

U.S. Options for Syria: Action vs. Inaction

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration should take actions to overcome the obstacles to, and mitigate the risks of, bolder international action in Syria.

With the failure of the Annan plan and the increasing civilian toll of fighting in Syria, the Obama administration is reportedly considering more proactive steps to compel Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to step aside. While most options carry risks, so does inaction. To achieve its policy objectives in Syria and increase the available options, the Obama administration should take actions to overcome the obstacles to, and mitigate the risks of, bolder international action.

Policy Objectives

For the United States, the Syrian uprising represents not only a humanitarian crisis to be addressed but a strategic opportunity to be seized. The Assad regime -- Iran's sole ally in the Middle East -- has aided terrorist groups and foreign fighters and has sought to destabilize Lebanon. While a successor regime may still oppose U.S. interests in some areas, it would unlikely prove a close ally to Tehran or Iranian proxy groups such as Hizballah.

For these reasons, President Obama more than a year ago called upon Assad to resign. Since doing so, however, the United States has proven unable or unwilling to compel Assad to actually step aside; furthermore, Washington appears to have stepped back from this policy objective, for example by endorsing the so-called Annan plan, which does not explicitly call for Assad's resignation. Washington's inability or unwillingness to compel Assad's departure from Syria, as well as its shifting objectives, poses a threat to American credibility and the perception of American power in the region.

The Obstacles

For all that might be gained by successfully achieving Assad's downfall in Syria, a more proactive U.S. approach also entails risks:

- First, the Obama administration worries about exacerbating the violence and instability in Syria, which could continue even after Assad's fall and could also spill over into neighboring countries.
- Second, U.S. officials are concerned about the fragmented state of the Syrian opposition and its implications for a post-Assad government. Unlike Libya's Transitional National Council, which based itself inside Libya after the liberation of Benghazi and achieved a common agenda and remarkable consistency of message until the fall of Qadhafi, the Syrian opposition has been forced to base itself abroad, failing to unite around a single platform or leadership. As for the Free Syrian Army and other armed opposition elements, understandable concern exists that their ultimate aims and interests may differ considerably from Washington's, that arms provided to them may be poorly controlled, and that militias may be reluctant to disarm and cede power to civilians if Assad is ultimately toppled. The pre-Assad history of Syria was characterized by rapid-fire revolutions carried out by military figures, and avoiding a return to such a scenario is vital for Syria's future.
- Third, Washington is concerned about international support for more proactive steps in Syria. Like in Libya, the Obama administration has preferred not to lead international efforts on Syria, but to await international consensus and defer to the leadership of regional or international partners. Unlike in Libya, however, such consensus has been elusive. While much attention has been focused on Russia's effective veto of UN Security Council sanctions, not to mention military intervention, Moscow is not the only obstacle to a bolder approach. French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who played a pivotal role in marshaling support for the Libya intervention, is no longer in office, and the European Union is mired in an economic crisis, leaving no one other than the Syrians themselves to champion greater Western involvement in dethroning Assad.

While these risks are not trivial, inaction also carries with it consequences. Rather than cutting Assad off from Iran and Hizballah, the fighting has drawn in both parties more deeply, risking the regionalization of the conflict. Also, one of the very risks Washington has been seeking to avoid -- spillover of the conflict into neighboring states -- is already occurring, with clashes occurring in both Lebanon and Turkey. And patient U.S. efforts to convince Russia to support international sanctions have borne little fruit while expending valuable time.

Policy Options

Looking forward, the Obama administration should recommit firmly to its original objective of compelling Assad to step down. A clear stance on this point will ensure that those in Syria and the region who support Assad will face up to the consequences of this support and not count on a diplomatic deal that protects their privileges and prerogatives. To begin making progress toward accomplishing this objective, the United States should work to diminish the obstacles to bolder and more effective action:

1. Continue to increase diplomatic and economic pressure. While not abandoning efforts to secure UN Security Council sanctions, Washington should not dilute its policy objectives or provide lifelines to the Assad regime solely for the sake of garnering Russian support. Realistically, Moscow is unlikely at this stage to make a strategic shift in its approach to Syria, which it sees as one of the few remaining bastions of Russian influence in a key region. Washington should therefore emphasize its diplomatic efforts on ratcheting up non-UN sanctions to the greatest possible extent, as Treasury secretary Timothy Geithner urged at a recent meeting in Istanbul. Sanctions, however, must be just one element of a broader effort to pressure Assad, as history demonstrates the ability of determined regimes to resist even comprehensive diplomatic and economic pressure.
2. Throw U.S. support behind Assad opponents in Syria. Washington should take steps to bolster the Syrian opposition and overcome doubts about its reliability, concentrating these efforts in two areas: First, the civilian opposition should

be urged -- even required, as a condition for international aid -- to unify behind a common leadership and platform that is pluralistic and provides for civil liberties, and should be provided with whatever international assistance is required. Second, the disparate elements that make up the armed opposition should be thoroughly vetted, including through greater contact with Western officials, and those found most trustworthy should be provided not just with arms but with intelligence, training in command and control, and equipment. This assistance should be conditioned on the militias subordinating themselves to the civilian opposition.

3. Lead consultations on international intervention. With Russia and China able to block UN Security Council authorization for intervention in Syria and with regional allies looking to Washington for leadership, the United States will need to lead discussions among allies on preparing for the possibility of military intervention in Syria should other measures fail to sway the Assad regime. Military intervention in Syria must have two objectives: first, to establish buffer or "safe" zones along Syria's borders to protect displaced persons and prevent further spillover of violence into neighboring countries, thus preventing the Syrian crisis from becoming a regional conflagration; and second, to deprive Assad of his most lethal resources and to support indigenous Syrian opposition forces by imposing no-fly, no-drive, and/or naval quarantine areas. While such intervention may ultimately be unnecessary, planning now for such actions and building international support for them will ensure that viable military options are available to Washington should they be required. In addition, such planning -- including the end of categorical U.S. and NATO statements that no intervention is being contemplated -- may influence the calculus of Assad and his supporters in Syria, as well as Russia, which may find supporting international sanctions preferable to the alternative of international intervention.

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