

Obama to Assad: Reform or Leave

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Washington and its allies should reach out to the Syrian opposition and help them plan for the eventuality of Assad's departure.

President Barack Obama's speech on the Middle East signaled a strategic shift in Washington's thinking on Syria. The message was President Bashar al-Assad must lead a transition to democratic rule or "get out of the way."

This means that the Syrian president must immediately begin a process of power sharing between his Alawite-minority dominated regime and his majority Sunni population or face international isolation and pariah status. The fact that Obama openly spoke about Iranian involvement ties Syria's regional and domestic policies together.

Obama was also specific and public in issuing demands -- something Washington has shied away from over the last two years as it pursued a policy based on facilitating Syria-Israel peace talks first and human rights a distant fifth.

By demanding that the Syrian government "stop shooting demonstrators and allow peaceful protests; release political prisoners and stop unjust arrests; allow human rights monitors to have access to cities like Dara'a; and start a serious dialogue to advance a democratic transition" its clear that Washington is developing policy metrics for measuring Assad's actions.

While the regime in Damascus is not yet at the dramatic tipping point like those that led to the fall of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, there is broad recognition among policymakers in Washington that the protest movement and its grievances cannot be accommodated by Assad's minority regime. Other allies, including France and even Turkey, have come to the same general conclusion. Assad must choose the lesser of two evils dilemma from his perspective.

The issuing of sanctions yesterday against President Assad, Vice President Shara, the country's Prime Minister, Interior Minister, and Security Chiefs, (as well as the bodies they command) means that the entire civilian and security apparatus have been essentially made international pariahs.

While it is doubtful that these individuals have many assets in the United States, the "knock on effect" of sanctions, plus similar sanctions rolled out by the European Union, mean those participating or benefiting in repression will not be able to invest their ill-got gains abroad.

Given Assad's terrible track record on reform, there is little sign that he is willing or capable of fulfilling President Obama's demands. In order to placate the protesters, Assad would have to make concessions that would end the privileges and graft enjoyed by the minority security chiefs and officials on whom he now relies more than ever. Thus, Washington needs to develop a plan designed to bring to an end the Assad regime as we know it now.

Whether this means power sharing that leads to majority rule or the full collapse of the Assad regime, Washington, together with its Western and regional allies, should reach out to the Syrian opposition and help them plan for the eventuality of a Syria without Assad at its helm and a Syria firmly out of Iran's orbit.

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[SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms](#) at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on U.S.-Syria relations. He is the author of the forthcoming book [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of America's Battle with Syria \(http://www.chicagoreviewpress.com/catalog/showBook.cfm?ISBN=1569768439\)](#). ❖

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