

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3219  
April 8, 2011

## Time for the Obama Administration to Support Freedom in Syria

*James Phillips*

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's ruthless regime is deservedly threatened by mounting protests organized by long-suffering Syrians fed up with its harsh repression, notorious corruption, and rigid autocratic rule. But the Obama Administration has soft-pedaled its criticism of Assad's dictatorship, eager to "engage" the stubbornly hostile regime despite its systematic repression of its own people.

**Calls for Freedom Trigger Regime Violence.** The Assad family, which has ruled Syria with an iron hand since a 1970 military coup, unleashed internal security forces that have killed more than 130 demonstrators, according to opposition activists. But the naked violence used to intimidate the demonstrators—predominantly composed of Sunni Muslims who make up about three-quarters of Syria's 22 million people—has severely eroded the already narrow base of popular support for the regime, which is dominated by members of the Alawite minority sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam that comprises only about 10–15 percent of the population.

Assad has sought to defuse the situation by promising vague reforms, which he has repeatedly done in the past without delivering on his promises. But he continues to denounce the opposition as agents of a foreign conspiracy designed to overthrow his Baathist ruling party. He continues to rely on intimidation to maintain his grip on power, secure in the knowledge that the Alawite officers who control the army and internal security forces will stand by his regime and not defect to the opposition (as in Egypt) or split into warring factions (as in Libya).

Assad is also counting on the legacy of regime terrorism that he inherited from his father, Hafez al-Assad, who brutally crushed a popular uprising orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 in Hama, killing an estimated 10,000–20,000 people with artillery and tanks before paving over neighborhoods destroyed in the fighting.

**Assad's Bloody Record.** Syria is a key Arab state that has sought to gain leadership of the Arab world by adopting hard-line policies against Israel and the U.S. Although it has a faltering economy and meager oil resources, it exploited strategic ties to the Soviet Union and more recently partnered with Iran to assume a major role in the Arab–Israeli conflict, extend its lethal hegemony over Lebanon, and oppose Western influence in the Middle East.

Assad's regime is a major state sponsor of terrorism that has used a number of Palestinian extremist groups—including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and secular factions—to indirectly attack Israel. It has conspired with Iran and Hezbollah to subvert Lebanon, where it has a long and bloody record of assassinating Lebanese politicians and journalists critical of Syria's domination. Syria's cold-blooded intelligence network is a prime suspect in the 2005

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3219>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting  
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to  
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

car bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and more than 20 others.

The Assad regime is Iran's most important Middle East ally. It has helped Iran build up Hezbollah's military strength, replenishing Hezbollah's supply of rockets after its 2006 war with Israel in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. Damascus has also facilitated the infiltration of Baathist and foreign Islamist militants into Iraq to kill American soldiers, Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi civilians in an effort to destroy the fragile democratic government of Iraq.

#### **The Failure of Obama's Engagement Policy.**

Despite the regime's bloody track record, the Obama Administration sought to improve relations with Damascus, using Senator John Kerry (D-MA) as an intermediary to thaw relations with the Assad regime. It sought to reverse the Bush Administration's decision to withdraw the U.S. ambassador from Damascus in 2005 after the Hariri assassination. When the Senate balked at confirming an ambassador due to Syria's continued hostile policies, the Administration made an end run by naming Robert Ford as ambassador while Congress was in recess last December.

The Obama Administration's engagement policy has failed miserably in Syria just as it has in Iran. The Administration clings to the hope that the Assad regime can somehow be persuaded to sign a peace treaty with Israel, but this is more unlikely than ever, because the embattled Alawite-dominated regime is fearful of being accused by the growing Sunni Muslim opposition of selling out in the struggle against Israel.

The Obama Administration, which has treated the Syrian regime with kid gloves, has compounded the problem by muting its criticism of Assad's repressive violence. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated on March 27 that Assad is considered a "reformer"—an embarrassing misreading of political reality in Syria. Although Assad promised reform when he succeeded his father in 2000, he has done precious little in 11 years to deliver on those promises. Some of his apologists claim that he was blocked by the old guard advisers that he inherited from his father, but he has long since replaced them with his

own supporters and could easily have taken steps to undertake reforms before now.

**Recommendations.** To salvage its failed policy toward Syria, the Obama Administration should:

- **Support Syria's democratic opposition.** The Administration should avoid the mistake it made following Iran's stolen elections in June 2009. Washington should strongly support the rights of Syrians to seek peaceful change, publicize the plight of Syria's numerous political prisoners, and lead an international campaign to secure their release. It should refuse to lift any sanctions against the regime until Assad respects the human rights and freedom of the Syrian people. It should denounce the Syrian government in every multilateral forum, including the U.N. Security Council, and press the Arab League to expel the Assad regime due to crimes against its own citizens, as it did with Libya.
- **Impose new sanctions against the Assad regime.** Washington should levy sanctions on regime leaders found responsible for human rights abuses during the crackdown and should freeze their assets and forbid their travel wherever possible. It should press its allies to follow suit. The U.S. has already imposed economic sanctions on Syria due to its status as a state sponsor of terrorism, but many countries in the European Union continue to reward Damascus with trade and investment. Washington should also seek support for sanctions against Syria at the U.N. Security Council. Even if Russia vetoes such action, the U.N. attention would hearten Syria's opposition.
- **Increase international pressure on the Syrian nuclear issue.** Syria has stonewalled the ongoing investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency into the covert nuclear reactor that Israel bombed in 2007. The Al-Kibar facility was a North Korean-designed nuclear reactor capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons that was probably financed by Iran in an end run around nuclear inspections. Washington should take the issue to the U.N. Security Council for action to penalize Syria for its non-compliance with its non-proliferation commitments.

- ***Withdraw the U.S. ambassador to Damascus.*** The Obama Administration should withdraw its ambassador to Syria as it did its ambassador to Libya. This would be an important signal to the Syrian regime and the opposition that it has abandoned its naïve courtship of the Assad regime.

**No More Wishful Thinking.** The Obama Administration should abandon its wishful thinking about the supposed benefits of good bilateral rela-

tions with the predatory Assad regime and mobilize stronger international pressure on Damascus to respect the human rights of its own citizens, stop its support for terrorism, and halt its dangerous nuclear collusion with Iran and North Korea.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*