



Biden Is Backtracking On Syria

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Whatever happened to America's Syria policy? These days, that's the question many in the Middle East are asking as they watch the Biden administration progressively disengage from what, over the past decade, has been the region's most intractable conflict. Over the past eight months, the new administration has progressively scaled down the U.S. commitment to isolating Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad or imposing costs on his brutal regime for its domestic abuses of power.

Officially, of course, nothing has changed. White House officials continue to insist that U.S. policy remains the same, that the Assad regime is still an international pariah and that there are no plans for engagement with Damascus. Behind the scenes, however, observers say there's an unmistakable sense that a "creeping normalization" of Assad's government is taking shape.

This impression, Josh Rogin of *The Washington Post* has noted, is what propelled the recent overtures of Jordan's king, Abdullah II, toward the Assad regime, with whom Amman resumed diplomatic contacts and reopened its border in recent days. It is also embodied in the White House's persistent failure to apply the Caesar Act, the 2019 law designed to penalize Syrian officials and government entities for their complicity in torture and human rights violations. To date, not one Syrian official has been designated by the Biden administration pursuant to the Act, sending a clear signal to the Damascus regime that its functionaries have nothing to fear from Washington for their manifold continued abuses.

What lies behind this malign neglect? At least part of the answer can be found in the fact that the Syria "file" has dwindled in urgency for Team Biden, eclipsed by other foreign policy priorities in the region — and beyond it. Relevant, too, is the fact that, after a decade of applying economic and diplomatic pressure on the Assad regime, the argument for reversing course now appears to be gaining currency within Washington's corridors of power.

Worse still, Syria may have become a bargaining chip of sorts in another of the Biden administration's foreign policy gambits: its persistent efforts to restart nuclear diplomacy with the Iranian regime. Syria, after all, represents a key strategic partner of the Islamic Republic, which (along with Russia) has long been helping to prop up the Assad regime politically, economically and militarily.

The results are striking. "Iran has infiltrated every facet of the Syrian regime," Anas Abdah, president of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, an opposition umbrella group, told me during a recent visit to Washington. "Iran's militias control Damascus, hold massive sway in most provinces and are even deeply enmeshed in the Ba'ath Party bureaucracy. Iran, in cahoots with Assad's security chiefs, uses Syria to manufacture and distribute illegal narcotics across the Middle East and the Gulf. Let's be under no illusion: Assad's Syria is an Iranian colony."

The Syrian regime, in other words, represents a vital strategic prize for Iran. As such, Abdah and his colleagues fear, lessening pressure on Syria could make for an attractive sweetener to bring Tehran back to the negotiating table.

That, in turn, would be a boon to Assad, whose government remains politically weak and economically insolvent — and whose policies are fundamentally at odds with what the Biden administration has said that it wants for Syria: a more pluralistic future, the repatriation of refugees, a reconstruction of the country and a return to normalcy for its citizens.

None of those things will be possible while Assad remains in power, which is why the Syria policy now being adopted by the Biden administration is so counterproductive. Syria's opposition elements hope Washington realizes the folly of its chosen path, and sooner rather than later.