



FPI Bulletin: What Congress Can Do to Hasten Assad's Exit

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The crackdown by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian people continues unabated. According to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Assad's security forces have killed nearly 3,000 civilians and injured many thousands more since the protests began in March 2011. In addition, human rights organizations estimate that Assad's government has detained or tortured more than 12,000 Syrians.

Although the Obama administration's response to the outbreak of violence in Syria has been sluggish, it has now publicly condemned the Assad regime's violent and lethal suppression of protestors on multiple occasions. It has also imposed U.S. sanctions on specific Syrian government officials and entities for human rights abuses. After much hesitation, President Obama went further and demanded that Assad to step down on August 18, 2011. Most recently, Obama stood before the U.N. General Assembly on September 21, 2011, and urged the Security Council to immediately sanction the Syrian regime for human rights abuses.

In Congress, efforts to take a strong stand against the Assad regime have met with mixed results.

Senators Joe Lieberman (ID-CT), John McCain (R-AZ), Marco Rubio (R-FL) and others have spoken out to draw greater public awareness to the plight of the Syrian people. Moreover, prior to the August recess, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the *Syrian Sanctions Act of 2011* ([S. 1472](#)), a bill that would impose far-reaching sanctions to isolate Syria's energy sector from global commerce. However, with only 9 co-sponsors in the Senate and no companion legislation in the House of Representatives, Gillibrand's praiseworthy bill deserves much more congressional support than it has received.

Even a seemingly non-controversial Senate resolution on Syria ([S.Res. 180](#)) has run into opposition. Introduced by Senator Lieberman in May 2011 and now co-sponsored by 25 lawmakers, the non-binding resolution lays out the indisputable facts of the Assad regime's atrocities. The Lieberman resolution had gained the support of the Senate's Democratic and Republican leaders, and seemed on track to pass this month. But Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), [placed a procedural "hold"](#) on Lieberman's non-binding resolution. It is shameful that Paul would take such action to block a straightforward resolution that expresses Senate's sense of solidarity with the Syrian people against Bashar al-Assad's despotic regime.

In addition, the Senate will soon hold an up-or-down vote on Robert Ford's nomination to be U.S. Ambassador to Syria. In December 2010, President Obama used a so-called "recess appointment" to install Ford as America's first envoy in Damascus since shortly after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. But Ford's recess appointment expires at the end of this year.

In the [FPI Fact Sheet: Five Steps to Hasten Assad's Exit](#) (July 2011), the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) urged President Obama to "recall the U.S. Ambassador to Syria—*unless* the administration is willing to use him as a proactive and public advocate for the Syrian people in their struggle against Assad" (emphasis added). Similarly, [an August 2011 letter](#), issued by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and signed by several FPI Directors and staff, called on the

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administration to “[r]ecall Ambassador Robert Ford from Damascus *unless* he is clearly charged with aiding the transition to democracy in Syria” (emphasis added).

Since then, this is what Ambassador Ford has attempted to do. He has repeatedly put himself in harm's way by visiting protests and funerals of murdered protesters, and vociferously condemning the Assad regime. While the Obama administration's initial efforts to engage Damascus via Ford's appointment were ill-considered, if he continues his recent actions, then his presence in Damascus helps make clear that America is firmly on the side of the Syrian people in their struggle for freedom.

However, if (as seems likely) Ford is confirmed, Congress will still have much work to do to ensure that the Obama administration fulfills the President's demand that, “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”