

Losing Legitimacy in Syria

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's [recent comments that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has "lost legitimacy"](#) suggest that the U.S. may pursue a more aggressive policy in Syria. Assad has presided over a repressive and authoritarian regime since coming to power in 2000, following almost 30 years of a similarly repressive regime in Syria led by al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad. In the last few weeks and months, al-Assad has become even more brutal as his regime cracks down on demonstrations and demands for more freedom following similar movements in other North African countries.

Clinton's remarks, however, were very unfortunately timed as they were made the day after pro-government demonstrators stormed both the French and American embassies protesting what they viewed as the support for the opposition to al-Assad offered by those two countries. Thus, Clinton's remarks can be interpreted that the American position is that years of authoritarian rule and violently repressing demonstrators were not evidence of al-Assad's lack of legitimacy, but the failure of the regime to protect the U.S. embassy is. While protecting foreign embassies is an obligation of the host country, not living up to this obligation is more of an issue between the countries in question than cause to describe a leader, or regime, as being without legitimacy.

It is, of course, unlikely that Clinton's words are solely a reaction to the failure by the Syrian government to protect the embassy, although the Syrian government should be held responsible for that as well, but that the Secretary of State was responding to the increasing brutality of an already brutal regime. The Syrian regime should be condemned in the strongest language possible by the U.S. and the Clinton's recent statement is, therefore, a big improvement on some of her previous [weaker statements regarding Libya](#).

The U.S. has been in a difficult position regarding Syria as American relative inaction in Syria is a stark contrast to U.S. policy in Libya where the U.S. has played a major role in ongoing military intervention against that country's authoritarian leader. While the situations in the two countries are not identical, there are ample similarities. The failure of the U.S. to become involved in Syria highlights both the deep inconsistency of American foreign policy as well as the limits on American, and indeed NATO's, ability to be everywhere at once. The specific problem which the U.S. faces regarding Syria and Libya is that of leaving itself open to criticism for intervening in one country while not intervening in another similar case.

In this context, Clinton's words, while empirically accurate, reveal something about the potential powerlessness of the U.S., as well as how the U.S. continues to see itself in the world. Clinton's language, "President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power." is still that of expectation, as if the U.S. determines when leaders of countries have lost their legitimacy and when they

have to leave office. It also suggests that a leader loses legitimacy when the U.S. no longer has anything invested in him or her. Although in the case of al-Assad, Clinton is right regarding his lack of legitimacy, the tone is still strange and laden with an implicit understanding of American *droit du seigneur* in the international arena. The U.S. would tolerate an assertion like this from no other country in the world and would view those assertions as *prima facie* evidence of the country doing the asserting, regardless of the facts of the situation.

Clinton's statement demonstrates the implicit belief on the part of American policy makers that the U.S. is unique and therefore has unique rights among states. It would be wrong to personalize this problem by blaming only Secretary Clinton. Clinton's tone and approach reflect the consensus view of the foreign policy establishment of which she is a leader and member in extremely good standing, as well as the views of senior American policy makers going back for decades.

The results of this peculiarly American belief are mixed, as it sometimes leads to the U.S. acting on the side of freedom and human rights, but other times it has become another form of American arrogance leading to the U.S. to overstep its role and miscalculate what it can achieve. More significantly, the ability of the U.S. to act based upon this view of itself is diminishing steadily, making this uniquely American view in danger of moving from arrogant to absurd.