



Assad must go? Obama administration's focus on Syria in doubt as death toll soars

By Barnini Chakraborty

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WASHINGTON – The rise of ISIS militants in Syria and Iraq, and the unwillingness of Americans to see their military involved in another foreign conflict, appear to have cooled President Obama's once-strident rhetoric demanding Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "must go" -- even as the death toll in the three-year-old civil war tops 170,000.

"Syria is a mess and Assad has managed to hold onto power," Chris Preble, Cato Institute's vice president for foreign policy studies, told FoxNews.com.

"I'm not convinced that President Obama gave up on the idea" of forcing Assad from power, Preble said. "He just realized how unpopular it was," adding, "America has very limited ability to affect the outcome in Syria."

Still, as new crises appear on the Obama administration's radar seemingly every week, and with foreign fighters and Islamic radicals streaming into the region, the Syrian death toll mounts as the administration is being accused of easing off its pledge to help rebel fighters -- and considering a policy of backing the lesser of evils.

A report Monday from the Obama administration's own State Department reveals that the Syrian civil war effectively has driven out the country's Christian population. In the city of Homs, alone, the Christian population has declined from 160,000, to barely 1,000.

And fresh casualty figures from the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, as reported by Reuters, say at least 700 people were killed in a 48-hour period two weeks ago that represented "the bloodiest fighting since the civil war began in 2011."

That same group put casualties at more than 171,509, as of July 8 -- though they believe the actual number could be much higher.

And 56,495 -- or one-third of total casualties -- are listed as civilians, including 9,092 children.

Frustration over the situation within the Obama administration spilled over last February with the resignation of America's ambassador to Damascus, Robert Ford, who said he no longer could defend the administration's Syria policy. Since then, Ford has stepped up his criticism, claiming the administration is failing to address the conflict's root causes while haphazardly addressing the escalation of violence.

"The situation in Syria has gone from bad to very bad to still worse, and the measures we have taken have been, in most cases, too little and too late," Ford told NPR in a radio interview.

And Obama's "Assad must go" rhetoric appears to have lost its influence on Capitol Hill lawmakers.

Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Bob Corker, R-Tenn., have been among the most vocal to accuse the White House of being too passive in Syria. During a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing last week, Corker shrugged off the idea of funneling another \$500 million to aid the Syrian opposition.

"I question how effective that's gonna be," he told Elissa Slotkin, a Defense Department official, at the hearing. "Did the administration really, truly think it could move the needle?"

Slotkin countered, "Sir, you can't fight something with nothing."

"Can you fight something with almost nothing?" Corker shot back.

Slotkin said the plan was to "start small and move up significantly in scale and numbers," but her answers were met with a collective eye-roll by panel members.

State Department and other officials are continuing to pledge U.S. support for certain members of the opposition, but lately it's been more talk than action.

Asked during a July 24 State Department briefing if the U.S. was satisfied with the pace of progress and aid going to the Syrian rebels, spokeswoman Marie Harf seemed to indicate it was.

"We know they are fighting very big challenges on several fronts, both from the regime and from ISIS and Nusra and the terrorists that we've seen there," Harf said. "So it's a huge challenge. We're continuing to increase our assistance."

Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki also insisted last week that, despite Assad's Damascus inauguration, he "has no more credibility now than he did before the so-called presidential election."

Still, it would appear at least that the ongoing slaughter in Syria has been pushed into the administration's foreign policy background, replaced by such recent crises as the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza.

And that lack of attention appears to have helped stabilize Assad's position -- along with the support of Syria's long-time ally Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has worked behind the scenes to diminish America's global voice in the Syrian crisis.

When the U.S. - with the backing of other Western countries - called on Assad to back down, Putin responded by sending Assad's army cash and weapons.

And when Assad crossed Obama's so-called "red line" on chemical weapons use, it was Putin - not Obama - who stepped up and brokered a solution in which the U.S. backed away from air strikes in return for Syria handing over its chemical weapons stockpile.

Assad, meanwhile, used his inauguration to declare victory against the U.S.-backed push to oust him -- a reality that Lebanese commentator Hisham Melhem believes could have widespread consequences.

"We may never know for sure if Putin's decisions in Ukraine were encouraged by Obama's passivity in Syria," Melhem said in an article posted on the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights website. "What we know for sure, is that the Russian president was not deterred because of anything the American president did in Syria."

Melhem believes those "less charitable" to Obama would say his inability to oust Assad sent a message that the U.S. and its allies were incapable of extinguishing growing problems in the region.

"The collapse of the Geneva process on Syria is a serious defeat for U.S. diplomacy that will not go unnoticed in the region and beyond," Melhem predicts.