CONFERENCE CALL: OBAMA CALLS ON ASSAD TO STEP DOWN IN SYRIA

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MODERATOR:
Tom Carver
Vice President for Communications and Strategy
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SPEAKER:
Paul Salem
Director
Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, Lebanon

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TOM CARVER: OK. I hope everyone else can hear. I'm sorry we’re a couple of minutes late starting. It’s Tom Carver from Carnegie here. I’m the vice president of communications. And thanks for joining this conference call with Paul Salem, who’s the head of Middle East Center in Beirut and I’m sure familiar to many of you – very distinguished commentator on Middle East affairs and formerly the director of the Fares Foundation.

So the subject today is the – obviously President Obama’s announcement calling on President Assad to resign. Paul Salem has had a lot of experience from Beirut of dealing with the Syrian situation. So let me just hand it over to Paul. Maybe, Paul, you could start by giving your reaction to this; sort of what impact you think it will have on the Assad regime. And then please feel free, anyone, to jump in if you have questions for Paul. This is a conference call that is on the record.

Thanks.

PAUL SALEM: Thank you, Tom. And thank you, everybody. Well, I do think this is a very, very major turning point – very major statement. The statement itself reflects, I think, a sort of growing consensus that includes the Europeans, the Turks and the Saudis and the Emirates and Qatar which is, you know, the Gulf Cooperation Council in general, all of those very, very influential players when it comes to the region and to Syria itself – leaving, obviously, Iran on the other side.

I think the assessment has been that the Assad regime has not been able to deal with this crisis properly. The Obama administration, as well as the Turks and the Saudis and the Europeans, gave the regime a lot of time, a lot of chances. But I think the feeling is it has failed to be able to manage the situation in any acceptable way and that the regime is failing, as it were, is crumbling in addition to all the violence that’s going on.

I think the statement will have an enormous impact politically, first of all, because I do think it will be read as representing a pretty broad consensus. It comes only days after the Saudi king’s historic statement against the Assad regime, also hours or a few days after another statement from the Turkish prime minister. So I think it’s seen as perhaps the beginning of the endgame for the regime.

The sanctions themselves are very significant and very biting. By themselves the trade issues, the energy issues are very significant; will also probably impact banking and just general financial and economic transactions in addition to the energy. The Syrian economy has already been in a free-fall. This will certainly, you know, push it much, much quicker and further down that road.

The statement also said that the U.S. hopes that other countries will take similar steps. I read that as meaning that they may have consulted – they may have a sense that some might take similar steps. Some of the Gulf Cooperation Council members have already withdrawn their ambassadors. Qatar stopped its investments. Turkey has made – has been thinking about that as well.
I think it will have a big impact inside Syria. People who are not with the regime but didn't move may rethink that. People who were with the regime thinking better to stay with than something else might read into this statement that the regime will not survive the next, you know, several months, hence, they better think elsewhere. I think we've entered certainly an ominous time. This is a very, very serious development.

Syria, I think, the only country in the Arab Spring in which a change of government would mean a complete rebalancing of the Middle East regional relations. The revolution in Egypt didn't really change Egypt's foreign relations dramatically, nor did Tunis, nor did Libya, nor would Yemen. But Syria is a game changer, certainly for Iran, for Hezbollah. Hence, it would, you know, be a big – a big boon for Saudi Arabia, possibly, and the U.S. and others.

Syria – change in Syria would mean change in the Middle East. And hence the – you know, the uprisings in Syria might take on a much more bitter regional and international aspect than other uprisings in other Arab countries – which really remained fairly domestic. Also the fact that the U.S. has stepped up so publicly in this way will probably mean that Iran might step up publicly as well to be more openly supportive.

It will probably mean, also, the Assad regime will say that the revolution, indeed, is foreign backed and it’s part of an international attempt, hence, justifying more support from Iran, possibly from elements in Iraq, and Hezbollah and so on. So there could be a tougher regional element to this. It's a beginning of a complicated process.

A change in Syria would be as momentous as the change in Iraq was in 2003. It may or may not be as devastating and as chaotic and bloody. But certainly there is a very high risk of state failure in Syria. And it’s possible, like the regime in Baghdad when it felt it was losing, it has means to sabotage the state, sabotage the nation. And I have fears that there are such risks in Syria as well. But I think the regime has not been able to handle the situation, and we are now on a very serious and – road, but one with high risks and high possibilities.

Let me stop there.

MR. CARVER: Thanks, Paul. Does anyone have any questions for Paul? One thing I – occurred to me, Paul, is – you know, you mentioned Iran, the possibility of this provoking Iran. How do you think Iran might respond to this?

MR. SALEM: A number of ways. I mean, Iran could certainly offer Syria economic and financial assistance more than it has. It could, in other words, step in to compensate Syria for losses that might accrue from these sanctions. It could do so through Iraq as well. Iran has leaned on the Maliki government in Baghdad to remain – you know, supportive of the Assad regime. And it’s possible that – I mean, certainly Iran will be supporting the Assad regime as much as it can.

This might end up being, possibly, an opportunity for Iran to vastly increase its presence and its aid and influence in Syria such – you know, given that Syria has lost all of its friends except Iran. If Syria is – if the regime survives,
it’ll be surviving because of Iran and it will be way more beholden to Iran – much more of a satellite than it ever was. Of course, if the regime collapses, then it’s a major, major loss to Iran.

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My fear is that if the regime is going to be lost, the option would be to sabotage Syria, as it were, to make sure that an alternative pro-Saudi or pro-Turkish or whatever – you know, an alternative regime doesn’t emerge quickly and strongly out of Damascus to impact Iran and Iraq and Hezbollah and, you know, that alignment.

MR. CARVER: OK, thank you. Any other questions? Do you think –

Q: I have one.

MR. CARVER: Sorry, please go ahead, yeah.

Q: Paul, How does the opposition organize itself to make itself more effective? And do you think that it is the inside or the outside that’s really more important in sort of pushing this process along?

[00:09:00]

MR. SALEM: I certainly think it’s the inside. And I think it’s sort of the people before the opposition. There is, you know, an opposition that’s met here and there at different levels of organization. But at the end of the day, Syria is still – you know, the regime is still in control of most of the cities, the protests remain – they are large, but they are, you know, different locations and intermittent.

What I think would need to happen for the situation to dramatically change is for, you know, a major city to drift out – you know, in a sustained way – out of government control – or a part of the country, might need not be a city – and to have, perhaps, parts of the army and other elites and so on gather in a spot inside Syria, like happened in Libya, like happened elsewhere.

Now, statements and sanctions like this and positions like this from the U.S., as they also reflect Saudi positions and Turkish positions, might have a major influence on populations in Syria. And they may or may not do things that will lead to that. But meetings of the opposition outside Syria will not, to my mind, be the key point.

My main concern is not that you know, I think there will be potential to get opposition numbers to meet here and there; to agree on an outline of things. But the danger in Syria is that the regime is the state essentially. And if the regime begins to fall, it’s going to take the state with it. And we’re going to be in a situation of state failure, possibly even state sabotage as it were – kind of a booby-trapped country – similar to the Iraq situation in which it’s going to be tough to – you know, to put it back together again quickly.

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The difference in Syria is that, perhaps, there’s one community – the Sunni Arab community – which is certainly by far the largest. So there isn’t the same sort of power balances that you had in Lebanon or you have in Iraq. So there could be a more decisive outcome. But certainly if the regime begins to fall, they might – they might play it dirty.
Of course, it’s possible that if they really see the writing on the wall, the regime or member of the Alawi community somehow could find a way to strike a deal via Turkey with the opposition and to save themselves and to have a soft landing for this crisis, but certainly all of this – very impossible to predict.

Q: Is there any indication – have you seen any evidence that any of that is happening, that there are any talks – anybody reaching out to try to do that?

[00:11:55]

MR. SALEM: Well, the Turks have been trying to do that from their end. And I’m sure they’ve been in contact with many leaders. I don’t know that they’ve made any progress. But this statement today – which really, to my mind, indicates that the U.S. and Europe and Turkey and the GCC think it’s over. You know, this is a major, major decision point for many communities, many leaders, many individuals in Syria. We’ll have to see from today onward, you know, how contacts proceed, who says what and who does what.

So far, the regime has felt that they are likely to be able to survive this. So, many people have stuck with them. Iran certainly has been telling Syria that they can survive it because, in a way, they’ve survived something somewhat similar since 2009 – although, with very different circumstances. But I think today indicates a sense among many that this regime is simply not going to make it so people are going to – might have to start making different calculations.

Q: Yes. Can I ask a question?

MR. CARVER: Sure, go ahead.

[00:13:11]

Q: Yeah, hi. How long do you think it will be before – how long will Assad be able to hang on?

MR. SALEM: I don’t know that. I don’t think anybody can know that. I think we’re – you know, we’re talking in terms of months, that’s my sense, not days and weeks and not years. The economic sanctions don’t bite immediately but they bite in months certainly. And the events of the last – of the month of Ramadan have been – have been tremendous because of the change in Saudi Arabia and the GCC, which is a major player, as well as Turkey and now the U.S., which effectively means the U.S. and Europe.

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So I – you know, I see it in a matter of months. It is possible that, you know, the regime could still save itself. Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council and probably others around the world – you know, if the regime could make major concessions and really, you know, turn a corner – nobody expects that they can – but if they could do that, most major players would prefer a political endgame to this rather than implosion and possible state failure and civil war and years of chaos.

So although this, you know, very, very powerful statement – it is also, you know, at one level raising the pressure on the regime in Syria to do what everybody’s been asking it to do. And they still have some chance to do that. So I’m not saying that the regime, you know, will – necessarily will leave, but it’ll either have to change fundamentally or leave. And since it doesn’t appear to be able to change fundamentally, it looks like it’s possibly on the way out in a matter of months. Now, I don’t know if that’s three months, six months, nine months –
Q: (Thanks ?).

MR. SALEM: – impossible to predict.

[00:15:14]

Q: Yeah, I know. Thank you very much.

MR. SALEM: Mm-hmm. (Acknowledgement.)

Q: Paul, I’m just wondering how you think this statement will play within the al-Assad family, like how you’d see the reaction sort of dividing or not dividing the family in terms of his brother and himself. How do you see that?

MR. SALEM: Well, I – it’s hard to answer. I can’t say that I’m – you know, could comment intelligently on what the family conversations will be. But my sense is that this makes it clear to the regime, regardless of, you know, which brother says what to whom, that they are now only with Iran and Maliki and Hezbollah.

Now that’s certainly the alliance they’ve been in for 30 years; so, in a way, that’s nothing new. If – so they will be hunkering down “à la” Iran. Obviously Iran has been in this position for years. So for them, it’s nothing new. You know, they’ve been sanctioned; they’ve been persona non grata for a long time.

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Syria’s always toyed with the idea that it’s sort of like Iran but it also has great relations with Saudi and Turkey and everybody else. They are now in a situation where they’re going to have to forego all of those nice relations and hunker down to the key strategic alliance, which is Iran.

Now, with high oil prices and so on, Iran has a lot of cash, a lot of ability to support. The Maliki government is supportive. In Lebanon, the government here, although not very influential, but, you know, Hezbollah-dominated – and with Hezbollah here as well, Syria has a tight group of friends. And the regime and the family will probably say, well, you know, let’s – you know, we can probably – perhaps – survive as the Iranians and others are, even though this will be a very, very tough ride. And they’ll have to see whether they’ll make it or not.

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I mean, their reading is that if they soften and if they give in internally, you know – if they give an inch, they’re going to have to give a mile. And so, their – you know, their way of dealing with it is this use of violence and sort of black-and-white approach. It worked in the early ’80s; it worked in Iran. Certainly I think they’re going to hope that it works again.

I think there will be concerns possibly among others in the Alawi community – and I’m not privy to such conversations – who might feel that the community is just taking too much of a historic risk. But whether that will make a difference to the regime, whether the community can impose a different line, so far that has not been the case.

Q: Can I ask one more of Paul?
MR. SALEM: Absolutely.

Q: All right. I'm just curious how you think or whether you think there's any credence to, I guess, the conspiracy theorists out there who say that, you know, Syria's always got one last card, and that is Hezbollah or conflict of some kind. I mean, is that a scenario that you foresee, I mean, the continuation of 2006, kind of as a way out? I don't know.

[00:18:36]

MR. SALEM: No, I mean, it – first of all, would not mean really be a way out at this point. Second of all, Hezbollah will not do it. They're not going to basically sacrifice themselves on the off-chance that that might help. It probably will not help; it'll possibly hurt because it will provoke yet more, you know, destabilization. It will, you know – I just don't see it at all as being able to help the regime seriously.

What might – what they've tried, which is different, is, you know, little skirmishes, little events here and there. We saw attacks from Sinai today. We saw demonstrations on the Golan Heights and south Lebanon on Nakba Day and Naksa Day, sort of a bit of changing the headlines. But Hezbollah certainly doesn't want a full-scale war, and Hezbollah cannot take the Shiite community in Lebanon through another war. And it really wouldn't at all solve the problem for the regime in Damascus. So I really – I do not think that is – that is on, you know, on the offing.

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It is noteworthy, I mean, that the statement of Obama today comes effectively 24 hours after the release of the details of the indictments, fingering, you know, Hezbollah in the assassination of Hariri. That, you know, is a significant event that has dominated sort of Lebanon and Syria for the last five, six years, and coincidentally it came out yesterday. So a number of things are, you know, ratcheting up at the same time.

Q: Do you think it was coincidental?

MR. SALEM: I do think it was coincidental. Yeah, I mean, the Syrian ratcheting up of statements from the Obama administration has been, you know, happening month – week by week, month by month, for several months, and they finally turned the corner.

Yeah, I do think it's coincidental; but it is – it is – you know, it is significant that they're coming at the same time, putting both Hezbollah and Syria in a very, very, very bad light and a very bad situation.

[00:20:57]

Q: I have a question. I feel like we're dominating, but no one else wants to ask questions, and we have you on the line.

MR. CARVER: Go ahead.

Q: Can I ask about Turkey? They've been seemingly hesitant; they waited till the last minute; they gave them every chance. Do you – do you think this is a genuine move on their part or they are – are they convinced that this is the end?
MR. SALEM: Well, I mean, Turkey has, in a way, the most to lose. Turkey’s a neighbor; U.S. is not, Europe is not, Saudi Arabia is not. Turkey is very, very, very concerned about having another Iraq on its border. It’s very concerned about the Kurds and the Kurdish issue in northern Syria, which might impact the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and they’re simply concerned about having another 10 years of failed state on their border; hence, their hesitation and, hence, their concern, and that remains the case.

As I said a few minutes ago, from their – you know, my reading of their position – I’m going there a lot in recent weeks – is they’re being as tough as they can in order to, sort of, you know, bully the regime into compromise. They – they’re rather convinced that if the regime goes, it’ll take a lot with it. It might take the whole state with it; it might take national unity with it.

And the Turks – you know, it might come to that; but the Turks are very afraid of it, very aware of that risk, and certainly I think their preference is still that Assad will, you know – it’s a preference. I don’t know that it’s a realistic hope on their part. I think they’re completely frustrated and disillusioned. But if the regime came up with a compromise that was serious, the Turks, I think, would certainly favor that over complete change.

Q: And do you think that Bashar will read that as a split between Washington and Istanbul: that they’re using the same language, but they don’t mean the same thing?

MR. SALEM: Well, I don’t know that – first of all, I mean, I’m not sure. I mean, the U.S. is also very, very concerned about state failure in Syria and a long-term civil war and another Iraq. The U.S. also, I think, would, you know – I mean, now Obama’s made this statement, it makes it much more difficult, and Bashar al-Assad has very – you know, has no legitimacy left internationally and so on.

But if, you know, I know that U.S. strategically would probably prefer still a – you know, they don’t want state failure and national disunity and civil war. They certainly would like a smooth transition; but that’s going to be tough. I think they’re beginning to realize that this regime is collapsing; the state is failing. So, you know, people have to begin positioning for the difficult road ahead and to try to make the transition as quick, as stable as possible although it’s going to be – it’s going to be complicated.

So I’m not sure that the Turkish and American positions are all that different. The Turks have been more frustrated in a way with the Syrians than the Americans have been because they’ve been very close, and they’ve been very, very angry and very, very frustrated. But, I mean, I think for the regime, it’s not so much reading the tea leaves as Erdogan and Obama as much as, you know, they’re in a fight for their lives internally, and they’ve chosen the old approach that Hafez al-Assad did in the ’80s, the approach that the Iranians have used. And I think they’re going to stick to that approach and, OK, if other countries drop off and won’t – you know, we’ll sanction them; we won’t deal with them – I think they’re just going to continue on this strategy. If they lose, they lose; if they make it, they make it. That’s probably how they’re thinking about it rather than gaming the Turks and the Americans and the Saudis. I think they’re much more in a sense of a fight for their lives.
Q: I mean, if Turkey wanted to, they could set up a Benghazi-like place on the border, if they really, really wanted to get tough. But they – you know, they really backed away from that yesterday when there was a rumor that they were thinking about that.

MR. SALEM: Yeah, I mean, I don’t think they want to do anything like that. I mean, there might be a sudden refugee situation, which they might have to respond to. But they really don’t want to embark on any adventure. I mean, all of Turkish foreign policy for the last decade has been, you know, called the “zero problems” policy and a deep-seated preference for diplomacy and all of that. They’re not about to embark on any military adventure in Syria.

Also, Iran, I think, has been, you know, sending threats or messages to Turkey that, you know, cross-border military operations to an ally of Iran are – will something – will be something that Iran also takes very, very, very seriously. And the statement from Obama today reiterating that this is a Syrian process; nobody will intervene – I definitely think that represents, you know, certainly the Turkish position and obviously the European position.

So it’s obviously very different than Libya, where intervention was the first thing on the table. I don’t think anybody is going to intervene in Syria unless there is a breakaway by itself of a major area and then maybe, you know, like a Benghazi-like or, you know, a northern Iraq-like situation 20 years ago. But we’re certainly nowhere – we’re not there at this point. But I don’t expect any Turkish military action.

[00:27:06]

MR. CARVER: Paul, we’re just up on the half-hour point; so –

MR. SALEM: Mm-hmm. (Acknowledgement.)

MR. CARVER: – which is the time scheduled for the call. So, by all means, if you – if you’re free, then, you know, feel free to carry on answering questions. But we’ll call this the kind of end of the formal conference call.

MR. SALEM: OK. I mean, if there – if there are other questions, I’m – and if not – up to your audience.

[00:27:31]

Q: I have one technical question.

MR. SALEM: Mm-hmm. (Acknowledgement.)

Q: What – and the technical question is, if there’s an export of – I mean a ban on export of refined petroleum products to Syria, is that significant, and where else can Syria import or get products from? You think the Iraqis or the Iranians will make that up?

MR. SALEM: Well, I’m not an expert obviously on that – you know, the technical side of that issue. I don’t know, but certainly Iran has, you know, has everything that – you know, all the basics that a country needs, and it’s flush with cash. They have Iraq as a conduit point. So despite any sanctions, you know, Iran-Iraq-Syria is a landmass that is contiguous.

[00:28:19]
So, as I was indicating earlier, I mean, this could be, you know, the beginning of the end for Syria or it could be the beginning of an expansion of Iranian influence into Syria. And if Iran is able to save the regime, it is going to be, you know, even much more influential in Damascus than it's even been because the old paradigm was built by Hafez al-Assad as sort of two equal partners. And Assad the elder did that by keeping good relations with the Emirates, with Qatar, with Saudi, with Europe, with Turkey, with U.S. – Turkey lately. If they lose of all that, they only have one leg to stand on, and it will not be at all anything like an equal relationship.

Q: Thank you.

MR. SALEM: All right?

KARLY SCHLEDWITZ: Are there any other questions?

[00:29:15]

MR. SALEM: All right then.

MS. SCHLEDWITZ: Great. Well, thank you so much, and we will put a transcript up online soon.

MR. SALEM: All right. All the best. Bye, Karly, bye everybody.

MS. SCHLEDWITZ: Thank you.

MR. SALEM: Bye, Tom.

[00:29:28]

(END)