

What Next for Syria?

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Shortly after taking office, in a dramatic departure from Bush-era policy, President Barack Obama made good on his pledge to reestablish dialogue with Syria. In recent months, in an effort to build confidence and improve the relationship, the administration has dispatched seven delegations to Damascus, including multiple visits from its top Middle East diplomat and peace envoy and senior military officials.

Much of the discussion has focused on stabilizing Iraq, an area where Syria -- the leading point of entry for al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgents since 2003 -- could potentially make a significant contribution. Washington also sought Syrian assistance in bolstering the embattled government in Baghdad. The administration chose Iraq because it was assumed to be a topic of "mutual interest," a belief seemingly confirmed in June 2009 by Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa, who described Iraq as "a very strong opportunity to cooperate with this administration."

Three months later, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that Damascus is falling short. Not only are jihadis continuing to flow into Iraq via Syria, but the Assad regime appears to be actively working to undermine the stability of the Iraqi government. The recent carnage in Baghdad tells the story.

On August 25, Iraq withdrew its ambassador to Syria to protest the suicide bombings that killed nearly 100 Iraqis a week earlier. In his videotaped confession, the mastermind of the attacks admitted he planned them on orders from a man in Syria. Adding insult to injury, the attacks emanating from Syria came just one day after Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was in Damascus for talks with President Bashar al-Assad about border security.

Despite Syrian protestations to the contrary, the bombings were not an aberration. In mid-July -- a month after the initial US-Syrian military talks about border security -- several armed fighters with Syrian passports were arrested in Mosul, another Iraqi city beset by suicide attacks. At about the same time, Assad himself hosted anti-American Iraqi Shi'ite militia leader Muqtada Sadr, whose Mahdi Army has proven a significant impediment to efforts to stabilize Iraq.

Regardless of whether the latest attacks were perpetrated by al-Qaeda or Baathist insurgents, Damascus bears responsibility. For the past six years, the Assad regime has provided al-Qaeda carte blanche to attack neighboring states via its territory. The relationship between this terrorist organization and this terror-sponsoring state remains complicated. Likewise, even now Damascus continues to oppose extradition of Iraqi Baathists who are working to destabilize the government in Baghdad.

After half a year of its good-faith effort to forge a partnership with Damascus based on "mutual respect and mutual interest", the Obama administration has hit a wall. While Syrian officials routinely articulate a desire for improved relations with Washington, the Assad regime has yet to take steps necessary to make this possible. From Iraq to Lebanon to its ongoing support for Hamas, and despite Washington's conciliatory steps, Damascus remains intransigent.

Concerned that Iraqi-Syrian tensions could undermine efforts to rehabilitate Syria, Washington has yet to condemn Damascus for its role in the Baghdad bombings, preferring instead to describe the events as an "internal matter" between the governments. Based on the priority Washington ascribes to Iraq, however, a stronger US response is warranted.

To date, the administration has been rather generous in response to Syria's promises to improve its behavior. Based on Syria's pledge to cooperate with CENTCOM on border security issues, for example, this past June the Obama administration undertook to return an ambassador to Damascus, a seat vacant since 2005. In July, the administration likewise eased the process of granting export licenses to Syria's aviation industry, another conciliatory gesture designed to encourage better behavior.

Absent critical Syrian followthrough on Iraq, Washington may want to reevaluate its conciliatory approach. While the administration is unlikely to take dramatic steps anytime soon, it could deliver a powerful message to the Assad regime during the UN General Assembly in mid-September. Syrian officials have been advocating an Assad-Obama summit for months and are hoping to engineer a meet and greet on the sidelines of the New York meeting. Given the ongoing problems posed by Syria, Obama would be well advised to snub Assad in New York.

Despite the best of intentions, the Obama administration approach has not yet convinced Damascus to change its ways. While it may be premature to throw in the towel and resume the Bush-era policy of isolation, if Syria's current behavior in Iraq persists it should provoke a policy review that adds some sticks to the arsenal of carrots already deployed against Damascus. The recent suicide bombings in Baghdad suggest an absence of mutual US-Syrian interests in Iraq. Apparently, the Assad regime does not want a strong, democratic and stable Iraq. As the US starts to draw down its forces there, Washington's Syria policy should reflect this reality.

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