks also are being deployed against civilians.

Moscow should continue to support the Syrian people's aspirations and deliver an unambiguous message to the Assad government that its egregious human rights violations and violent crackdown on demonstrators must end. It should also prod the government to allow access to UN monitors to investigate violations of international human rights law and crimes committed against civilians in Syria.

Encouraging the Assad government to allow UN human rights monitors would not affect Russia's interests in regional stability and could help play a role in stopping the slaughter.

The Kremlin's position has gone from threatening to veto any Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime to voicing concern over human rights violations in Syria. Moscow has much to gain by continuing to support international efforts aimed at ending human rights abuses in Syria. Moscow should use its influence with its own friends and allies to curb its support for the authorities in Damascus, starting with Iran.

The Arab world is set on a course that is irreversible, and the people are taking note of who supports and who thwarts their aspirations. It is the men, women and children on the streets of Syria who will supply the country's next leaders in the years to come.

It is in Russia's interests to support Syrians who want a democratic country — one that values human rights and upholds the dignity of its own citizens. Russia's wisdom on this issue will be the whole world's gain.

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Watch.

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