

A Sea Change in Washington's Policy toward Syria

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Hillary Clinton's recent characterization of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad as "not indispensable" is the latest public signal of a quiet sea change in U.S. policy toward the regime.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement yesterday that Syria's President Bashar al-Assad is "not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power" is the latest public signal of a quiet sea change in U.S. Syria policy over the past few weeks.

For months, Washington took a careful, cautious approach to the protests in Syria. Bashar al-Assad leads a minority Alawite-dominated regime, whose members command the country's security agencies and armed forces. This strengthened Assad's hand and mitigated the risk of the armed forces splitting off and turning against the regime as in Egypt and Tunisia. Assad was also helped by the fact that the protests largely took place in rural areas, far away from Syria's urban centers.

But as the regime doubled down on violence as a strategy for maintaining control, killing an estimated 1,500 civilians to date and arresting more than 12,000 people throughout the country, Washington took note. Protests spread in number and intensity.

The Syrian regime's battle with protestors in Tel Khallak along the Syrian-Lebanese frontier, as well as in Jisr as-Shaghour along Syria's border with Turkey caused thousands of people to flee their homes and turned the Syrian uprising into an international humanitarian crisis.

Most recently, Washington watched as the Assad regime threatened more violence to quell peaceful protestors in the Syrian city of Hama -- where the regime massacred 30,000 people in 1982.

U.S. ambassador Robert Ford's visit to Hama last week showed very clearly that unlike in 1982, the regime's actions at Hama will not go unnoticed.

Taking a page out of its standard playbook, the Assad regime attempted to cast the protests as the work of "foreign interference." It sent pro-Assad supporters to attack and scale the walls of the U.S embassy in Damascus, including spray painting graffiti on the embassy's walls describing Ford as a "dog" and hoisting the Syrian flag over the embassy's chancery (albeit for a short time).

No embassy personnel were hurt, but the attack marked a turning point in U.S.-Syrian relations. Even before Clinton's strong statements on Assad, who she added "has lost (his) legitimacy," Robert Ford's posting on Facebook pointed out the irony of the attack.

"I have not seen the police assault a 'mnhebak' demonstration yet," Ford wrote, in reference to the "You (Bashar) are Our Beloved" slogan used by pro-Assad protesters throughout the country. "On July 9 a 'mnhebak' group threw rocks at our embassy, causing some damage. They resorted to violence, unlike the people in Hama, who have stayed peaceful. Go look at the Ba'ath or police headquarters in Hama -- no damage that I saw."

U.S.-Syria policy is changing for the better. While we can't yet discern exactly what measures the Obama Administration will ultimately use against the Assad regime, we can expect more designations of individuals responsible for the regime's brutal crackdown. Behind the scenes, U.S. policymakers are focusing moves against Syrian energy as well. In the meantime, we all can expect stronger public statements and possibly more visits by U.S. ambassador Robert Ford to besieged Syrian cities.

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