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**“Iran and Syria: The Tale of Two Crises”
The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington DC 20036
Thursday, February 02, 2012 10:00 AM-12:00 PM**

On Thursday, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings hosted a panel discussing the ongoing crises in Syria and Iran, the potential for escalation, and America’s role in the situation. Panelists included Saban Senior Fellows **Robert Moran** and **Suzanne Maloney**, and next generation fellow from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Syria Expert **Andrew Tabler**. Brookings Senior Fellow and Director of the Saban Center **Kenneth Pollack** moderated the event.

Andrew Tabler began the discussion giving the audience some historical background of Syria helping to understand the situation on the ground. Tabler discussed the sharp increase in violence resulting from President Assad’s “security solution”. **Assad has deployed military forces using “live fire and shabiha militias” leading to an increasing number of dead.** Tabler believes Assad seems content on sticking with this approach. Promised reforms were completely cosmetic or nonsensical. **Local Committees have asked for international intervention and civil defense units have appeared defending peaceful protesters.** The Syrian regime is now trying to reassert its control where he lost power, driving up the **death tolls to around 1200/month.**

Tabler said that the Assad regime is constructed much differently from other regional players. Assad regime consists of “ruling family of minority Alawi” causing any sort of “penetration” into the regime very limited. Tabler used the Syrian proverb, **“Those who know don’t speak, and those who speak don’t know”, to describe the Assad regime extent of control over information.** Tabler contends that the Free Syrian Army, and for the matter the whole opposition, is fragmented. The **opposition has managed to get complete control over some areas,** Idlib for example, which has forced the regime to play a “whack-a-mole game” trying to blot out the opposition. The **regime has lost control, was not able to broker deals with neighbors** (the Arab League), who they let in thinking they could “change the narrative”, and thus is under a lot of pressure.

Robert Moran moved the conversation to the role Syria plays in the regional/national context. Moran proposed two major players: the U.S. and Turkey. First speaking about Turkey, he said that **“if there is going to be any intervention, it is going to be from Turkey” and knowing this the Turks are “extremely hesitant to intervene “for a few reasons”, mainly being they will have to answer the “Kurdish question.”** The Syrian Crisis said Moran is a fail for the Turkish government due to the breaking of its “no problems with neighbors” foreign policy. As for the U.S., Moran said that the Obama Administration was framing the crises the wrong way, failing to see the regional ramifications and connection to Iran. **The administration either a.) Doesn’t see the situation as a strategic play against Iran, or b.) Using what he called “masterful inaction” meaning**

that the administration believes that they can get the desired result without doing much. Duran stressed the need to sever the tie between Iran and Syria. He added that the Arab League, though it has political value, “cannot shift the power calculus of Bashar Al-Assad.” **Tabler** added that the Arab League, having an Iraqi-led ministry, will by nature be “less interventional.” Moran emphasized that the crisis does not go away unless the regime goes away (reform=regime change.” Moran concluded saying that three scenarios include continuing civil war, collapse of the regime, or regime change. Additionally, he referred to the Libyan model of intervention as a possible model.

Ken Pollack transitioned the conversation to **Suzanne Maloney** to discuss “what’s really going on in Iran,” much the same way the panel had discussed Syria. Maloney started out by saying that “irrespective of everything that is going on in the Middle East” she would still **call our situation with Iran a “foreign policy crisis.”** The U.S. is in an election year and Iran is much the center of the political debate (and the Iranians know this). “Dramatic escalation” of the situation has resulted in “toughest sanctions” Iran has ever seen, however Maloney said that Iran’s nuclear activity remains un-impacted. The heightened sense of urgency was a “shock” to the Iranian public. “The riyal lost half its value,” said Maloney.

Maloney contends that **the regime has responded predictably**, first by lashing out (“the best defense is a good offense” approach), then by denying the impact of the sanctions, and finally by retaliating. Maloney says **retaliation is going to come “in the immediate neighborhood” in countries like Iraq or the abusing their utility in oil markets.** She predicted that Iran will be pragmatic—“first they [Iran] will try to save their economy any way they can.” Maloney responded to a question about what action can the international community make that may “change the course” saying that the perceived “soft war” and economic attacks play into the paranoia of “they’re going to make the regime fall mentality,” and thus the regime is going to by time, be unwilling to negotiate, and “buy good will with the international community cooperating with “20% requirements.” “Iran is vulnerable with parliamentary elections coming up,” said Maloney.

The question and answer session opened up with a large discussion about **the spill-over the civil war in Syria is having on the region, particularly with respect to a larger dynamic of a single Sunni-Shia conflict.** Pollack referred to this as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” as he expects more and more governments to frame the conflict this way. Moran concurred assuring that regional dynamics “force us to see it this way,” while Tabler opined that it “wasn’t so black and white.” Tabler added that Syria is going to evolve into a situation with different governments backing different factions with the likelihood of development into a larger crisis increasing. Moran said that the **Obama Administration is complying with arbitrary international guidelines outlined for Libya intervention and rather needs to assemble a coalition of “action-oriented states” and make visible public strides to pressure greater action.**

Tabler described the Syrian opposition in more detail dividing the opposition into the FSA (more or less a franchise), the SNC (exiled with contacts on the ground), youth movement (protest organizers) and older generation (more likely to negotiate). Their fragmentation is a direct result of brutality of the Assad family. Tabler said economic conditions will disable the regime from subsidizing support causing rapid deterioration. **He added that the resolution needs to make Assad make real choices, “if you don’t do this, then you get that” language.** He said **intervention may model the intervention that was seen in Bosnia** during the Kosovo conflict. Tabler believes that Hezbollah, with the keystone connection removed, will attempt to assert itself in the Levant. Iran will look to make contact with emerging elements in Syria to establish a connection, but the logistics will remain complicated. **The panel ended emphasizing the importance of the U.S. government to “recognize the connections” of the crises, but do not do so to an extent that “you make problems worse than they already are.**