



Ellen Lust-Okar

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"Syria: Prospects for Reform"

**Thursday, April 27 , 2006
12 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120**

This lecture is open to the public. Lunch will be served to invited students and faculty who RSVP to [Emily Cole](#) no later than Thursday, April 25, 2006.

Ellen Lust-Okar received her Ph.D. from University of Michigan in 1997 and is currently Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University.

Her research concerns the dynamics of political opposition, the formation of political institutions, and the links between foreign policy and domestic crisis, focusing on the Middle East. Her articles have appeared in *International Interactions*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, and edited volumes.

She is also author of *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions* (Cambridge University Press), which examines how ruling elites manage and manipulate their political opposition in the Middle East.

Syria has and continues to figure prominently in debates about American foreign policy. Because Syria is located at the heart of the Middle East and U.S. foreign relations in that area have changed in the wake of the Iraq war, Syria's authoritarian regime and American-Syrian relations have been widely discussed.

Ellen Lust-Okar is one of a few scholars who have examined the prospects for political reform and democratization in Syria. Given the delicate stability of Syria's authoritarian regime and the weakness of the political opposition in the country, Lust-Okar believes that the prospects for democratization in Syria are dim. However, she argues, it would be counterproductive for the United States to push for regime change in Syria, in part because of the difficulty and instability encountered in trying to establish democracy in Iraq.

Neoconservatives in Washington have argued that the United States should push for regime change in Syria for several reasons. First, Syria was one of the two Arab countries governed by the Baath party. Second, Syria supported political groups that oppose America's key ally, Israel, in both Palestine and Lebanon. However, this neoconservative vision for effecting change has not materialized. In fact, in the aftermath of Sept. 11, Syria provided valuable assistance to the United States. It is only recently that U.S.-Syrian relations once again deteriorated, with Syria keeping its place on the U.S. list of supporters of terrorism.

Perhaps more important to Syrian politics than the Baath party, Lust-Okar said, is the decades-long rule of the Assad family. However, this constant variable has recently undergone a major change. With the death of his father, Bashar Al-Assad -- until then a minor player in Syrian politics -- became the Syrian president in 2000.

Because Bashar was educated in the West and seemed to have modern outlook, many onlookers in Syria and around the world began to have great expectations about political opening and liberalization of the regime. In fact, Syrian-Western relations initially improved and cooperation toward reform was achieved in a number of areas. For example, after decades of crackdown and

repression, opposition parties were given some freedom in organization and expression. Local elections have been held, albeit with restrictions.

However, such steps have fallen short of democratization. Lust-Okar gave two reasons for this and for the low prospects for reform in Syria in general. First, the Syrian opposition itself is deeply divided. While those living outside Syria fully support regime change, those living in Syria worry about the negative consequences that the process of regime change might bring about. They believe that sectarian divisions could divide the country, much like the chaos that has emerged in Iraq in the absence of an authoritarian regime.

Another dynamic is also at work. Opposition figures outside of Syria lack a political following within Syria and therefore cannot effect meaningful change. Meanwhile, opposition figures in Syria must operate within the limits established by the Syrian regime itself. This means they must undertake a careful balancing act between pushing for change and not antagonizing the government. As a result, they are not likely to effect major change either.

The second reason for the low prospects for democratization in Syria is more subtle and concerns the nature of recent reforms, Lust-Okar said. Namely, the Syrian regime has allowed for certain openings as a way to bring the opposition groups under more careful control. Like the regime, many opposition leaders want to keep Syria together and therefore stress unity among their groups. Ironically, these opposition leaders help government maintain control, opposition figures have to keep a close eye on developments in their own ranks.

The Assad regime in Syria justifies its authoritarian rule in other ways as well, Lust-Okar said. First, while the majority of Syrians are Sunni, the regime is minority Alawi. For this reason, wide sections of Syrian society do not support the regime: however, even worse than the prospect of continued Assad rule is the ever-present fear of sectarian and ethnic divisions. Hence, the regime plays on the fear of possible breakdown to justify its authoritarian rule. Second, the Assad regime emphasizes the danger of Islamists, and conservatives are portrayed as posing a grave threat to Syria. This provides the regime with a mandate to crack down on such opposition, ostensibly in order to preserve Syria.

Finally, Lust-Okar argued that it would be counterproductive for the United States to overtly push for regime change in Syria for three reasons. First, if the United States supports Syrian opposition groups logistically or financially, Syrians will see those groups as illegitimate and their actions will be discredited. Second, given the difficulties and costs of the Iraq operation, the United States would be ill-advised to bring about regime change by force in yet another country with sectarian divisions. A more effective strategy would be to advocate human rights and civil rights.

Finally, U.S. interests may be better served by preserving stability in Syria than by trying to democratize it. In the fight against terror, American foreign policymakers appear to be, at least in the case of Syria, in favor of eliciting cooperation than pushing for change with uncertain consequences.