

Syria and the Next U.S. Administration

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Articles & Testimony

Although Syria has long been a vexing policy issue for the United States, intervening after the election to help end the Assad regime should not be a difficult decision.

During a trip to Lebanon earlier this month, outspoken Druze leader Walid Jumblatt complained bitterly to me about the absence of a serious US policy that would end the senseless killing and destruction in Syria. Jumblatt was right. The Obama Administration's Syria policy since the beginning of the uprising has demonstrated a real lack of leadership and sense of urgency.

Even before the popular revolt, the Administration's policy of trying to diplomatically engage with the clearly irredeemable dictator was misguided. But over the last nineteen months, this early Administration misstep was compounded -- first by opposing the militarization of the intifada, then by focusing efforts on the hapless Syrian National Council, and later by outsourcing the lead on Syrian policy to the Turks, the French, and finally the United Nations.

The approach suggested a total misreading of the nature of the Assad regime and the trajectory of events on the ground in Syria.

In addition to the staggering cost in human lives and the loss of Syria's historical patrimony, the Obama Administration's inability until now to formulate and lead an effective response to the massacre has resulted in the radicalization, Islamization, and jihadization of the conflict, trends that may be difficult if not impossible to reverse.

To be fair, Syria -- under both Hafiz and Bashar -- has always been a tough nut to crack for US policymakers. In 2003 when I was responsible for Syria at the Pentagon during the Bush administration, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tasked me to come up with a strategy to "put more pressure on Syria," which was at the time flooding Iraq with insurgents. Prior to putting pen to paper, I consulted with then assistant secretary of defense, Peter Rodman, who had worked with Henry Kissinger in the Nixon and Ford Administrations. Rodman told me that Kissinger had

tasked him with the same assignment in 1973.

In the end, while the Bush Administration levied a series of painful sanctions -- including particularly onerous actions against the Commercial Bank of Syria and the designation of Assad's cousin and money-man Rami Makhlouf -- and supported anti-Syrian Lebanese in their heroic efforts to end the brutal Syrian occupation, we never succeeded in changing Assad's reckless and murderous behavior.

Regardless of whether Mitt Romney or Barack Obama is elected on November 6th, the start of the next Administration presents an opportunity for a change in US policy on Syria.

The first step should be to end the gratuitous opposition to arming the Free Syrian Army. While Qatar and Saudi Arabia have done an important service in providing weapons to fuel the revolt, these states' penchant for arming Islamist militants -- who, after Assad's demise, will surely seek to change Syria's traditionally tolerant and moderate religious outlook -- serves neither Syrian nor American interests.

After the elections, Washington should take the lead in vetting and providing units of the Free Syrian Army with the weapons required to more quickly end the war. Governor Romney has already indicated that if elected, this would be his policy. It's possible that if re-elected, President Obama -- freed from electoral constraints -- might also move in this direction.

The logic is simple: the longer the fighting continues, the harder it will be to prevent violent retribution against ethnic and religious communities that perpetrated or were seen as supporting regime atrocities. At the same time, continued fighting all but assures a fragmented, chaotic post-Assad Syria dominated by well-armed -- and perhaps Islamist -- militias, a dangerous prospect in a state with one of the most advanced chemical weapons programs in the region.

Second, Washington should immediately implement a diplomatic initiative focused on establishing an Arab consensus in support of a no-fly zone patrolling the territory in northern Syria liberated from Assad. It should be clear now that Russia and China are not going to end their opposition in the United Nations to concerted international action to protect the Syrian people. Absent this kind of so-called "international legitimacy," Arab support for military action would be helpful in encouraging a more forward-leading US policy.

Even better would be Arab leadership in establishing the no-fly zone and, eventually, a post-Assad peacekeeping force. After all, the Qatari, Emirati, and Jordanian Air Forces were deployed in the Libya conflict. Unlike Iraq, after Assad is dispatched, Arab states -- and not the US -- should be prepared to take the lead in investing their money and troops in post-war stabilization and rebuilding efforts.

Given the capabilities demonstrated in Libya, there is no reason the United States alone should bear both the burden and the risk in Syria. To wit, notwithstanding the generally applauded US military involvement in the Libyan revolution, experience suggests that the US would be both praised and cursed for helping to liberate Syria.

No doubt, historically Syria has been a vexing policy issue for the United States, but intervening now to help end the Assad regime should not be a difficult decision. Not only has the dictator massacred tens of thousands at home, he has undermined US interests in Lebanon and Israel and was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of US soldiers in Iraq between 2003 and 2009. Moreover, the fall of Assad would be a significant setback for the theocratic regime in Tehran. The provision of meaningful military support for the Syrian revolution would reflect both US humanitarian concerns and strategic interests. It is a policy that the next US President -- and Arab states -- should adopt.

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