

If You Must Engage Syria, Do It the Lantos Way

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Articles & Testimony

President Bush's address to the nation on Iraq last week dispensed with many of the 79 recommendations included in the 142-page report of the Iraq Study Group. The headline on the speech was the decision to surge 21,000 troops, rather than downsize the U.S. military presence in Iraq as the ISG had advised. But the Bush administration also took a pass on study group's controversial recommendation to engage with Syria and Iran, in an effort to convince these state sponsors of terrorism to play a more productive role in Iraq. Instead, the president implied a military solution, saying that U.S. forces would "interrupt the flow of support" to the insurgency from these states.

Administration opposition to engagement with Syria, in particular, is sure to ruffle some feathers in the new Democratic-led Congress. Indeed, after the Iraq Study Group report was released in early December, members of Congress -- ignoring State Department counsel -- started to press forward with the suggestion to engage with Syria.

A week after the Iraq Study Group report was published, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., traveled to Damascus to gauge for himself whether Syrian President Bashar Asad might be willing to "be part of a solution" on Iraq. Then, a week later, Democratic Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., made the pilgrimage. These legislators' visits were the first of their kind since 2004, when Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, visited Damascus.

The White House has been critical of renewed engagement with Syria on Iraq. Its own extensive efforts at dialogue failed miserably, leading the Bush administration to the conclusion that engagement was unhelpful at best, and counterproductive at worst. Legislators such as Sen. Kerry maintain that "you can't begin to resolve those differences if you're not willing to try to understand." But even those making the trek to Damascus aren't optimistic that engagement will work. Rather, the argument seems to be that engagement can't hurt.

Regrettably, the Bush administration's experience has proven otherwise. Meetings, in which U.S. emissaries delivered blunt messages to Asad, were spun by Damascus as "breakthroughs" in Syrian-U.S. relations, undermining the morale of the region's democrats and alleviating pressure on the regime. As White House spokesman Tony Snow said after Nelson's visit, even if delegations deliver a tough message, "the Syrian have already won a PR victory."

So Bush administration engagement has proved unproductive. But what of congressional visits? A quick assessment suggests that these meetings have also undermined Bush administration policy. A 2003 meeting of U.S. Reps. Darrell

Issa, R-Vista, and Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., with Asad is emblematic of the problem. During the trip, Issa and Rahall discussed with Asad the presence in Syria of former Iraqi regime elements who were aiding the insurgency in Iraq. The congressmen later told the press: "We looked the president [Asad] in the eyes and asked for his assurance that he would expel any Iraqi leader in his country and not grant asylum. He agreed." With this pledge in hand, Issa and Rahall declared victory. Issa later pronounced that Asad's "word seems to be good."

The problem, of course, is that Asad lied. Two years later, in February 2005, the Bush administration announced that Syria continued to harbor a dozen former top-ranking associates of Saddam Hussein, who were helping to orchestrate the insurgency.

The notable exception to the stream of highly damaging congressional visits has been Lantos, incoming chairman of the House International Relations Committee. In 2003, when he was in the minority, Lantos met with Asad, but unlike his Democratic and Republican colleagues, Lantos towed a hard line both in the meeting and out. In fact, immediately after his audience with Asad in 2003, Lantos returned to the Damascus Sheraton hotel and gave an unprecedented press conference, reviewing the full litany of U.S. grievances with Syrian policy, from human-rights abuses, to active undermining or stability in Iraq, to Syrian support for Palestinian terrorists and Hezbollah.

Although the Bush administration was likely not pleased with the Lantos trip at the time, his courageous public message countered the potentially negative implications of the visit. Not surprisingly, when Lantos returned to Syria in 2004, he was not granted a meeting with Asad, but instead had to settle for then Foreign Minister Farouq Sharaa.

The difference between Lantos and the other congressional visitors to Damascus is that Lantos reinforced the Bush administration's message with regard to Syria, instead of undermining it. But Lantos is the exception to the rule. Generally speaking, the post-meeting statements by these delegations left -- and continue to leave -- Asad with the (mis)impression that he has little about which to worry. This mixed message on U.S. policy has in turn diluted the effectiveness of an already tenuous Syria policy.

Now that the new House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., is encouraging contact with Syria and Iran as a central plank of the new Democratic Congress, congressional travel to Damascus may be inevitable. Of course, it would be best if members of Congress did not visit Syria, as it cannot but legitimate the regime. But if these legislators do feel a need to "fact find," the general principal should be to do no harm.

In this regard, delegations would be well advised to follow Lantos' lead, and not shy away from publicly articulating in uncompromising tones the tough messages they say they are conveying in private, and doing so on Syrian soil. Meeting Asad should not be about blandishment or gaining "understanding," but rather about conveying an unvarnished message. Given Syria's continuing problematic behavior -- and the pending investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, in which Syria is a leading suspect -- engagement absent this public component risks sending the wrong impression and further emboldening this already dangerous regime.

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