

Is the U.S. Ambassador to Syria Being Unfairly Blamed for the Administration's Bad Policy?

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Aug 4, 2011

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Washington has several policy options short of military action to torque the pressure on the Syrian regime and to help the Syrians themselves topple the dictatorship.

On Tuesday, as Syrian shells rained down on the besieged city of Hama, the White House took the opportunity to press for senate confirmation of its ambassador to Damascus, Robert Ford. At his hearing, the ambassador described the regime of Bashar Al Assad as either "unable or unwilling to lead democratic transition, but either way it doesn't matter: it's not in our or [the] Syrian peoples' interest." After months of hedging and obfuscations from the Obama administration about the United States' stance towards the Syrian regime, Ford's words were a breath of fresh air. But given the near universal disapproval of the administration's Syria policy, it's difficult to imagine that Ford will be confirmed. (No Republican senators even showed up to the hearing). Indeed, even though Ford has been personally outspoken on the regime's brutality, he has become the totem -- if not the lightning rod -- of the administration's failed policy.

Ford was posted to Syria via a recess appointment in December 2010. To his credit, he traveled to the besieged city of Hama in early July to demonstrate solidarity with the protestors -- a move that was widely hailed as a brave and unambiguous statement of U.S. sympathies. But the Obama administration has marred these actions through a series of equivocations and delays.

Following the regime's crackdown over the weekend, the White House issued a statement condemning Assad and vowing to "work with others around the world to isolate" the regime. Five months and nearly 2,000 casualties into the uprising, however, it was the eighth such statement issued by the chief executive. Adding to the chorus, Foggy Bottom has condemned Damascus 20 times.

While each one of these statements has been incrementally tougher, the rhetoric hasn't made much of an impression on Assad. It also hasn't impressed the Syrian opposition. As 34-year-old human rights lawyer and opposition leader Razan Zaytouneh -- currently in hiding in Syria -- told the Italian Arabic news service Adnkronos on Sunday night, "There is an overwhelming feeling among Syrians that the Western states are giving chance after chance to the regime in order to repress the revolution, and that there are no real efforts to condemn and to demand for the regime to leave."

The administration's ambivalent response to the Syrian uprising has also come under fire from both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. During a recent congressional hearing, Representative Gary Ackerman, the top Democrat on the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, delivered a scathing assessment of Washington's Syria policy: "Somehow," he said, "it manages to combine colossal moral failure and unimaginable strategic imbecility with the overpowering stench of hypocrisy, thanks to our feckless intervention in Libya." And on Monday, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, along with Joe Lieberman, released a statement calling for Obama to finally "demand Assad leave power," a position the administration -- in light of its expeditious abandonment of Washington's 30-year strategic ally in Cairo, Hosni Mubarak -- has inexplicably failed to adopt.

The *Washington Post* has also been quite critical of the administration's stance. In April, in an editorial titled "Shameful US Inaction on Syria's Massacres," the Post went so far as to accuse the administration of "effectively sid[ing] with the regime against the protestors."

It's true that the administration, with serious congressional impetus, stands poised to level a slate of energy sanctions against the regime. This will no doubt increase pressure on the Assad government, especially if the Europeans follow the U.S. lead. Nevertheless, the administration's Syria policy remains muddled five months into the uprising, with contradictory statements emanating from the highest levels. In June, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the Assad regime to be "illegitimate," only to be rolled back days later by the president, who described Assad as "increasingly...los[ing] legitimacy in the eyes of his people."

For decades, Damascus has vexed Washington policymakers. The uprising is an opportunity to change the dynamic. The Syrian people have clearly demonstrated their commitment to regime change. Meanwhile, the most forward leaning expression of U.S. policy vis-a-vis the Syrian regime is Secretary Clinton's double negative pronouncement that Bashar Al Assad is "not indispensable." The administration's apparent ambivalence about the ultimate disposition of the Assad regime lies at the heart of the policy problem.

In his July 31 statement on the massacre, President Obama said the United States would "stand with the Syrian people." Washington has several policy options short of military action to torque the pressure on the regime and to help the Syrians themselves topple the dictatorship. It's time for the administration to get off the fence.

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