

# The U.S. Needs to Speak Clearly on Syria

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## The time has come for Washington to withdraw its ambassador from Syria, just as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and others have done.

**W**hen the story of the Arab Spring is written in Arabic, it is unlikely to reflect well on the United States. In his speech about the Middle East on May 19, U.S. President Barack Obama attempted, and rightly so, to place his administration squarely on the side of pro-democracy activists. As seen from the region, however, U.S. actions are hard to square with the message of May 19; instead, the hallmarks of U.S. policy have been hedging and hesitation.

However vociferously we might protest, people in the Middle East are apt to ascribe motives to U.S. policy which differ sharply from those we profess. Seeking to understand our readiness to intervene in Libya and reluctance to do so in Syria, many in the region will assume that the difference is driven by designs on the former's oil resources. Eyeing the withdrawal of U.S. support in February of longtime U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak, some accuse us of naively paving the way for an Islamist takeover, others of privately seeking renewed military rule under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. When people in the region hear us speak of supporting democracy, they look askance upon the tense relationship we have with democratic Turkey versus the coziness of U.S.-Saudi relations.

It is right that U.S. officials push back on cynical readings of U.S. actions in the region; while the United States bases its policies on national interests like any other country, we -- regardless of the administration -- more often than not try genuinely to do so with transparency and with respect for our values. It is also right that U.S. officials make the case that each of the turbulent situations we face in the Middle East is different from the others, and demands therefore a different response.

That said, the line between nuance and vacillation is a fine one, and this is nowhere clearer than in Syria. The Obama Administration has not, despite repeated urging, called for Syrian President Assad to step down. The reason seems clear -- they worry that if they issue such a call and Assad does not, in fact, leave, it will be a further blow to U.S. power and prestige in the region. Every day that Assad remains in power, he would do so in open defiance of the

United States.

This reasoning is logical, but flawed. The fact is that the concatenated statements of U.S. officials amount, in essence, to a call for Assad to step down. The statements made thus far -- whether that Assad has lost legitimacy, that Syria would be better off without him, or that the U.S. has no stake in his continued rule -- certainly give this impression. They are reinforced by the sanctions recently imposed by the Administration, which among other things target Assad personally. More than a distinct policy line, the statements and sanctions appear to constitute a tortured effort to indicate that Assad should go without ever actually saying so.

The problem with this "wink and nod" approach to calling for Assad's departure is that it leaves sufficient ambiguity to hamper American efforts. It feeds the Syrian regime's efforts to convince domestic constituencies who may be on the fence that things will one day return to business as usual. It results in a lack of clarity down Washington's bureaucratic chain -- which is a very long chain indeed -- as to what precisely the U.S. policy is in Syria, leading U.S. diplomatic and military officials on the ground around the world without precise guidance. And, perhaps most damagingly, it feeds into a narrative that the U.S. response to the Arab uprisings has been to hedge our bets and decide whom to support only when the ultimate outcome is already clear. At the end of the day, our failure to speak clearly provides Assad room for maneuver, able to claim on one hand that he is defying Washington, while on the other suggesting to foes in Syria and the region that Washington despite its rhetoric will once again need to deal with him.

Just as American words must be clear, they must be clearly supported by our actions. For this reason, the White House should now withdraw Amb. Robert Ford from Damascus as a sign of its break with the Assad regime. Amb. Ford is a talented and, as he demonstrated in his visit to Hama, courageous diplomat who has acquitted himself well in an extraordinarily difficult assignment. Though it seems unlikely that the Syrian regime would allow him to repeat his visit to Hama or other besieged cities, it is possible that if he were to remain in Damascus he could continue to play a useful role by speaking to the opposition and calling attention to their struggle.

Any such benefit, however, must be weighed against the cost of his remaining and the benefits of withdrawing him. The Obama Administration sent an ambassador to Syria (after the long absence of an American envoy there) with the express intention of engaging with the Assad regime. Nothing would more clearly signal a change in the engagement policy than withdrawing that ambassador, just as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and others have done. The continued presence of a U.S. ambassador in Damascus, however, feeds suspicion that Washington remains open to engaging Assad, and gives cover to other countries who wish to continue doing so. Better than leaving Amb. Ford in place would be recalling him and, as the U.S. ambassador to Libya has been doing, tasking him to work with the Syrian opposition globally to marshal U.S. and international support for them. This would be better, too, than simply allowing his confirmation to die in the Senate, which would further fuel the sense that Washington is split on the issue of how to handle Syria.

Affecting the outcome in Syria will require a mix of international isolation, economic pressure, and the exacerbation of internal fissures. Within each pillar there are a number of steps -- the withdrawal of Western ambassadors, the formation of an international "contact group" to coordinate policy, the imposition of energy and other economic sanctions, for example -- which can be taken to add to the strong measures which the Obama Administration has already put in place. But the United States must start by ensuring that our own policy -- toward Syria and toward democracy in the Arab world broadly -- is unmistakable.

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