

Three Ways to Help Push Asad Aside

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President Obama's call for Bashar al-Asad to step aside puts to rest debate about where exactly Washington stands on the Syrian regime.

Today, five months after the Syrian regime began its brutal crackdown on anti-regime protestors, President Obama announced that "the time has come for President Asad to step aside." The statement, released simultaneously with a speech by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, puts to rest debate about where exactly Washington stands on the Asad regime. The question now is how best to work with the Syrian people to bring about Bashar al-Asad's downfall.

First, the United States must bring concerted multilateral pressure to bear on Damascus. Historically, this is a diplomatic tactic that works with Asad, most recently in forcing him to pull his forces out of Lebanon in April 2005. Soon after Obama's announcement, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and the European Union joined in calling for Asad to step aside. To give these calls teeth, the United States and its allies, particularly countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, should launch a concerted diplomatic effort to delegitimize the regime and its representatives in international forums. Washington should also press for a UN Security Council resolution condemning the crackdown, as well as refer the regime to the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court. A contact group with regional allies to coordinate policy toward the regime would also be useful.

Second, Obama announced a slew of new sanctions, most notably the unprecedented move of targeting Syrian oil sales. The administration will also implement the final measure of the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act: a ban on American investment. The EU, whose countries account for more than 90 percent of Syrian oil sales, is meeting tomorrow to consider similar measures. These efforts will deprive the regime of vital foreign exchange (oil proceeds account for approximately 30 percent of Syrian budgetary revenue) and force it to borrow from the Central Bank or private banks. This could in turn exacerbate tensions between key constituencies in Syria and facilitate splits in the regime, most notably with the Damascene and Allepine trading families.

Third, the United States should continue to support the work of Ambassador Robert Ford as he liaises with the opposition and the tribes of eastern Syria to help them prepare a viable alternative to Asad's feeble reform plans. Because Ford's work will likely lead the regime to expel him, the Senate, as a sign of solidarity, should cease holding up his nomination and confirm him at the earliest opportunity. Whether based inside or outside the country, the U.S. ambassador to Syria represents a senior American representative

that the opposition and Sunni and Kurdish tribes will take seriously, respect, and be willing to deal with to help bring about a peaceful and orderly transition of power.

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