

# Syria Opinion: "A Population Can Now Dismantle A Modern State on Its Own" (Foley)

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The downing of a Syrian helicopter near Damascus and Sunday's twin bombings close to the heart of the regime's military leadership provide fresh evidence of the precarious position of the Assad Government. Although the insurgents in Syria cannot dislodge the regime from fortified positions, they can attack key targets and have made it virtually impossible for leaders to govern as they did before the rebellion began.

The predicament of the Government is remarkable given the advantages that it had when the rebellion started. The regime boasted a capable intelligence service and one of the biggest military forces in the world. Syria's military was also well armed and funded: its 2005 budget may have been equal to nearly 6% of Syria's GDP. The regime also had a solid base of support within the country, and powerful allies abroad. Divisions between Russia and the West made certain that the United Nations would not authorize a military intervention analogous to the one that had taken place in Libya. Syria's neighbor, Turkey, showed little interest in opening its bases to NATO forces, as Italy had done in the war against Muammar Qaddafi, and Ankara was unwilling to use its own military assets, even after Syria's military shot down a Turkish reconnaissance plane. In addition, Syria's central position in the Middle East meant that instability there would spread to Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey. Consequently, Western governments would have to think twice before authorizing the use of force against Damascus.

Large portions of Syrian society also accepted the government and were willing to give it wide latitude to put down the rebellion. It had produced decades of stability and many Syrians feared what might replace it. There was the precedent of 1982, when Damascus repelled an uprising that had spread to a number of key cities and reestablished its authority over insurgent areas.

Nor did the opposition appear to have the cohesion and determination of its counterpart in Libya. For much of 2011, the focus was on peaceful demonstrations, as it took months to develop military forces. Division occurred over minor issues. A number of the nation's wealthiest and most capable individuals lived abroad, and Syrians were hardly wealthy: their per capita [income](#) was \$5,100 in 2011. Absent international military intervention or an unexpected division within the Syrian government, it was widely assumed that the opposition's prospects looked no better than those of the rebellion in 1982.

This assumption not only reflected the advantageous position of the Syrian government in 2011 but

also the guiding principles of the global political system. Since the Westphalia [Settlement](#) in 1648, national governments have exercised sole sovereignty within their territories, a right usually cloaked in the mantle of popular sovereignty. While neither national nor popular sovereignty have always been respected, governments have stayed in power and enjoyed broad freedom to organize internal affairs if they a) maintained a virtual monopoly over force domestically; b) enjoyed legitimacy; and c) avoided conflicts with stronger states. On this basis, Russia vetoed proposals for international military action in 2011, confident that it had blocked the one avenue for the West and the opposition to topple the Syrian government.

For all of this, the insurgents have fought the government in Damascus to a standstill and may control large portions of the country, as they killed thousands of Syrian soldiers and members of the [security](#) forces. Ordinary Syrians have shown for the first time that a national population, essentially on its own, can dismantle a modern and established state in a number of months --- even if the leaders are determined to maintain power by force.

In the long run, this achievement may be one of the most significant legacies of the Arab Spring for two reasons. First, it calls into question the norms that have governed the international system since the seventeenth century, namely the assumption that military power, political legitimacy, and the absence of external foes are enough for governments to maintain authority. Governments must now take seriously the possibility that any population can dismantle a modern state on their own. Second, the events in Syria suggest that other national populations may be able to topple more powerful states in the future. That should give pause to national leaders across the globe.

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