

A Fighting Chance: Why Obama's Support for Syria's Non-Violent Protests Isn't Enough

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Oct 25, 2011

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By telling the Syrian opposition to remain nonviolent and explicitly ruling out military intervention, the Obama administration is laying out unrealistic expectations.

Since this summer, the United States has generally played a constructive role in support of the Syrian opposition. In contrast to Russia and China -- whose flags are now routinely torched by Syrians after the two countries vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime for atrocities -- Washington is popular with Syria's anti-regime opposition. Although it took seven months and approximately 2000 dead protestors, in August President Obama called for Assad to "step aside." Since then, in addition to orchestrating an impressive array of multilateral energy sanctions against Damascus, the administration -- via its ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, who was pulled from the country over the weekend after "credible threats against his personal safety" -- has unambiguously aligned Washington with regime opponents.

Yet underlying the administration's current course of action has been a different, less heartening strain of rhetoric which makes clear that U.S. support for the Syrian opposition is strictly conditional. By predicating its support on the opposition remaining nonviolent (even in the face of massive violence directed against it), and by explicitly ruling out the possibility of military intervention, the Obama administration is laying out a set of unrealistic expectations -- one which draws a false equivalence between violence and self-defense, and which will needlessly limit the United States' range of options should the situation in Syria become even worse.

In September, the Obama administration warned that it might withdraw support for the opposition if -- after approximately 3000 peaceful protestors have been killed -- it "suddenly become[s] violent, or...foster[s] terrorism" against the Assad regime. This statement, made by Ford, essentially predicates U.S. support on the protests remaining nonviolent. But as the conflict drags on and the body count of the protestors mounts, there is an ongoing

debate among the opposition regarding the militarization of the conflict. And the longer the repression continues, the more likely the argument in favor of violence will prevail. Recent reports of assassinations in Syria -- of the pro-regime Mufti's son, as well as regime-friendly academics -- suggest that the uprising is already moving in this direction.

Washington's concern is that the increasing rate of defections from the military, coupled with rising opposition calls for the militarization of the revolt, will contribute to sectarian conflict or full-blown civil war in Syria. While the U.S. can be excused not for wanting to jump into another conflict, it is both strange and inappropriate for the administration to be lecturing Syrians on how they shouldn't defend themselves. Moreover, the administration may be correct in its assessment that a militarization of the revolt would be unsuccessful, but given the increasing number of regime-perpetrated atrocities, a demand for pacifism seems neither realistic nor reasonable. Indeed, the ultimate result will be simply to place the U.S. in a tight spot should the opposition decide to take up arms. And in the meantime, knowledge that the leading international supporter of the opposition does not countenance, and in fact will penalize, violent retaliation against the regime provides Assad and his cronies with a seeming *carte blanche*.

In addition, the Obama administration has removed from the table the possibility of future international intervention, *à la* Libya. And it's even gone further, admonishing the opposition "not look to outsiders to try and solve the problem." Unlike Libya -- which was somehow an international problem requiring NATO intervention -- the uprising against Assad is, according to Ambassador Ford, "a Syrian problem and it needs Syrian solutions." While it seems reasonable for Washington to manage expectations about the extent of the United States' commitment, it is equally disingenuous for the administration to claim -- after demanding that Assad step down and levying harsh sanctions to achieve that end -- that responsibility for finding solutions to the problem rest solely in the hands of Syrians. And when it comes to the possibility of intervention, there is little benefit to Washington in needlessly limiting its options. After all, should the situation deteriorate further, there may indeed come a time when either multilateral or unilateral military intervention on behalf of the Syrian people is called for.

To be sure, Libya is different than Syria. The principal difference, of course, is the political environment. Neither China nor Russia, nor the Arab League, were willing to defend the Qaddafi regime; these states are more invested in Assad. Likewise, beyond the Syrian opposition -- which is increasingly demanding protection -- there is little international appetite for another military intervention. Yet when it comes to Syria, the administration should nonetheless take a lesson from Libya. Two decades of sanctions could not end the tyrannical reign of Muammar Qaddafi. Syria doesn't have the oil resources of Libya, but more must be done to ensure that Assad, like Qaddafi, doesn't endure. Rather than trying to dictate what the opposition should do and vowing to not militarily intervene, the administration would be better advised to focus on expediting the end of the regime. Otherwise, years from now, Syrians might be burning American flags and asking what Washington is doing to end the slaughter.

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