FPI Fact Sheet: Five Steps to Hasten Assad’s Exit

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s security forces have killed as many as 1,600 civilians since protests began in March. Human rights organizations also estimate that at least 12,000 Syrians have been arrested or detained. In response, the White House has publicly condemned the Assad regime’s violent and lethal suppression of Syrian protestors, and imposed U.S. sanctions on certain Syrian government officials and entities for human rights abuses.

But until recently, the Obama administration had avoided calling for the Syrian dictator to step down—and instead appeared to hold out hope that Assad would yet prove himself to be a “reformer.” That began to change on July 11, 2011, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States has “absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power.”

The Arab Spring has given rise to mass protest movements throughout the Middle East and North Africa, in which everyday people are risking their lives to stand up to tyrannical regimes and demand moderate governance that respects human rights and the rule of law. Syria is no exception.

The United States, however, has yet to articulate a coherent strategy that responds, proactively and constructively, to the Arab Spring. Instead, U.S. policy has been reactive, ad hoc, and inconsistent. This is especially troubling in the case of Syria. Bashar al-Assad has presided over one of the most brutal regimes in the Middle East—a regime that has supported terrorist groups; given aid to foreign fighters that have infiltrated Iraq and killed American troops; and in recent years only deepened ties to Iran.

In the long term, a democratic and moderate Syria is in America’s interest and would benefit regional stability. As the Executive Branch and Congress mull changes to U.S. policy towards Syria, this FPI Fact Sheet outlines five steps that the United States can take to hasten Assad’s exit.

(1) **Unequivocally call for Bashar al-Assad to step down**

The United States should leave no doubt that it sides with the Syrian people by demanding that President Bashar al-Assad immediately step down. It is worth noting that France has already done this. For example, as French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said: “The situation is now very clear. In Syria, the process of reform is dead and we think that Bashar has lost his legitimacy to rule the country. And so we are in exactly the same position as we are in Libya.”

So far, even the Obama administration’s strongest statements have left open the door, however implicitly, that Assad could still show himself to be a “reformer” and move Syria towards democracy. For example, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: “President Assad is not indispensible, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power. Our goal is to see that the will of the Syrian people for a democratic transformation occurs.”

Moreover, while the administration has started to take a harder line against the Syrian dictator, the shift in rhetoric came about after a pro-Assad mob had attacked the American embassy in Damascus on July 11, 2011. As President Obama said the next day:
“We’ve certainly sent a clear message that nobody can be messing with our embassy. But more broadly, I think that increasingly you’re seeing President Assad lose legitimacy in the eyes of his people. And that’s why we’ve been working at an international level, to make sure that we keep the pressure up—to see if we can bring some real change in Syria.”

The Obama administration should not leave anyone with the impression that it was damage to U.S. property—and not the regime’s mass murder of Syrian civilians and other human rights abuses—that caused Assad to lose legitimacy. Strong, direct and repeated calls by the United States for Assad to immediately step down would dispel any such ambiguity.

(2) **Further sanction the Assad regime for human rights abuses**

The United States should work to impose further unilateral and multilateral sanctions on the Assad regime for its ongoing human rights abuses.

First, the White House should get other countries—especially in Europe—to impose sanctions similar to those that the United States has already imposed on the Syrian government, such as:

- The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 (Public Law 108-175), which already forbids a wide range of U.S. exports to Syria
- Executive Order 13572, signed by President Obama on April 29, 2011, which targets the property and interests not only of several high-ranking Syrian officials and entities, but also of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force, which is believed to be aiding Syria’s crackdown on protestors.
- Executive Order 13573, signed by President Obama on May 18, 2011, which expands the list of Syrian officials sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses to include Bashar al-Assad himself, as well as Syria’s vice president, prime minister, defense and interior ministers, and head of military intelligence.

Second, the Executive Branch and Congress should push for multilateral sanctions on Syria’s energy industry and other sectors that fund the Assad regime. The petroleum sector alone provides as much as a third of the Syrian government’s revenue. As the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Andrew J. Tabler said, “If you really want to pressure the Assad regime, targeting energy makes sense because it deprives them of a source of revenue.”

Third, the Obama administration should redouble efforts to get the United Nations Security Council to pass measures in response to the Syrian government’s human rights abuses. As the Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ Tony Badran wrote:

“The United States, along with Britain and France, is halfheartedly seeking to overcome Chinese and Russian objections to a Security Council resolution condemning Assad . . . . Yet consensus requires American leadership to coalesce. French, Qatari, and Turkish officials are operating on their own because they cannot be sure of Washington’s position . . . . Once Washington states unequivocally that it sees no role for Assad except for him to leave, everything else will follow. The position of the superpower, after all, matters.”
(3) Withdraw the U.S. Ambassador to Syria and expel Syria’s Ambassador to the United States

President Obama should recall the U.S. Ambassador to Syria—unless the administration is willing to use him as a proactive and public advocate for the Syrian people in their struggle against Assad. Notwithstanding Ambassador Robert Ford’s praiseworthy visit to Hama on July 8, 2011, the continued presence of a U.S. envoy in Damascus lends legitimacy to the Assad regime.

In an effort to engage Damascus, Obama used a recess appointment in December 2010 to install Ford as the first U.S. Ambassador to Syria since the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Given that Syria has long been a state sponsor of terror, allied with Iran, and unwilling to conclude a peace deal with Israel, key U.S. lawmakers had objected to sending an envoy to Syria. At the time the administration had countered, “No other U.S. official in Damascus can provide the outreach and high-profile attention to the Syrian people that an ambassador can.”

Despite the Obama administration’s strategy of engagement with Syria, Assad has not renounced his support of terrorism, and his regime’s barbaric campaign against peaceful protesters demonstrates that its sole interest is to maintain power. As the Council on Foreign Relations’ Elliott Abrams wrote:

“We have two options. The first is to recall him, citing this attack on the embassy plus previous Syrian misconduct. The second is to send him back to Hama and to ratchet up his public displays of disgust with the regime and its behavior. If he does not take those steps, there is no point in his remaining in Syria. If he does take them, either he will become a symbol of resistance to tyranny (always a great role for any American envoy) or he will be expelled from Syria. The latter would dramatize America’s final break with Assad . . . . Either way we win.”

Moreover, the United States, on principle, should immediately expel Syria’s Ambassador to the United States, Imad Mustapha, for the provocative actions of Syrian officials against American citizens on U.S. soil. As a State Department spokesman said:

“We received reports that Syrian mission personnel under Ambassador Mustapha’s authority have been conducting video and photographic surveillance of people participating in peaceful demonstrations in the United States . . . . We are also investigating reports that the Syrian government has sought retribution against Syrian family members for the actions of their relatives in the United States exercising their lawful rights in this country and will respond accordingly.”

(4) Pressure the Assad regime over its secret nuclear program

The continuing controversy over Syria’s covert nuclear program gives the United States another lever to pressure the Assad regime internationally.

In September 2007, an Israeli airstrike destroyed the plutonium-producing nuclear reactor that Syria had secretly built, with North Korean assistance, near the town of al-Kibar—a reactor that the Assad regime could have used to acquire fissile material for use in nuclear weapons. As a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), Syria was obligated to declare the existence of the al-Kibar reactor to the world’s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In response, IAEA inspectors tried to investigate Syria’s nuclear program to make sure that no
other undeclared nuclear sites or weapons-related nuclear activities exist. Syria, however, repeatedly stonewalled the IAEA’s investigation. As a result, the IAEA’s 35-nation Board of Governors voted on June 9, 2011, to find Syria in “noncompliance” with its international obligations, and send its case to the U.N. Security Council for further action.

The United States should use Syria’s referral to the U.N. Security Council to pursue sanctions and pressure the Assad regime to come clean about the complete scope and history of its secret nuclear activities. As the Foreign Policy Initiative’s Jamie M. Fly and Robert Zarate wrote:

“Washington should support Syria’s referral to the U.N. Security Council and pursue sanctions until the regime reveals the full extent of its nuclear program. More immediately, the White House should also impose, in addition to the human rights sanctions recently put in place, unilateral sanctions on Syria for its illicit nuclear activities . . . . Otherwise, Washington is sending the message that any criminal regime can slaughter its own people, consort with terrorists, violate international obligations, and pursue nuclear weapons—and face no real consequences.”

(5) Get Turkey to exert pressure on the Assad regime

Finally, the United States should encourage Turkey to pressure President Assad to step down.

Although Ankara has tried to pursue a so-called “No Problems” foreign policy to increase its regional influence, the Syrian government’s continuing crackdown on protestors has led thousands of refugees to flee into Turkey. As the Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ Reuel Marc Gerecht wrote:

“[In response] Turkish public opinion became intensely hostile to Damascus. Turkish newspapers started talking about the “Alawite (read Shiite) dictatorship” in Damascus, enflaming Sunni Turkey’s distaste for things Shiite. [Foreign Minister Ahmet] Davutoglu’s nonsectarian, pro-Muslim, “neo-Ottoman” policy of good relations with all of Turkey’s Middle Eastern neighbors has been coming apart because a democratizing Turkey actually does care about self-government beyond its borders. It cares, too, about Sunnis getting killed and tortured by Shiite heretics.”

As President Obama has said, “I am incredibly optimistic about the prospect of stronger and stronger ties between the United States and Turkey that will be based not only on our NATO relationship, our military-to-military relationship, our strategic relationship, but also increasing economic ties.” Syria provides a chance to test the strength of ties between Washington and Ankara. The administration therefore should seek to advance America’s strategic and moral interests with Turkey’s economic interests, and encourage Ankara to support a peaceful transition in Syria.

Conclusion

Unless President Obama gets serious about the Assad regime, the world will face a slow-motion human rights disaster in Syria. In addition to those on the Syrian street who looking to Washington for leadership, other dictators are paying attention. The United States therefore must do all it can to side with the Syrian people and hasten Assad’s exit.