An Iron Grip Shows Signs of Weakening

The amazing fact about Bashar al-Assad today is not that he is still in office, but that he appears so close to losing it. A year ago, predictions that the Arab League would be actively and directly pushing a U.N. resolution calling for his resignation would have been met with disbelief, if not ridicule. The speed and scope of change in the Middle East and North Africa over the past year has led the watching world to accept this as the new normal.

The initial expectations in Syria last spring were that Assad would simply crush the relatively small and distant protests in cities like Deraa and Idlib. Then it became apparent that the protesters were prepared to keep coming, no matter what the human toll. Still, no one, least of all Assad, expected the Arab League to do more than talk and issue vague resolutions condemning the “violence.” And few expected Turkey to step up so strongly — or for the Saudi king to call for Assad’s resignation.

Assad thought he was protected by many of the very factors that now have his neighbors so worried: Syria’s strategic position in the heart of the Middle East, its close ties to Russia and Iran, its complex ethnic and religious composition, its proximity to Israel. Those factors were supposed to militate against any intervention on behalf of the Syrian opposition; today they are strong arguments for forcing him to step down and give way to a process that is the best hope of a peaceful and relatively stable outcome to the current crisis.

How was Assad to anticipate that mass killing of his own citizens would trigger regional and international outrage — and action? After all, his father massacred 10,000 to 20,000 people in Hama with impunity. But his father’s world is gone.