

Congressional Testimony

Axis of Abuse:

U.S. Human Rights toward Iran and Syria, Part II

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for inviting me to take part in today's hearing. I also would like to commend you for holding this hearing at a critical time in the ongoing Syrian uprising against the regime of Bashar Assad. I will keep my comments brief and ask that my full statement be made part of the record.

We have reached a potentially dangerous moment in the Syrian revolution. At the same time, there is now a rare opportunity to change the political landscape in the entire region. If we take this opportunity, and if we succeed, Syria can be rid of a murderous ruling family, which has both Syrian and American blood on its hands. More importantly, Iran's influence not only in Syria but throughout the region would be severely curtailed.

The uprising has reached a stalemate. Seven months after it erupted, the Syrian popular protest movement has shown remarkable resilience and bravery in the face of unspeakable violence. While this movement shows no signs of relenting, and is intensifying its efforts at more effective organization, the most recent demonstrations have begun making general, unspecified calls for "international protection." In addition, there are now questions as to whether the option of peaceful protest will be enough to dislodge Assad, as the regime's brutal repression persists and pressure to arm the revolution intensifies.

The momentum of US policy has also stalled. Since President Obama's August 22 statement calling on Assad to step down, there has been little high-level movement on Syria, even on the level of declaratory policy. In contrast to President Obama's stance on Egypt and Libya, he has publicly shown little personal investment in the Syrian uprising.

To its credit, the administration has slapped a series of sanctions on the Syrian regime. However, it is still unclear whether new ideas and contingency plans are being developed. Most importantly, the Obama administration, preoccupied with other urgent matters, such as the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN and Turkey's role in the region, is yet to assert the leadership required at this important juncture. Given the strategic importance of the outcome of the Syrian revolution and its impact on Iranian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, US leadership is critical.

This leadership, to be effective, must include a clear strategic path forward. Though they have had some impact, sanctions cannot substitute for an integrated policy guided by a clear strategic goal.

Apart from economic pressure, aggressive regional diplomacy is important to ensure all US allies are in line behind our policy objective. And that objective can only be one thing: Assad's departure and the breaking up of the Iranian alliance system.

As the prospect for a protracted violent confrontation—one that could devolve into a regional proxy war – increases, there is a need for a review of the administration's Syria policy.

The Administration's Turkish Mistake

At the outset, the Obama administration adopted a hands-off approach to the Syrian revolution. Skeptical at first that the protest movement had legs, the administration kept its distance. When it became apparent that there was a serious challenge to Assad's rule, the administration struggled with the reality that its policy of engagement with Assad had collapsed. However, its adjustment was slow and its desired objective lacked clarity for several weeks.

One reason for this reluctance and confusion was the administration's deference to Turkey. In sharp contrast with its handling of the Egyptian revolution, the Obama administration appeared very reticent to take the lead on Syria. Instead, it effectively subcontracted the policy to Turkey, under the belief that Ankara had the most influence with Assad and could persuade him to respond to the protesters' demands. President Obama maintained close contact with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and repeatedly heeded his counsel to delay calling on Assad to go.

It was a critical mistake to cede leadership to the Turks, just as it was an error to assume they shared our interests. For months, Turkey urged President Obama not to call on Assad to step down even as he repeatedly snubbed the Turks' every initiative, and the President deferred to Ankara's wishes. Still, as recently as early August, the Turks, without consulting with Washington, extended Assad another two-week window to stop the violence and begin reforms. Needless to say, Assad pressed ahead with his murderous campaign.

To its credit, the administration finally broke with Turkey and endorsed a policy of regime change in Syria, calling on Assad to leave power. It has not, however, pressed Turkey to follow US policy. Indeed, Ankara to this day has not publicly called on Assad to leave power. Nor has the administration been able to convince Turkey to take concrete punitive measures against Assad, even as the US has worked with our allies in Europe to impose more sanctions on the Syrian regime.

Lining Up Regional Allies

The Obama administration now needs to make up for lost time. Having lacked assertiveness, and with the Turks having failed to generate a positive outcome on our behalf, the administration has allowed a leadership vacuum to emerge.

The administration has recently done a commendable job in working with European allies to increase the heat on the Syrian regime, but it has not done the same with regional allies such as Iraq, Jordan or the Gulf states.

As several tranches of international sanctions targeted Assad, his regime began adjusting by turning to several regional states in order to bypass their effect. For example, on Sunday, September 18, 2011, a Jordanian paper reported that the Syrian Central Bank recently executed a number of cash transfers in Jordan meant to help it evade future sanctions and potential asset freezes.

The Syrians have also turned to the Iraqis for cheap oil, and there have been reports that Baghdad has agreed, though there is confusion as to the quantity (some claiming 150,000 bpd, others saying only 10,000 bpd).

Convincing our Jordanian allies to close or freeze such accounts and dissuading our friends in Iraq from extending any helping hand to Assad are but two quick examples of avenues the administration could pursue. If Iran is capable of pressuring regional players, including Turkey and Iraq, not to push hard in Syria, then the US ought to be applying its considerable leverage to push in the opposite direction.

Balancing Regional Agendas

As a *New York Times* report noted on September 19, 2011, the administration remains apprehensive about appearing to “[try] to orchestrate the outcome in Syria.” However, only the US can balance the complex and competing agendas of the region’s multiple players.

Moreover, the absence of US leadership opens the door for regional middle-range powers to vie for position and advance their own agendas, which could come into conflict with US interests.

For example, while Qatar has played a helpful role in highlighting Assad’s crimes on Al Jazeera, withdrawing its ambassador, and suspending its investments in Syria, it now seeks a preeminent role in shaping the political transition. To that end, it has hosted Syrian opposition meetings and has tried to market its own political initiative to end the crisis. But the Qataris also ran their initiative by Tehran, in order to assuage its concerns and to secure its support. Indications are they tried to assure the Iranians that Syria’s “security doctrine”—meaning its policy of support for so-called “resistance movements” sponsored by Iran—would remain intact.

Similarly, the Arab League has floated its own initiative. However, this initiative allows for Assad to stay on for the remainder of his term before new elections are held in 2014.

Both these initiatives run counter to US interests and the declared policy of a democratic Syria without Assad. They serve as examples for the need for assertive US leadership in the region. Washington should be quarterbacking the transition and directing the actions of Turkey and Qatar. Without US leadership, Iran will fill that role.

Preparing for the Worst

The administration has been working to try and bring about a peaceful transition to democracy, mainly relying on tools such as sanctions, while urging the opposition to unite and present a leadership and a platform which Syrians—especially minorities and business elites weary of the alternative to Assad—could endorse. In addition, the hope is to create cracks in the regime that would provide possible mechanisms for the transition. US Ambassador Robert Ford is said to be the point man on the outreach to the opposition, but it is unclear which cadres he is actually able to meet, given the tight security restrictions.

The administration's assessment now is that the regime, thanks to Russian intransigence and full Iranian support, can hang on for a while, increasing the likelihood of a violent conflict. The strategic stakes are quite high, as such a conflict is likely to draw in competing regional actors. The Iranians, who are directly involved in Assad's war against his people, have already announced plans for a military base in the coastal city of Latakia. The Iranians know this is a war for their strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Obama administration needs to frame the Syrian situation in such strategic terms—as a battle to break up Iran's axis—and, accordingly, make it a pressing priority in its regional agenda.

As the probability of an armed conflagration in Syria increases, the administration would do well to begin developing adequate responses and contingency plans. Deferring such difficult decisions by subcontracting policy to reluctant and/or vulnerable regional players is likely to fail again. The domestic challenge to the Assad regime is a strategic opportunity that the US must not fail to exploit. An outcome other than Assad's ouster would be a blow to US interests and a boost to the Iranian bloc.

To ensure and hopefully accelerate such an outcome, the administration should continue with hard economic pressure. Specifically, it should pressure the Turks and other regional allies to impose sanctions. Also, it should consider targeting banks in the region used by the regime to circumvent sanctions. Finally, the ban on investment in Syria should be expanded to include foreign companies.

Beyond targeting the Syrian regime economically, the US should also target its tools of propaganda and information warfare. The spearhead of the regime's apparatus in the US is Syria's ambassador, Imad Mustapha. Expelling him from the United States, where he is suspected of surveilling and threatening dissidents, would be a good start.

In addition, although it is an undesirable scenario, the US should start planning for a possible conflict in Syria, especially as calls by protesters for international protection become louder. Pooling the resources of allied neighbors of Syria will be critical. But the US also has to take the lead in order to balance out these players' agendas.

Mr. Chairman, I will conclude. Aside from upholding US values of freedom and democracy, the strategic prism through which the situation in Syria must be viewed is that of an opportunity to break the Iranian alliance system. The end of the Assad regime will enhance the standing and interests of the US and its allies in the region.

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, I want to once again thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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4. Have you received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	5. Have any of the organizations you are representing received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
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