

## The Obama Administration and Syria: From “Off the Table” to On

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A quick look at the news dealing with the Syrian uprising the last year shows a slow progression from protests and civil resistance towards violence. The Obama Administration's policy dealing with what many have called “*slow motion revolution*” has evolved in fits and starts, with mixed episodes of confusion, assertiveness, denial and drift. As regime violence flared, Washington moved policies long viewed as unthinkable, including sanctions targeting the Assad family's inner circle, oil sanctions as well as an overt, though understated policy of regime change in Damascus. With the armed opposition now a sizeable part of the uprising, and Sunni extremist groups claiming massive bomb blasts in Damascus, Washington is now stuck at a crossroads: continue a policy of sanctions and diplomatic isolation that will help bring down the Assad regime in the medium to long term as the country tips toward greater violence or adopt a more robust approach involving military assistance to the Syrian opposition and perhaps direct military involvement to hasten Assad's demise and head off what many predict could be a civil war that is likely to suck in regional and international powers alike.

### Phase One – coming to grips

In the days and weeks following the outbreak of protests across Syria on March 15, 2011, United States government officials discounted the chances that what became known as the “*protest movement*” had any chance of bringing down the Assad regime. The reasons made sense: the Assad regime is a minority-dominated regime, with members of the Alawite sect serving in the upper ranks of the country multiple security services and of the Army. Therefore a military coup akin to that in Tunisia or Egypt, where military ousts the ruling family for the sake of the nation as a whole, was unlikely. The memory of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where a Sunni-dominated regime

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endured international sanctions and isolation and was in the end only ousted through a military invasion, was still fresh in the minds of policymakers in the State Department and White House. And given that the Obama Administration was elected on the platform of withdrawing United States troops from Iraq, another military adventure was off the table. The White House therefore adopted a general policy approach that continues to this day: that it would not say anything in response to the crisis that it did not truly intend to do.

But as the Assad regime continued to use brute force to put down the uprising, defined early on as the “*security solution*”, and failed to announce a credible package of political reforms that would get protestors to go home, members of the State Department and White House quickly initiated a review of its Syria policy. It was a steep learning curve: the Obama Administration has employed a policy of constructive engagement with the Assad regime for the better part of two years based on forging a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. The policy objective, called “*strategic reorientation*”, involved using a treaty to move Syria out of Iran’s orbit by getting Damascus to cut off arms flows to Tehran’s ally Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to the diplomats shepherding the negotiations, both sides made considerable progress, but lacked the political will at that time to forge a deal. A key part of the engagement was a lack of pressure by Washington on the Assad regime, other than the renewal of US sanctions that had been significantly strengthened under the George W. Bush Administration, following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the February 2005 murder of the former Lebanese Premier Rafik al-Hariri.

### **Phase two – leverage in tandem with Europe**

While US sanctions had not changed the Assad regime’s policies, the latter’s worsening financial situation had made it clear that sanctions were changing its calculations for survival. Oil production had declined rapidly under Bashar al-Assad, but still accounted for around one third of government revenue. The regime’s invitation of increased recovery and wildcatting companies allowed it to continue exporting around 150,000 barrels per day. But the product Syria exports, *Suweidia*, is a heavy and sour grade of crude that could only be refined profitably in European countries, which consumed over 90% of Syrian exports in 2010.

As the country had opened to the outside world under Bashar, Syria was also increasingly dependent on imports of high tech goods that included American inputs, meaning companies legally exporting to Syria had to obtain export licenses from the US Department of Commerce or risk losing their worldwide business with the United States. Illegal “*re-exports*” of products from Lebanon and Dubai were common, but involved a substantial increase in the price of sanctioned goods.

Last, but not least, those in and around the Assad regime had amassed substantial fortunes abroad, primarily in Europe and the Arab countries. While non-US dollar denominated transactions did not have to transit through New York, banks holding Assad regime deposits were forced to divest their holdings with a sanctioned

individual or entity or risk losing their business with the United States market.

Policymakers also realized that a political shift towards regime change would be required as well. For some, the considerations were moral: the Assad regime's brutality in suppressing the uprising, including use of live fire and arrest sweeps, were simply something the United States could not condone. Others, especially those dealing with "*transnational*" policies involving promoting democracy and human rights, viewed the Assad regime's crackdown as something completely out of step with US policy throughout the region. But perhaps the biggest reason the Obama Administration believed it had to move politically against Assad was the regime's diminished results using the security solution. Protests were spreading, and parts of the country were falling outside government control. The Assad regime, long considered one of the region's most stable, was suddenly not so.

Supporting this approach was growing frustration in European circles, particularly in France and Germany, with the Assad regime's failure to stop the killing despite repeated attempts by European missions in Damascus to engage the regime. Europe and the European Union mission in particular had supported Syria's moribund "*reform program*" with sizeable grants and support under Bashar al Assad with little or nothing to show for it. As the death toll mounted and the Muslim Holy month of Ramadan approached, there was general agreement across the Atlantic that pressuring a weakened Assad regime from power was the quickest way to hasten its demise.

Finally on August 18, President Barack Obama announced in a written statement read by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that Assad must "*step aside*" - a passive statement outlining a formal policy of regime change in Damascus. Obama implemented all remaining tenet of the *Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act*, and added to it a general ban on the import of all Syrian oil products to the United States. The following day, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the European Union and Canada followed suit. The goal of "*constructive realignment*" – *i.e.* moving the Assad regime out of Iran's orbit, would now be pursued by other means: bringing down the Assad regime in tandem with the Syrian people and bringing about a government more representative of the country's Sunni majority that would have a "natural tension" with Shia Iran.

### **Phase 3: Drift and Denial**

In Washington, many in the government believed President Assad would be out of office by the end of 2011. Since it appeared the regime's "*security solution*" was failing, regional powers like Turkey were now firmly against the regime, the Assad regime was burning through an estimated \$1bn per month to deal with the uprising, and the United States focused most of its energy on a post-Assad Syria. From nearly the beginning of the conflict, Turkey had quietly worked with exiled groups, particularly the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, to forge a coalition of countries that could fly into Damascus when the regime fell and take the reigns of power. In

October 2011, the Syrian opposition announced the formation of the *Syrian National Council* (SNC), headed by the Paris-based secular academic Burhan Ghalioun. But behind the scenes, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists checked the secular block backing Ghalioun. Stasis set in, as different factions jockeyed for SNC seats. The SNC produced a “*transition plan*”, which was presented to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Geneva on December 6th, 2011. But the plan never really saw the light of day, as the SNC as a whole was unable to agree upon the final text. As it was unclear what the SNC aimed for in a post-Assad Syria, other groups suspicious of the Brotherhood and Turkey, most notably Syrian Kurdish groups and Arab tribes, shied away from the SNC.

Faced with a deteriorating situation on the ground, Washington backed in autumn an initiative by the Arab League to observe the situation in Syria and propose a regional solution to the crisis. Hundreds of monitors from Arab countries showed up in Damascus and were escorted around the country by Assad regime forces. Protestors filled the streets of major cities throughout the country to greet the observers. When the observer mission produced its report accusing both the regime and protestors of violations of the Arab League protocol, the Arab League ministerial committee, led by Qatar, used a rare two-thirds voting regulation to get around the usual consensus needed for Arab League action. It proposed a plan where President Assad would hand over power to his deputy, presumably vice president Farouq as-Shara, and step aside as the country prepared for elections. President Assad dismissed the plan out of hand, and the observers went home.

Meanwhile on the ground, the regime continued to use live fire against demonstrators. The international community continued to refuse SNC pleas to intervene in Syria, leading more and more Syrians to take up arms to defend themselves or battle the regime. The *Free Syrian Army (FSA)*, a group of soldiers who deserted from the Syrian military early in the conflict and who had fled to Turkey, began to carry out operations against the State. As more units joined the FSA, however, it became clear the organization did not employ a linear structure with command and control, meaning the FSA’s founders in Turkey remained on the fringes of what soon would become one of the strongest branches of the opposition. Two other variants of the FSA soon emerged, deserters from the Syrian military in Syria and local men akin to “*minutemen*” in the American Revolution who defended protestors and carved out space for civil resistance.

Washington’s first response to the FSA phenomena was to ignore it, and forbid American officials from directly engaging FSA members. Washington also ignored other domestic opposition factions as well, including Revolutionary Councils. In many ways, this approach was a carry over from early in the conflict, when Washington decided that the Assad regime was best equipped to battle an armed opposition and engaging with those who picked arms would only encourage that trend. But as the regime continued to hold on, and the international community not only continued to refuse to intervene, but also insist that military intervention was “*off*

*the table*”, it became clear that the opposition would soon morph into an insurgency. Policymakers expected the Assad regime would soon move into major areas of FSA activity, including Idlib province, Homs, and Der’aa, clear the areas using elite forces, hold them, and dictate whatever superficial reforms the regime had outlined in 2011.

Then the unexpected happened: the Assad regime’s forces were unable to completely clear the areas under FSA control. The process, called “*whack-a-mole*” in policy circles after the carnival game, meant the Assad regime only had enough forces to clear areas for a few days after moving in. More soldiers, mostly Sunnis, deserted from the military, causing the Assad regime to break its elite divisions of Alawites into brigades that operated throughout the country. After the brigades would withdraw, fighters and protestors would soon come back out. The regime responded with shelling and mortar fire before moving in with tanks. But the same thing occurred again: the fighters came back out soon after the regime’s forces departed. The regime proved unable to deal with civil and armed resistance alike.

Faced with a civil insurrection slipping into armed insurgency and toward civil war, and without international consensus on military intervention, the Obama Administration began an outreach to Russia. The rationale was three fold: that Moscow understood that the Assad regime wasn’t going to hold on and a transition plan was needed; two, Russia would use its influence in the Syrian military to get the Alawite generals at the top of the regime to expel the Assad family; or three, Russia would eventually agree to a United Nations resolution demanding the Assad regime step aside. Despite extensive outreach, Russia continued to block UN action, culminating in a dramatic Russian veto on February 4, 2012, of a US-backed Moroccan draft resolution that demanded President Assad step aside.

#### **Phase Four – Stuck at a dilemma**

In the aftermath of the veto, Washington continued to back a United Nations process in order to leverage Russia to help find a “*managed transition*” to the crisis. The Security Council’s Special Envoy Kofi Annan developed a six point framework to deal with the crisis, dubbed the “*Annan Plan*”, that required the Syrian regime to cease fire and withdraw its forces from populated areas by April 10 and 12, respectively. Both deadlines were not met, a fact the opposition used to ignore the plan as well. Publically, the Obama Administration said the Annan Plan was the only option to avert civil war in Syria.

But behind the scenes, Washington conducted a comprehensive and thorough look at the opposition groups within Syria as part of the construction of a “*Plan B*”. It also inaugurated the “*Friends of the Syrian People*” (FOSP) meetings in concert with European countries, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. By the second FOSP meeting on April 1 in Istanbul, regional countries were openly pushing Washington to lead some kind of intervention against the Assad regime, including support for Syria’s armed opposition. Washington decided to provide non-lethal assistance to the

opposition “*within Syria*”, and while discouraging regional countries from arming the FSA and other affiliates, it did not stand in their way. Last, but not least, the United States and Europe continued to tighten the sanctions noose around the Syrian regime, designating more entities and individuals in a bid to starve the regime of vital revenue to sustain its operations. While estimates of Assad regime reserves were at around \$7bn and dropping, rumors of Iranian financial and military support for the regime led many to speculate that the Assad regime had the capability to “*hold on*” – albeit in diminished fashion and not throughout the country into 2013 and possibly beyond.

Then explosions started going off throughout Syria. While the blasts targeted mostly military and security installations, civilians were killed as well. *Jebhet al-Nusra*, a Syrian jihadist group with some ties to *al-Qaeda* but apparently not under its command, claimed responsibility for many of the attacks. Suddenly the Obama Administration’s policy of staying out of the Syria conflict so as to lessen the conditions for civil war was called into question. As the conflict moved into a full on insurgency that threatened to eat down into Syria’s sectarian make-up and set off a civil war, more US politicians began raising the case for intervention sooner, rather than later. But with President Obama up for reelection in November 2012, and continued doubts over the Syrian opposition’s ability to organize and plan for a post Assad Syria, it seemed likely that Washington would continue to react to and manage developments on the ground in Syria instead of implementing a clear plan to achieve its objective for Assad to “*step aside*”.

All eyes are now on July 20, 2012 – the date when Annan’s observer mission expires and the start of the Muslim Holy month of Ramadan in Syria. In 2011, protests leading up to and during Ramadan led the regime to move wholesale into cities such as Hama, spiking death tolls and extreme public pressure for change that forced the Obama Administration to change course. With violence already escalating and the regime continuing to disregard its commitments to cease fire and withdraw forces from populated areas, leading the opposition to refuse to put down its weapons as well, there is every indication that conflict will be the constant for the foreseeable future in Syria. “*Plan-B*” – supporting the opposition “*within Syria*” – continues to be constrained by the Obama Administration’s lack of political will to push the issue forward in an election year. But if the conflict worsens rapidly as it did in the summer of 2011, violence in Syria continues to send refugees across the border into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and extremists continue to grow within Syria, intervention sooner rather than later may be necessary to head off a civil war that many predict could turn into a proxy struggle akin to Lebanon in the 1980s. The question remains at what point, and under what circumstances, might the Obama Administration move the “*military option*” from off to on the table, like so many policy tools over the last year, to finally force Bashar al-Assad to “*step aside*”.