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# Fear of slippery slope has paralysed Obama

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Sir, David Gardner makes a crucial point, frequently ignored, about the difficulty of removing Bashar al-Assad from power: namely, that President Assad's person (together with his family) is bound up with the very structure of the state ("A chasm at the heart of the Syria crisis", December 28). Mr Assad's is a virtually totalitarian, Ba'athist regime, the sister of Saddam Hussein's, in which he and his family are its linchpin. Removing Mr Assad would therefore entail massive regime change; how else could a transition to the pluralist government Barack Obama envisions for Syria be effected? This is a stumbling block that the Obama administration seems not to have thought through.

Actually, it would appear to be another instance of what Elizabeth Drew, a political writer and Obama supporter, once described as the president's penchant for feinting in the direction right-thinking people would encourage him to go, while failing to follow through because of his inner lack of faith in the policy. Failure to provide Ukraine with the necessary weaponry for its self-defence, while preferring largely ineffectual sanctions on Russia, is one instance. Mr Gardner highlights yet another: Mr Obama "called for the downfall of the Assads but then held back from giving the mainly Sunni rebels the means to achieve it". Or, as David Remnick remarked in a recent New Yorker article on John Kerry: "But no one could convince Obama that deeper involvement [in Syria] would avoid a repetition of the Iraq fiasco."

A chronic and arguably irrational fear of the "slippery slope" has essentially paralysed Mr Obama's conduct of foreign policy, to which the current bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq is no exception: it is meant to avoid further US commitment while containing rather than defeating the terrorist enemy. Look for Mr Obama's successor to follow through.

**Albion M Urdank**

*Los Angeles, CA, US*

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