Twisting Assad's Arm

by Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew J. Tabler (/experts/andrew-j-tabler)
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.

Articles & Testimony

The key to dealing with the Assad regime is to always keep your options open and be prepared to walk away with no obligations. Only by making clear when it will do so, and what will be the consequences, will Washington ever have a hope of getting a straight answer out of the Syrian president.

A little over two years ago, I had to leave my eight-year career as a journalist in Damascus because of a report I had written on the Syrian opposition that the regime didn't like. Since arriving in Washington, I've had the pleasure to share views on the Syrian regime with well-meaning U.S. officials charged with engaging my former home base. But it's become something of a mantra in Washington -- as the regime has perpetrated a brutal crackdown on opposition activists -- that the United States simply has no leverage in Syria.

But after sitting through countless discussions about President Bashar al-Assad and his Alawite-dominated government -- especially since the protests erupted in recent weeks -- it is now clear to me that the problem isn't a lack of leverage, but the strategy being used.

Assad rules through ambiguity and duplicity, and his speech on March 30, in which he blamed unrest sweeping his country on foreign "conspiracies" and refused to announce any specific reforms, indicates that he is not about to change his ways -- at least not without a push from the outside. Assad has spent the last 11 years promising political "reform," but has never got around to delivering it. This is a well-established pattern. He talks about peace with Israel while at the same time delivering Scud missiles to Hezbollah. He promises to keep his hands off Lebanon, but recently worked with Hezbollah to bring down the government in Beirut. He says, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, that he wants a nuclear-free Middle East, but stonewalls International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors investigating the rubble of his North Korean-designed nuclear program.

Applying pressure on Assad has worked in the past. U.S.-led multilateral pressure -- in the face of mass protests similar to those now sweeping Syria -- proved decisive in forcing him in April 2005 to end Syria's 29-year occupation of Lebanon. And U.S. sanctions on the Assad regime have also had an unexpected impact on its worsening finances and the ability of its members to invest internationally. While the Assad regime may have few or no investments in the United States, the "knock-on" effect of U.S. sanctions has deterred most foreign banks and companies from doing business with Damascus -- making lifting sanctions a key Syrian demand in talks with the United States. After all, what major international company would risk its U.S. business to make deals with an economy roughly the size of Pittsburgh? Why couldn't similar efforts work in the current crisis?

Up until now, Barack Obama's administration has engaged Assad with the primary goal of restarting peace talks between Syria and Israel while trying to mitigate the regional damage from Syria's worsening policies. Washington has attempted to test Assad's intention and ability to reorient his country away from Iran and toward the West in Syria-Israel peace talks by putting him on the horns of a dilemma: Either you get back the Golan Heights, or you keep supporting Hezbollah -- but not both. So far those well-intentioned efforts have not broken the gridlock: Israel watches Assad's transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, doubts his peaceful intentions, and refuses to make the risky political decision to rejoin talks. With Washington unable to deliver Israel to the negotiating table, Assad has not yet been compelled to show his hand.

The Obama administration is right to use dilemmas as a negotiating strategy -- it causes people to make clear choices. They are also key instruments to revealing a person's character and intentions, as their choices speak for themselves. But the dilemma has to fit the context. Assad, who in his recent speech repeatedly attributed the unrest in his country to Israeli and American meddling -- and has already lost significant public support by using live fire on protesters -- is not likely to risk further alienating his supporters by signing on the dotted line with Israel anytime soon.

Dilemmas also only work if they are set up properly. So far, the Obama administration has tried to administer its test by talking behind closed doors with Assad about peace with Israel and his destructive policies -- while keeping U.S. sanctions in place. But it has not introduced new negative incentives in response to Assad's regional meddling and hardhanded tactics that diametrically oppose U.S. interests or values. And thus Assad has little fear that Washington will, especially when U.S. officials make his case for him by repeatedly emphasizing their lack of leverage in Damascus. Pressure alone, much like engagement alone, will not be enough to change Assad's policies. Both stand a far better chance of being effective if used in concert. That requires focus and creativity: two things Washington's Syria policy has historically lacked.

The current unrest sweeping Syria and the rest of the Middle East provides Washington with an opportunity to launch a hybrid Syria policy that would allow the administering of more tests in better ways. This will involve expanding the focus of U.S.-Syria policy beyond the Israel question.

First, Washington should shine a light on the Assad regime's human rights violations by bringing it before the U.N. Human Rights Council. On the multilateral front, the administration should be working closely with France and other allies to establish an effective sanctions regime -- including diplomatic isolation -- against Assad to push him to stop his bloody crackdown on protesters and follow through on his reform promises. Second, the Obama administration, in the spirit of its declarations in Libya, should issue a new executive order on human rights abuses in Syria, allowing the Treasury Department to freeze accounts of individuals responsible for the crackdown. Third, it should use this remit to designate more Syrian officials and figures under Executive Order 13460, which targets rampant regime corruption -- the mortar that holds Assad's regime together and a key issue that has brought protesters out into the streets.

With these additional measures in place, Washington could rally allies around a common cause, send a strong message to Assad that his crackdown will cost him, and establish clear boundaries in terms of the scope of U.S. engagement with Syria. Washington can also use these instruments on Assad's worsening domestic position to extract concessions on his relationship with Iran, be it his relationship with Hezbollah or -- eventually, when the time is right -- peace talks with Israel. It will also teach Assad that Washington will judge him on his actions, not just his words to U.S. officials behind closed doors.

High-level U.S. officials or senior senators talking with Assad and wagging their fingers at him when he's bad will not change his ways. A good Syrian friend once told me that the key to dealing with the Assad regime is to always keep your options open and be prepared to walk away with no obligations. Only by making clear when it will do so, and what will be the consequences, will Washington ever have a hope of getting a straight answer out of Bashar al-Assad.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Institute's ***Program on Arab Politics (templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)*** *.* ❖

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