

A White House Divided on Syria

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Mar 30, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Even more than the conflicts in Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain, and perhaps even more than the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, the recent violence in Syria has posed a challenge to the Obama administration's strategy in the Middle East.

More so than the conflicts in Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain, and perhaps even more than the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the recent violence in Syria has posed a challenge to the Obama administration's strategy in the Middle East. The conflicting impulses within the administration can be seen in recent statements made by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; days ago, she described Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a "reformer"; in London on March 29, she issued a "strong condemnation of the Syrian government's brutal repression of demonstrators." Which view of Assad prevails, and how the United States responds to events in Syria, will go a long way toward determining how deeply U.S. policy in the Middle East is altered by the recent turmoil there.

One of the key departures President Obama made from his predecessor's policy in the Middle East was in his approach toward Syria. Rather than continuing to heap pressure on the Syrian regime, the Obama Administration returned to the policy of engaging Syria practiced by past administrations. The reasons behind this shift were manifold: the pressure policy was perceived as not working and engagement with hostile regimes broadly was seen as holding diplomatic promise.

Perhaps most importantly, however, Syria was seen as key to making progress in Israeli-Palestinian peace. Damascus not only hosted the headquarters of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and therefore in theory held leverage over these groups, but its own negotiations with Israel were essential to achieving the "comprehensive peace" that the administration sought.

After two years, this approach to Syria has borne no fruit. Syria has not increased its compliance with the IAEA investigation into its clandestine nuclear activities, decreased its cooperation with Iran and Hizballah, or reduced its interference in Lebanon or increased its cooperation with the Hariri Tribunal. On the domestic front, far from being a reformer, Assad oversees a regime rated worse for political rights than was Hosni Mubarak's Egypt. And there has

been no progress on the Syrian-Israeli track, nor has Syria played a role in the frozen Israeli-Palestinian talks (though granted, those talks have faltered for reasons quite independent of Syrian policies).

But the current U.S. policy toward Syria has not only been unsuccessful in its outcomes -- it was flawed in its conception. U.S. interests and values demand that we support freedom and sovereignty for Palestinians; those same values, however, preclude us from trading the liberty of the Syrian and Lebanese people for Palestinian statehood. Likewise, there is little reason to believe that Bashar al-Assad is truly interested in a Syrian-Israeli peace; Syria's state of war with Israel provides his justification for permanent "emergency laws," and the relations with Iran and Hizballah which he would need to sacrifice to make a deal profit his regime greatly. We may foresee a peace dividend, but Assad uses a different accounting.

There are signs that some within the Obama administration recognize the need to change course on Syria. An unnamed U.S. official told the *New York Times* on March 26 that "Whatever credibility the [Syrian] government had, they shot it today -- literally....it's definitely in our interest to pursue an agreement, but you can't do it with a government that has no credibility with its population." Some will argue that the problem is not Assad, but his father's "old guard" which surrounds him. But Assad's own statements and policies belie such wishful thinking.

Courting Assad in pursuit of regional goals while neglecting what happens inside Syria is not realpolitik; it may satisfy the politik by smoothing bilateral relations, but it falls short on the real by underemphasizing the impact of political and economic stagnation in the region for U.S. interests. A more creative, less one-dimensional, and more promising approach is needed, which should include reinvigorated economic and political pressure using sanctions and support for Syrian democracy activists. The Assad regime is economically vulnerable -- it lacks its neighbors' natural resources, and there are signs that previous rounds of economic pressure were beginning to stress the regime. It is also politically vulnerable, with a restive population, the urge for reform sweeping the region, and the loss of a Western ally in France, whose foreign minister Alain Juppe recently signaled a major change in French policy toward Syria. In his speech Monday night regarding Libya, President Obama said that "wherever people long to be free, they will find a friend in the United States." He can follow through on this pledge by galvanizing an international coalition to exert pressure on the Assad regime.

One can't help but see shades of St. Paul in the Obama Administration's struggle to decide on its approach toward Assad. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul saw the light and changed his ways; perhaps it will be on the diplomatic road to Damascus that President Obama realizes the need to reorient U.S. policy toward Syria and the region beyond.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

ForeignPolicy.com

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](/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

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)