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Assad faces exile or fight to finish

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World powers meeting in Tunisia in February began laying the groundwork for a political transition in Syria, and the United Nations General Assembly has already passed a resolution calling for Syrian President Bashar Assad to resign.

Yet parallels are already being drawn with recent events in Libya and many expect Assad to meet the same fate as Moammar Gadhafi — being killed by his foes. They see several more months of brutal fighting by Assad to try to hold on to power before being finally hunted down and killed in a bloodbath by opposition forces supported by Western allies.

If such an outcome occurs, the international community deserves part of the blame because it has removed any exit options for Assad and his senior leadership, despite the potential of these options to partially defuse the conflict.

For centuries, a struggling dictator in crisis could expect a retirement abroad with the continuation of his lavish lifestyle, and most importantly, no fear of prosecution.

A former colonial power, Cold War ally, or friendly neighbor would negotiate his safe removal from power, grant him exile in their country, and protect him from any potential prosecutions for crimes committed during his rule. This does not seem to be in the cards for Assad.

In the end, no one wants to see brutal mass murderers basking in the sun on a resort, but no one wants to see them continuing to murder civilians *en masse* either. In the past, exile was often the

lesser of two evils, and such an option should not be removed from the table in Syria.

The practice of political exile has long been a mainstay in international relations, stemming from Napoleon Bonaparte, who was sent off twice to island estates following defeat in international war.

Kaiser Wilhelm II was given safe refuge and protection from prosecution in the Netherlands after Germany's defeat in World War I. Former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin lived peacefully for more than two decades in Saudi Arabia following his forced removal from power in 1979. Similarly, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier enjoyed the sanctuary of France for nearly two decades until his poorly planned return to Haiti, last year.

While not every dictator has found refuge or escaped popular uprisings in time, exile has always been a likely and attractive exit option, and played into the strategic calculations of leaders during times of unrest. Yet the international climate is changing, and it is becoming increasingly less acceptable to provide safe haven to an international criminal. Few countries would be willing to endure the international and domestic criticism that would come with harboring a former dictator, particularly one like Assad whose human-rights violations have been front-page news.

In addition to this normative development, legal developments further restrict the potential for exile, and harboring states are bombarded with extradition requests from a variety of global courts. Dictators now know that their options are limited and that any exile that is granted is extremely risky and uncertain. Ni-

geria, for example, reversed course on Charles Taylor, charged with crimes against humanity in Liberia, releasing him to stand trial in The Hague just three years after granting him refuge.

And while this expansion of accountability for violators of human rights is positive, we are now seeing the negative side effect of this development. With nowhere to go, dictators are clinging to power and using brutal means to do so. In Syria, this has taken the form of tank attacks on civilians and the use of human shields, with no end in sight. Yet, removing Syria's senior leadership has the potential to diffuse the situation, one which, given the significant firepower of the Syrian military, could see a slaughter of civilians on an epic scale.

Russia, a key ally of Syria and Assad, and powerful enough to partially resist international human-rights norms, is in a unique position to help. Letting Russia take the lead on the negotiation and extrication of the current regime would also let Moscow save face and play a more important role in shaping Syria's future — a future that Russia needs to feel will include a continuation of close relations between the two countries.

In the end, such a move would not free the international community from the significant work that needs to be done to help Syria move forward, but it might just enable that work to begin sooner and with thousands fewer civilian deaths.

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