

Engaging Syria: Alternatives to the Regime

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Brief Analysis

With less than a week before the publication of the Iraq Study Group's report, it is speculated that the panel chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton will recommend diplomatic engagement of Syria and Iran. The Bush administration has been firmly against dialogue with Syria, emphasizing how Damascus has made choices that have cast its fate with "the forces of violence and extremism." The administration has, however, kept the doors of dialogue open to members of Syrian opposition groups in both Damascus and Washington.

Background

On November 20, 2006, Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem completed a two-day visit to Iraq, leading to the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between the nations and discussion of greater Syrian vigilance over their shared border, which foreign fighters have used to cross into Iraq. It appeared to be a step toward greater Syrian cooperation in stabilizing the ever-spiraling chaos in Iraq, as well as a gesture to the United States that Syria may be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

A subsequent episode of violence to Syria's west, however, indicated that Damascus may not be part of the solution after all. On the evening of November 21, Lebanese minister of industry Pierre al-Gemayel, a scion of one of Lebanon's leading Maronite Christian political families, was gunned down in a Christian suburb of Beirut. Al-Gemayel was a member of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition in the Lebanese parliament. It did not take long for fingers to point to Damascus, denouncing yet another Syrian attempt to recover its hegemony over Lebanon. The UN Security Council moved with uncharacteristic speed to charge the existing UN team investigating the death of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri with looking into Gemayel's death as well.

These two nearly contemporaneous events highlight the dearth of American options regarding Syria. Damascus has made encouraging verbal assurances on several issues but has not delivered on them. Although President Bashar al-Asad has indicated his willingness to negotiate peace with Israel, he has not kept the promises he made in 2003 to close down the Damascus-based offices of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Similarly, despite Asad's promises to U.S. administration officials over the past three years, Syria's efforts to halt the flow of insurgents and materiel into Iraq have been unsatisfying. And, while it has welcomed a bevy of European delegations over the past month, Damascus has yet to provide the international community with substantial evidence of any efforts to improve regional cooperation and security.

The Syrian Opposition

In light of these problems, officials in the State Department, Pentagon, and White House have met with Syrian opposition leaders in both Washington and Damascus. The regional status quo, however, makes the likelihood of regime change in Damascus -- or even regime reform -- remote at best. A look at the more visible Syrian opposition players in Washington and Damascus is instructive because their constituencies, influences, and statements indicate the complexities faced by U.S. policymakers in dealing with Syria.

The National Salvation Front (NSF). Founded in early 2006 by former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam -- who allied himself with exiled Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Bayanouni -- the NSF is committed to regime change through the activation of opposition elements in and outside of Syria. The combination of Khaddam's Syrian connections and Bayanouni's Muslim Brotherhood connections would seem to indicate that such an alliance could topple the regime and, theoretically, install a better alternative. The NSF also recently opened an office in Washington. Yet a November article on the pan-Arab web newspaper Elaph -- whose veracity was denied by both the NSF and a senior U.S. administration official -- indicated that in discussions with administration officials, the NSF was unable to answer questions regarding the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist ideology (especially regarding religion and state) or the treatment of minority groups in a new Syria. Whether or not the claims raised in the article are true, they point to two things that the U.S. government should be wary of: a group with a substantial Islamist component calling for regime change, and the possibility of sectarian violence akin to what is transpiring in Iraq.

The Reform Party of Syria (RPS). The party was founded in 2003 by Farid Ghadry, a native of Aleppo who emigrated from Syria at the age of eighteen. Many inside Syria dismiss Ghadry as a nonfactor who lacks support within the country. But Ghadry, who has repeatedly met with senior U.S. government officials, has managed to gather a group of ethnic minorities and moderate Sufi sheikhs under an umbrella called the Syrian Democratic Coalition. The RPS calls for a "new Syria" based on democracy, pluralism, and tolerance. It is marked by two other notable traits: (1) an intense animosity toward Syria's Alawite leadership, and (2) a great desire to engage Israelis, as Ghadry emphasized in a recent op-ed on the Israeli website YNet calling on Israelis to help change the Asad regime. Coupled with its small base, RPS's intense anti-Alawite strain is also liable to ring alarm bells within a U.S. administration still wincing from the sectarian violence in Iraq.

The Damascus Declaration. Named after the document its members signed in October 2005, the Damascus Declaration is the largest, most visible opposition grouping within Syria itself. The document calls for a democratic and pluralist Syria that respects the freedoms of speech and assembly and promotes a social contract and separation of governmental powers. The declaration was a watershed: a statement of principles agreed upon by representatives of Syria's diverse religious, ethnic, and intellectual streams and parties. Unfortunately, the regime -- through arrests, harassment, and travel bans -- has succeeded in not only fragmenting the opposition, but, more important, preventing any possibility of mass demonstrations. Opportunities for outside support of the movement are limited -- Damascus Declaration activists hope to change the system on their own because the regime often labels individuals who seek foreign assistance as spies or collaborators.

Conclusion

The chaos in Iraq and the recent actions of Hizballah and Iran have only emboldened the Asad regime's conviction that it is a potential power broker in the region. Washington's continued isolation of Syria makes the regime's ties with Hizballah and Iran (and now Turkey) stronger, contributing to its defiance. Although opposition parties would like to see real change in Syria, their disorganization, lack of mass appeal, and positions on minorities (notably the Alawites) are not likely to make regime change a palatable option for U.S. policy.

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Syria's domestic politics and foreign policy. ❖

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