

Step Assad

Contributed by David Schenker
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During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Syria's Assad regime was helping insurgents to cross the border and kill Americans. In response to the Syrian provocation, the Bush administration considered a broad range of policy options. But one family of options always remained off the table: regime change or any combination of pressures that might destabilize Damascus. The prevailing interagency concern was that Syria without Assad could prove even more militant than under his terrorist-supporting regime.

At the Department of Defense—where I worked—we held a dissenting view. While the Pentagon didn't advocate toppling the Assad regime, we likewise didn't see an interest in helping to preserve the dictator's grip on power. In discussing the administration's Syria policy, then Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman—a former aide to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who served in five U.S. administrations—recalled Averell Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1943–1946. It was Harriman, Rodman sardonically noted, who once said, "Stalin I can deal with. It's the hard-liners in the Kremlin who scare me."

Three weeks and hundreds of casualties into the Syrian uprising, longstanding concerns about whom and what will replace Assad are resurfacing. So too is the atavistic attachment to a regime that not only has killed thousands of its own citizens, but contributed to the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of U.S. troops and contractors in Iraq. Support for the regime goes beyond the standard "devil you know" rationale. To wit, one commentator in *The National Interest* recently opined that "Washington knows [Syrian President] Bashar well and it knows how rational and predictable he is in foreign affairs." No doubt, Assad hasn't killed millions like Stalin. But he has spent his first decade in power recklessly dedicated to undermining stability—and U.S. interests—in the Middle East.

Here's the devil we know: Since 2006 alone, Assad's Syria has exponentially increased the capabilities of the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, providing the organization with advanced anti-ship and highly accurate M-600 missiles, top of the line anti-tank weapons, and has allowed the organization to establish a SCUD base on Syrian soil. At the same time, Assad continues to meddle (and murder) in Lebanon, harbor and support Hamas, and subvert Iraq. Damascus remains a strategic ally of otherwise isolated Tehran. And in 2007, it was revealed that Assad's Syria was progressing toward building a nuclear weapon. Given the pernicious effect of Assad's policies on U.S. interests and the region, it's difficult to imagine that a successor or replacement regime could be worse.

Of course, Washington can not dismiss outright the "perfect storm" scenario. It is possible, for example, that Assad might be replaced by an even more overtly hostile member of his Alawite minority sect. Alternately, the regime could be supplanted by a more militant anti-American Sunni junta, triggering a wholesale massacre of Alawites and a massive emigration of Christians. Perhaps the Assad regime would be replaced by an Islamist theocracy lead by the Muslim Brotherhood, or worse, absent an effective despot, Syria could devolve into chaos, providing an opportunity for Al Qaeda to establish a foothold in the Levant. These scenarios could transpire, and none of them would serve U.S. interests. But neither does Assad, and despite some remaining ill-placed optimism that he will reform, it should by now be clear that the regime is irredeemable.

It perhaps goes without saying that the United States should not be in the business of regime removal in Syria. Yet it's time to revise the assumption that Washington somehow has a vested interest in Bashar Assad's political survival. As the brave Syrian people do the hard work and pay a high price to rid themselves of a corrupt, capricious, and brutal dictator, America should not be throwing him a lifeline.

Years ago when I was working in the Bush administration, I was tasked to write an options paper on Syria. Prior to putting pen to paper, I sought the sage counsel of the late Peter Rodman, who, in typical fashion quipped, "Kissinger tasked me to write the same paper in the early 1970s." Today, 40 years and seven presidents later, the United States is still seeking an effective policy to contend with the Assad regime. Paralyzed by concerns of what comes next, the Obama administration—like the Bush administration before it—continues to cling to the Assad regime. Regrettably, if the Assad regime weathers this storm, hamstrung by ongoing fears of worst-case succession scenarios in Damascus, decades from now Bashar—or his own son Hafez—will remain a policy challenge for the United States.

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