

Obama's Push-Pull Strategy: How Washington Should Plan for a Post-Assad Syria

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer/), [Mara Karlin \(/experts/mara-karlin\)](/experts/mara-karlin/)

May 26, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer/)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



[Mara Karlin \(/experts/mara-karlin\)](/experts/mara-karlin/)

Mara Karlin is the associate director of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.



Articles & Testimony

Andrew J. Tabler and Mara Karlin discuss what the United States can do to bring the Syrian crisis and the Assad regime to a peaceful end.

Foreign Affairs recently convened an online panel to discuss the increasingly brutal crackdown in Syria, the durability of the Assad regime, and what, if anything, the United States can do to bring the crisis to a peaceful end. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute Next Generation fellow Andrew J. Tabler and Mara Karlin, former Levant director at the Pentagon.

[Read the entire discussion on the Foreign Affairs website](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/roundtables/end-of-days-for-assad)

[\(http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/roundtables/end-of-days-for-assad\)](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/roundtables/end-of-days-for-assad).

Last week, U.S. President Barack Obama gave Syrian President Bashar al-Assad an ultimatum: Lead a transition to democracy, or, in Obama's words, "get out of the way." The speech recognized an inconvenient truth for Washington: Although the Assad regime has not yet reached a tipping point like that of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, nearly three months of protests across Syria have shaken the Assad regime to its core. Government forces have killed 1,000 protesters and arrested another 10,000, yet demonstrators continue to fill the streets demanding the fall of the government. Assad is now caught in a dilemma: He can continue relying on his fellow Alawite security chiefs and the minority system they dominate to persecute the predominately Sunni protesters, or he can enact deep political reforms that could convince the protesters to return home but would end the Alawite-led system on which he so

heavily relies. Either way, the Assad regime as it has existed for more than four decades is disintegrating.

Now, to follow through on his bold declaration last week, Obama and his advisers must plan for a Syria without the Assad regime as it currently exists. To do so, Washington should try to push Assad from power while pulling in a new leadership.

As a start of this "push" strategy, Obama must go even further than he did in his speech last week and publicly state that Assad must go. Such a move would signal that the United States will no longer deal with Assad. Put bluntly, high-level U.S. officials would no longer plead for Assad's support on questions of U.S. interest in the region, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon.

Sanctions are another way to weaken Assad's already loosening grip on power. Obama has issued an executive order levying sanctions on Syrian officials responsible for human rights abuses during the current crackdown. Last Wednesday, Washington added Assad himself to the order. Although Assad and other Syrian officials have few assets in the United States, multinational banks and financial firms, which risk losing their U.S. business if they associate with individuals under U.S. sanction, have now been forced to cut ties. This effect has been compounded by recent European Union sanctions against Assad and 22 other regime officials involved in putting down the protests.

The United States could also exploit the vulnerability of Syria's oil sector, a key node of power for the Assad regime. Washington should press EU member states to join in the United States' ban (passed as part of the U.S.A. Patriot Act) on transactions with the Commercial Bank of Syria, the country's largest state-owned bank and the chief vehicle for recycling Syrian oil receipts. The bank is known to keep a portion of its approximately \$20 billion in hard currency reserves in short-term accounts at European banks. Freezing those funds would threaten the regime's economic viability and undermine its support from the Syrian business elite. (Assad's much-maligned cousin, Rami Makhlouf -- who himself was designated in a 2008 executive order and whose businesses were further designated under last week's executive order -- would particularly suffer, given his substantial investments in Syrian oil production.)

Furthermore, the United States could invoke some combination of the remaining tenets of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. (The act was first enacted by Congress in 2003 to sanction Syria for its pernicious meddling in Iraq and Lebanon, support for terror groups, and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.) Those tenets include a ban on U.S. investment in Syria, a ban on the travel of Syrian diplomats beyond a 25-mile radius of Washington and New York, and a downgrading of diplomatic relations.

These bilateral moves would capitalize on the growing European and Turkish consensus that the status quo in Syria must change. Such a united front would show Arab allies, most notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt (both of which have no love for Assad), that Washington is serious about its "push" strategy and could entice them to actively join the anti-Assad bandwagon. Also, a concerted, multilateral effort against the Assad regime would help strip away Russian and Chinese objections to a UN Security Council resolution condemning the violence, which, in turn, could spur UN action to bring Assad before the International Criminal Court. Continued pressure against the regime for its attempted nuclear program and its violations of UN Security Council resolutions targeting Damascus' support for nonstate actors in Lebanon (including Hezbollah, other militias, and al Qaeda affiliates) would further isolate its few supporters, given the Assad regime's increasingly bloody crackdown and unwillingness to reform.

Within Syria, such moves would send clear signals about Washington's intentions, which, until last week's executive order directed at Assad and other top officials, were seen with some disappointment by Syrian oppositionists. Most important, such strong U.S. action would encourage Syria's central players to place their bets on a future without Assad. In particular, the merchant classes in Damascus and Aleppo, whose economic patronage has historically buoyed the Assad regime and given it a veneer of Sunni legitimacy, could be convinced that Assad is no longer the safest or most dependable protector of their commercial interests. They could be further distanced from Assad by

additional sanctions on a wider net of Syrian businessmen under Obama's executive order. Similarly, Syrian military officers (some of whom are Sunni) as well as the army's enlisted rank and file (which is largely Sunni) could be convinced to question seriously Assad's ability to survive. This would help raise the possibility of Sunni members of the Syrian military stepping in to save the country by ousting the ruling family.

As the United States works to push Assad from power, it should also be looking to pull in new political forces to replace him. Above all else, Syrians themselves must be at the forefront of any regime change in Damascus. Washington should, therefore, begin an active dialogue with the members of the National Initiative for Change, a declaration signed in April by nearly 200 prominent figures in the Syrian diaspora. Syria's opposition groups have historically been divided by ideology, ethnicity, and egos; the NIC, by contrast, is an inclusive body whose diverse constituencies make it better able to deliver real change. Focusing attention on the NIC would also allow Washington to distance itself from organizations with anti-Western sentiments, such as various anti-imperial leftist parties and the Muslim Brotherhood.

To further assist the Syrian opposition, Washington should, at a minimum, find a way to offer courses in political organizing and rule-of-law training, perhaps conducted by the National Democratic Institute or the International Republican Institute. Although the Syrian regime will surely oppose such training, conducting courses outside of Syria or over the Internet are realistic alternatives. The pervasive use of the Internet in Syria, and the proxy servers that Syrians regularly use to get around the regime's Internet firewall, would make it possible to carry out these operations on the ground, as is clear from the deluge of protest footage secretly sent out of the country over the Web each day. Washington should also encourage the Syrian opposition to assemble a conference in the region in which a clear, multiconfessional leadership structure is elected (preferably a team of three or so individuals who are empowered to make decisions on the opposition's behalf) and the initial outlines of priorities for transition are established. The upcoming Syrian opposition conference to be held in Antalya, Turkey, on May 31 could serve as an appropriate venue for these decisions. If the conference elects a respected, diverse leadership and adopts principles broadly consonant with U.S. values, including respecting minority rights and secularism, then Washington should quickly arrange meetings with the newly elected leadership.

This element of the policy requires Obama's personal investment: In calling for new leadership in Syria, the White House must think about what that leadership should look like by setting clear parameters for cooperation and not simply picking favorites. Any new, post-Assad leadership in Syria should be transparent, respect human rights, and reflect an accurate representation of the country's sectarian makeup (in other words, not the current minority system).

This is why the U.S. government's list of priorities regarding Syria needs to be switched from an emphasis on the peace process to one centered on domestic Syrian affairs. Until a few weeks ago, Washington based its Syria strategy almost wholly on the conclusion of a Syria-Israel peace treaty that would require Assad to break off relations with Iran and Hezbollah. Now, Washington should focus on bringing about a government led by the country's Sunni majority, which would naturally create considerable tension with or a break in Syria's alliance with Shiite-dominated Iran.

Given the current standoff between the Assad regime and Syria's protestors, the fall of the Assad regime will be much bloodier -- and take much longer -- than the collapse of the dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. But it will fall eventually. In the meantime, a push-and-pull strategy will provide Washington with multiple tools to bring about an orderly end to one of the United States' most problematic regional adversaries. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)

