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### **Syria Under Siege: Implications for the Kurdish Minority**

The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad has so far managed to survive the upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring, but the loss of life has already been much greater than that in any other country affected by that social and political turmoil. The latest estimate is that at least 5,000 anti-regime demonstrators have perished in the crackdown by government security forces. The Kurdish population is especially at risk as Assad and his cronies try to cling to power and seek to eliminate adversaries.

There are several reasons why the Kurdish people in Syria are unusually vulnerable. First, Syrian authorities, along with those in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, have always questioned the loyalty of their Kurdish minorities to the states where they live. That has been true since the years immediately following World War I, when the Western allies broke their promise to create a separate country for the Kurdish people. Instead, Kurdish populations were parceled out to other newly created states in which other ethnic groups were dominant. To this day, Kurds are the largest population in the world without an independent political homeland, and that factor has produced resentment and restlessness. The governing authorities in all those countries, in turn, have tended to view their Kurdish minorities as a potential secessionist threat. That has been true in Syria throughout the decades, and it is certainly true under the current regime in Damascus.

Another factor that makes the ruling clique especially suspicious of the Kurdish minority is that Syrian authorities realize that the Kurds in neighboring Iraq are easily the most pro-U.S. portion of Iraq's population. And those same authorities believe that the United States is eager to bring down the current Syrian government. That belief may well be true. Washington has never considered Bashar al-Assad or his long-ruling father friends of the United States. Quite the contrary, they viewed Syria as a Soviet client state during the Cold War and as a disruptive, radical force in the Middle East in the post-Cold War

era. Now that the Obama administration has openly called on Assad to resign and for free elections to be held, the belief that Washington is putting Syria under siege and is attempting to topple the regime (as NATO did to Libya's Muammar Gadhafi) is certain to grow.

This development places Syria's Kurdish minority in a delicate and dangerous position. It would be easy—and very tempting—for the Damascus government to use that population as a scapegoat for the regime's growing troubles. Other Syrians may well believe the propaganda that is already beginning to circulate that the Kurds are prominent participants in the anti-regime upheaval and that they are serving as willing tools of the United States. Such a strategy would be terribly cynical and unfair, but it might distract those Syrians who are dissatisfied with the corrupt, dictatorial Assad regime. The United States is unpopular in Syria, just as it is in most other Muslim countries. Public opinion surveys show that positive views of the United States languish in the low double digits, and in some cases in the single digits.

Suspicious that Washington might be up to its old trick of using the Central Intelligence Agency to undermine a government deemed hostile to U.S. and Israeli interests are ever present and can be exploited. Using the Kurdish minority as a scapegoat and portraying it as a U.S. puppet could easily lead to a new round of atrocities. As the Assad government teeters, the Kurdish people in Syria could be in for a very rough time.

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