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**FOREIGN POLICY**  
initiative



**FDD**  
FOUNDATION FOR  
DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

December 19, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Mr. President:

The situation in Syria is rapidly deteriorating. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that over 5,000 Syrian civilians have been killed, and 14,000 more detained, since President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown against anti-regime protestors began in March 2011. Cities such as Homs are under siege, with the Syrian military's tanks and armored vehicles firing indiscriminately into residential areas, and regime forces going house-to-house to arrest or murder the regime's opponents. The conflict is quickly escalating towards civil war.

We are glad that, in the time since your call for President Assad to step down on August 18, 2011, the United States, European Union, and regional powers have increased the breadth and strength of sanctions imposed against the Assad regime. However, it is increasingly clear that more assertive American leadership and international action are required to ensure that the Syrian people have the opportunity to enjoy a post-Assad future as soon as possible.

America's interests in Syria are clear. The Syrian government, which has been on the State Department's State Sponsors of Terror list since 1979, maintains a strategic partnership with Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah. For years, the Assad regime also assisted the transit of foreign fighters who were responsible for killing numerous American troops in Iraq. And for years, the Syrian government secretly pursued a nuclear program with North Korean assistance. The emergence of a representative Syrian government that protects the rights of all of its citizens and opposes violent extremism in all forms would therefore be a significant blow to Tehran and dramatically improve regional security and stability.

Members of your administration, however, have made statements against the militarization of the uprising, even warning that such a turn could threaten international support for their cause. Such a position is counterproductive, especially since the protesters themselves are calling for international protection from the Assad regime's forces. As of now, this protection is coming only from defectors from the Syrian military, who are fighting in support of the revolution. U.S. condemnation of their armed resistance undercuts them, and could have the effect of discouraging further Syrian military defections.

As was the case in Libya, the situation in Syria is one in which our interests and our values converge. We therefore urge you to take the following immediate actions to bring an end to Assad's brutality:

- Show leadership on sanctions by immediately supporting legislation originally proposed by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand, Mark Kirk, and Joseph Lieberman, and Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Eliot Engel, and working with allies to impose other crippling multilaterally-based sanctions on the Syrian government.
- Form a contact group of like-minded international partners to coordinate national strategies to further increase pressure on the Assad regime.
- Establish direct contact with various anti-regime Syrian groups, especially the Syrian National Council, as well as those who have defected from the Syrian military, and evaluate their leadership and membership with the aim of increasing the capabilities of those groups whose political goals accord with U.S. national security interests.
- Work with Turkey and other partners to establish safe havens in Syria, as well as no-go zones for the Assad regime's security forces to protect civilians.

In the absence of American leadership, other countries that do not necessarily share our goals and values are stepping in to fill the void in Syria. Given the stakes, it is important that the United States lead on this issue. The Syrian people are calling for protection from the Assad regime. It is our moral obligation and in our interest to assist them.

As you said in the case of Libya, it is now time "to live the values we hold so dear."

Sincerely,

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