

# INDEPENDENT POLICY REPORT

## A Diplomatic Road to Damascus: The Benefits of U.S. Engagement with Syria

Leon T. Hadar\*

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### *Executive Summary*

In the spring of 2007, the Bush administration began to signal a welcome and overdue reversal of its policy of isolating and threatening Syria. Since 2002 the president and his advisors have sent mixed signals to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Consistent with the advice of those who advocate regime change in Damascus, the Bush administration has provided assistance to Syrian opposition groups and imposed sanctions on Syria designed to compel the Assad government to reverse course on Lebanon and its support for Palestinian terrorist groups. The Bush administration has portrayed Syria as part of an Iran-led regional coalition, and administration officials have depicted the Syrian Ba'ath regime as a leading regional opponent of its "Freedom Agenda" in the Middle East as well as one that is committed to an "Islamofascist" ideological orientation. These efforts run counter to U.S. strategic interests. At the same time, designating Syria, which is run by a secular leadership, as a proponent of an Islamist political agenda is just another example of

the Bush administration's neoconservative propaganda style.

A sensible U.S. policy would involve co-opting instead of isolating Syria. Constructive relations between Washington and Damascus could prove useful in advancing U.S. interests on a number of fronts, including the future of Iraq, the long-term prospects for a viable state in neighboring Lebanon, and progress toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians. If the United States and Syria agree to put their common interests ahead of ideology, it could help to move the regional balance of power away from Iran. Ongoing dialogue is also needed to ensure that Syria continues its cooperation with U.S. government agencies in the search for al-Qaeda and its allies. Finally, diplomatic and economic engagement between Syria and the United States and the European Union could help strengthen the reformist forces in that country, including members of the professional and business classes, and accelerate the efforts to integrate it into the global economy.

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# A Diplomatic Road to Damascus: The Benefits of U.S. Engagement with Syria

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## **Introduction**

The meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moalem on the sidelines of an international conference on Iraq in Sharm al-Sheik on May 3, 2007, was the first high-level encounter between Syrian and U.S. officials in two years. While it was described by Moalem as “frank and constructive” and by Rice as “professional” and “business-like,” focusing mainly on security issues relating to Iraq, the meeting signaled a new willingness on the part of the Bush administration to engage Syria in a diplomatic dialogue. “I made clear we don’t want to have a difficult relationship with Syria, but we need to have some basis for a better relationship,” Rice told reporters.<sup>1</sup>

This apparent willingness by the Bush administration to engage Syria was welcome, and overdue. Constructive relations between Washington and Damascus are crucial to advancing U.S. interests on a number of fronts, including the future of

Iraq, the long-term prospects for a viable state in neighboring Lebanon, and the progress toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Ongoing dialogue is also needed to ensure that Syria continues its cooperation with U.S. government agencies in the search for al-Qaeda and the individuals and organizations that support them.

## **Change in Policy or “Muddling Through”?**

The meeting came after a long period in which Bush administration officials were dismissing any suggestion for rapprochement with Damascus. Hence U.S. President George W. Bush and his aides had rejected the recommendation by the December 2006 report by the Iraq Study Group for a dialogue with Syria as way of promoting a solution in Iraq. And Rice has stressed several times that Syria was required to change its behavior on three key policy issues as a precondition for renewing any engagement with Washington: (1) it needed to arrest the

guerrillas who cross its border into Iraq; (2) it had to stop meddling in Lebanese affairs; and (3) it had to cooperate with an international investigation of the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, while the Bush administration has refrained from including Syria as a full-fledged member in its “Axis of Evil,” its officials have depicted the Syrian Ba’ath regime as a leading regional opponent of its agenda of establishing political and economic freedom in the Middle East. The administration later seemed to have embraced a more Realpolitik framework to portray Syria as part of regional coalition led by Iran that was challenging the efforts by a pro-American group headed by Saudi Arabia to stabilize the Middle East. That Damascus has been providing safe haven for anti-Israeli militia—Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and some members of Hamas—has been seen in Washington as an integral part of Syria’s effort to sabotage U.S. policy in the region.<sup>3</sup>

In an indication that Washington was intent on maintaining Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime pariah status and adopting a more aggressive strategy vis-à-vis Damascus that could eventually lead to “regime change” there, the Bush Administration has accelerated its efforts to isolate Syria by announcing on April 23, 2007, sanctions on fourteen companies and government agencies accused of supplying military equipment to Syria. The Bush administration has also taken steps to provide assistance to Syrian opposition groups, allowing the opening of an office

of the National Salvation Front (NSF) in Washington headed by Dr. Husam Dairi. The NSF is led by Abdel Halim Khaddem, former vice president of Syria, who left his country in 2005 and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, Syria’s main Sunni opposition party.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the Bush administration has responded to reports that the Syrians have expressed an interest in negotiations with Israel that could lead to a peace accord between the two neighbors by pressing the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to refrain from even putting out feelers to test the proposals from Damascus.<sup>5</sup> The negative response by the Bush administration to the visit by U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat from California, to Syria and her meetings with officials there only helped to accentuate the sense in Washington that the White House had no intention of opening a dialogue with Syria. It considered the diplomatic ball to be in the Syrian court; that is, it was up to Damascus to accept the American preconditions for diplomatic engagement with Washington.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with the Cable News Network (CNN), Rice stressed that “we are looking for some indicators to attest that Syria is ready to cooperate, and adopt measures that will lead to regional stability. Diplomacy is not just about talking, but achieving results, and when you sit down to talk you hope that you can reach some sort of result. We aren’t encountering such signs.”

The U.S. chief diplomat even seemed to suggest that Pyongyang (a member of the

Axis of Evil) was adopting a more moderate approach than that of Damascus, noting that “in talks with North Korea we detected signals and some readiness for moving forward . . . with Syria we just talked and talked and talked. We are interested in deeds. . . . We want Syria to alter its conduct and we’ve made this abundantly clear. They know what they have to do. They just have to do it.”<sup>7</sup>

Hence, that the Bush administration was seeking a “better relationship” with a regime that it considered to be “out of step” with U.S. policy in the region and with which it refused to engage in direct negotiations seemed to be a significant diplomatic development, if not, indeed, a strategic breakthrough.<sup>8</sup> Or was it just a tactical move in a process of “muddling through” on the part of the administration, seeking some level of Syrian cooperation in stabilizing Iraq but without embracing a strategic shift in the approach toward Damascus, which it still regarded as a long-term threat to U.S. interests?

### **Levantine Intrigues: The Hariri Assassination and the Cedar Revolution**

After all, since the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14, 2005, contacts between Washington and Damascus have been severed. The Bush administration has been working together with the European Union (EU), and particularly France (which regards its former Lebanese protectorate as being in its “sphere of influence”), as well as with Saudi Arabia

in actively pursuing a policy of isolating the Syrian regime led by Assad. The Americans and the Europeans have accused members of his regime of orchestrating the terrorist car bombing in Beirut that killed Hariri, a businessman and self-made billionaire who was responsible for resurrecting Lebanon from the chaos of its bloody civil war and who maintained close ties to the Saudi royal family as well as to former French President Jacques Chirac. Assad and other Syrian officials denied an involvement in Hariri’s killing, but a United Nations (UN) investigation found senior Syrian officials likely to have been complicit in the assassination.<sup>9</sup>

This policy toward Syria has been part of a wider U.S. approach to events in the Levant aimed at assisting the Lebanese government headed by Fouad Siniora in extending its sovereignty over all of Lebanon and strengthening its democratic foundations. This approach has been highlighted by the enthusiastic response from Washington to the so-called Cedar Revolution, a chain of demonstrations and popular civic action in Lebanon, especially in the capital, Beirut. These actions were triggered by the assassination of Hariri as well as by the U.S. support for the demands of Lebanese leaders that Syria end its military presence, numbering approximately fifteen thousand troops in their country. Eventually, following the passage of a UN resolution on the issue and under pressure from the international community, Syria began withdrawing its troops from Lebanon—and by April 26, 2005, Syrian soldiers had already crossed the border back to Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, the United States and Saudi Arabia had encouraged Syria to deploy its troops in Lebanon in 1976 as part of the international efforts to end the civil war in Lebanon and to bring stability to that country. After the Cold War had ended and the Syrians lost their main global backer, the Soviet Union, while their statist economic system had major difficulties competing in the new globalized economy, Syria's continuing control over Lebanon—which was transformed into a de facto protectorate of Syria—provided Damascus with a strategic and economic asset. By manipulating Lebanese politics, Syria's security apparatus emerged as Lebanon's power broker. By providing a safe haven for anti-Israeli groups—Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and some of the leaders of Hamas, including the radical Khaled Meshal—Syria could gain leverage in its conflict with Israel as it demanded the return of the Golan Heights that Syria had lost in the 1967 war.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Syria's political and economic leaders could continue exploiting the prosperous Lebanese economy in order to prop up their own bankrupted economy.

From that perspective, the Bush administration, as a leader of a coalition of European and Arab countries backing the legitimate government in Beirut, ended up forcing Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. It freed the pro-western and free-market-oriented Lebanon from the control of a ruthless military regime and a decaying socialist government. The Syrians, after losing their Lebanese asset, were under growing pressure to cooperate with the United States

and the West on a variety of policy issues, in addition to treating its neighbor Lebanon with more respect. In a way, it was a demonstration of an effective, U.S.-led, multilateral diplomacy, with the Europeans and the Saudis using their economic power to help increase the diplomatic pressure on Damascus. Indeed, the role of France and its EU partners proved to be very critical in the process. The European Union is Syria's largest trading partner (through its oil exports, Syria has a regular trade surplus with the European Union). And Syria's isolation by the international community over Lebanon could have threatened the "Association Agreement" it had signed with the European Union as part of the planned Euro-Mediterranean free trade zone.<sup>12</sup>

### **Bush and Assad Seniors vs. Bush and Assad Juniors**

The proverbial "Man from Mars," analyzing the policy steps taken by Washington after Hariri's assassination and up to Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, would likely have concluded that President George W. Bush was following in the footsteps of President George H. W. Bush by adopting a realistic and cost-effective policy, based on working with America's regional and global allies to achieve goals that were in line with core U.S. national interests as well as with its traditional values.

When the first President Bush and his advisors recruited Syria, then under the leadership of Hafiz al-Assad, to the U.S.-led military alliance that evicted Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, they had

no illusions about the nature of the Ba'ath regime in Damascus. A bureaucratized military dictatorship, the last socialist regime in the Middle East, orphaned globally in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and with no regional ally to count on, Syria was a regional power in decline. Joining the Bush-headed anti-Iraq coalition provided Assad with an opportunity to weaken the power of the rival Ba'ath regime in Baghdad, to join the pro-American Arab bloc led by the Egyptians and the Saudis, to win U.S. support for launching negotiations with Israel on the future of the Golan Heights, and to integrate into the global market system. In turn, President Bush could ensure that Syria would not join the dwindling, pro-Saddam camp (that included Jordan) and that it would take part in a new round of Arab-Israeli negotiations following the U.S.'s military victory over Iraq.

Indeed, both Washington and Damascus benefited from this pragmatic partnership. While a series of U.S.-sponsored Syrian-Israeli talks did not produce a peace agreement, the death of Hafiz al-Assad, who had ruled Syria for three decades, and the coming to power in 2000 of the young Bashar, an ophthalmologist who had lived in London and was considered more moderate and westernized than his father, raised some expectations in American and European capitals. These leaders believed that Syria would now go through a slow and gradual process of economic and political reform and would coordinate its foreign policy with the pro-American Arab leaders. But neither the first President Bush nor his

successor, President Bill Clinton, had toyed with the notion of grandiose schemes aimed at achieving regime change in and bringing democracy to Syria. They recognized that changes in Syrian foreign policy, including Syria's continuing control over Lebanon, its support for the anti-Israeli Hezbollah, and its development of chemical weapons, would take time.

In fact, the expectations on both sides were lowered by the time the second President Bush entered into office. The younger Bush disappointed the younger Assad, who had expected the new White House occupant to adopt the more "even-handed" approach, à la Bush père, to Israeli-Arab issues. Instead, Bush and his advisors seemed to be giving a cold shoulder to Syrian lobbying for restarting negotiations between Damascus and Jerusalem. At the same time, U.S. officials concluded that Bashar al-Assad may have lacked the power that was needed to achieve change in Syrian policies. Indeed, after a short period, referred to as the "Damascus Spring" (July 2000 to February 2001), during which Assad had made a series of appointments of reformist advisors, the new leader seemed to be slowing down the movement toward political and economic reform.

### **Syria: A Partner in the War on Terrorism ...?**

The September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington and the ensuing U.S.-led war on terrorism provided the younger President Bush with an opportunity to test his father's realistic approach toward



Damascus. Indeed, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, there were some signs of a growing Syrian-American rapprochement that reflected the common interest of the United States and the secular Ba'ath regime in Damascus in containing the threat of violent radical Islam. According to Matthew A. Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “[S]ince September 11, Syria has undertaken some positive measures in the war on terrorism,” including the reported arrest of a number of foreigners allegedly affiliated with Al-Qaeda; the sharing of intelligence with U.S. agencies on people and organizations linked to Al-Qaeda; and the public statements by Syrian officials suggesting that the organizations headquartered in Syria limit themselves to political activity, not to include terrorist operations.<sup>13</sup>

Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, writing about U.S.-Syria cooperation in *The New Yorker* noted that “within weeks of the September 11th attacks, the FBI and the CIA, with Syria’s permission, began intelligence-gathering operations in Aleppo, near the Turkish border,” where Mohammed Atta had apparently met with agents of the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical and anti-American Arab-Sunni Islamic group that is also an opponent of the Ba'ath regime in Damascus.<sup>14</sup> And, indeed, U.S. officials admitted that Syrian cooperation had benefited Americans. “The cooperation the Syrians have provided in their own self-interest on al-Qaeda has saved American lives,” declared Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs William Burns in June 2003.<sup>15</sup>

However, “even before the Iraq war, there were powerful voices in Washington, particularly among Israel’s supporters and in the neo-conservative camp, unhappy with the US-Syrian rapprochement,” according to Michael Young, an editor with the Lebanese *Daily Star*. Young suggested that by the latter half of 2002, as the Bush administration edged closer to war in Iraq, the Syrian-American relationship began showing severe strains. The Syrians had hoped that their cooperation with the Americans would lead to Syria’s removal from the State Department’s list of terrorism sponsors. Instead, according to Young, the Bush administration demanded that Syria give up its support for, and close down the Damascus offices of, Palestinian groups on the list, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as to end its cooperation with Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Washington also remained particularly keen on forcing the Syrians into giving up their support for Lebanon’s Hezbollah, which was believed to have thousands of rockets pointed at Israel from southern Lebanon.<sup>16</sup>

The Syrian-American rift grew still wider. On May 6, 2002, then Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton gave a speech entitled “Beyond the Axis of Evil,” in which he added Syria (and Libya and Cuba) to be grouped with the already mentioned “rogue states.”<sup>17</sup> And as the United States sought a UN mandate to go to war in Iraq in November 2002, Syria, which was a non-permanent member of the Security Council at the time, opposed the idea of a resolution that would authorize war. Syria sided with



France and other council members in passing a compromise resolution, Resolution 1441, which did not include an implicit trigger for a war in case of Iraqi noncompliance. In Washington, Syria's vote was construed as an anti-American move.<sup>18</sup>

### **... or an Adjunct of the "Axis of Evil"?**

It was around that time that the more pragmatic basis for U.S.-Syrian cooperation that could have created a foundation for the co-option of Syria into the pro-American Arab camp was gradually replaced with a more ideological approach on the part of Washington. According to Hersh, even then Syria continued to cooperate with Washington on antiterrorism issues. "By early 2002 Syria had emerged as one of the CIA's most effective intelligence allies in the fight against al-Qaeda, providing an outpouring of information that came to an end only with the invasion of Iraq," Hersh wrote.<sup>19</sup>

But the decision by the Bush administration to attack Iraq, and the refusal of Syria to back that decision, played into the hands of the neoconservatives in the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others charged that Syria was allowing insurgents to cross the borders into Iraq, and pundits were speculating that the Bush administration might try to do a "regime change" in Damascus after the ousting of Saddam.<sup>20</sup> While there appeared little likelihood the U.S. would expand military operations to Syria, there was much information coming out of Washington suggest-

ing that some in the administration wanted to do just that," Young wrote.<sup>21</sup>

Against the backdrop of the rising anti-American insurgency in Iraq, tensions between Washington and Damascus were increasing, especially over the accusations that the Syrians were aiding the insurgents. The Bush administration seemed to be focusing more and more on Syria as a threat to its ambitious plans of reordering and expanding freedom in the Middle East. That played directly into the hands of Israel and its supporters on Capitol Hill who were arguing that the notion that Syria was helping fight terrorism was meaningless, because the Syrians continued to assist Hamas and Hezbollah, which Washington had designated as terrorist organizations. Hence Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, legislation that required that Syria "halt support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, [and] stop its development of weapons of mass destruction." It also threatened sanctions against Syria, which the Bush administration ended up imposing on Damascus.<sup>22</sup>

### **Back to Lebanon: The Syria-Iran Partnership**

While Syria was not designated as an official member of the Axis of Evil, much of the rhetoric coming out of the administration and Congress in the aftermath of the ousting of Saddam Hussein created the impression that Damascus was one of the "evildoers" and an integral part of the league of "Islamofascists." Bush and his aides applied that

label to any Muslim groups or regimes that seemed to challenge the American strategy in the Middle East, ranging from the Muslim fundamentalist Osama bin Ladin (Sunni) and Muqtada Al Sadr (Shiite) to the mullahs in Tehran and now to the secular Ba'athists in Damascus.

But this ideological framework applied by Washington made it difficult to isolate the diplomatic pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon from the evolving Middle East mess that resulted from the occupation of Iraq and to deal with it instead in the more pragmatic manner of the first President Bush. For example, Syria's agreement to withdraw from Lebanon could have become part of a larger diplomatic package deal under which, in return for "carrots" (removal from the terrorist list, closer ties with Washington, and support for negotiations with Israel), Syria could have taken steps to meet American and European demands (distancing itself from Hezbollah, ending support for Hamas, and working to bring stability to Iraq).

Co-opting instead of isolating Syria clearly made sense under the conditions created in the Middle East as a result of the war in Iraq. While the Americans were being drawn into the bloody quagmire in Iraq, the power of the Shiite-led Iran was on the rise: its two regional rivals, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, were ousted by the United States; Shiite political parties with ties to Iran were coming to power in neighboring Baghdad; and a parliamentary election in Lebanon increased the political power of the Shiite Hezbollah

movement while voters in Palestine elected the radical Hamas to power. These and other developments threatened the pro-American Arab-Sunni governments in the region while playing into the hands of Iran. In this environment, Syria, concerned over the instability in neighboring Iraq and the spread of Islamic radicalism, could have been drawn into the pro-American camp and could have helped Washington to shift the balance of power in its favor and counter challenges from Iran.<sup>23</sup>

But instead, the Americans decided to isolate and punish the Syrians, making it inevitable that Damascus would try to protect its interests and to stave off American pressure by partnering with Iran while strengthening its support for their common partner, Lebanon's Hezbollah. "For its part, Tehran counts on Syria to facilitate the continued primacy of Hezbollah in Lebanon in order to advance its own interests in the region and beyond," according to a study issued by the Power and Interest News Report (PINR). "For Tehran, Hezbollah represents an effective threat to Israel and is a central pillar of Iranian grand strategy."<sup>24</sup> Hence, a strong Syrian-Iranian axis only reinforced Hezbollah's position in Lebanon and, therefore, Tehran's position. And, indeed, the cooperation between the secular Ba'ath Syrian regime and Iran's Shiite clerics in assisting Hezbollah before and during its war with Israel last year demonstrated the effectiveness of the Tehran-Damascus partnership.

One does not have to accept either of the contending theories—that the Syrians

and the Iranians encouraged Hezbollah to attack and kidnap the Israeli soldiers, a move that triggered the war, or that the Bush administration had given Israel a “green light” to attack the Hezbollah forces in Lebanon—to conclude that the war represented a strategic confrontation between the United States and the Iran-Syria axis through proxies (Israel vs. Hezbollah).<sup>25</sup> In that context, while neither the Israelis nor Hezbollah were able to achieve a clear military victory, the goal of the Israelis, backed by the Americans, to destroy the entire military infrastructure of Hezbollah in Lebanon and deliver a major blow to its sponsors in Damascus and Iran—that is, the shift of the balance of power in the Levant–Persian Gulf in favor of the United States—was not achieved. And, if anything, the ability of Hezbollah to sustain the devastating Israeli military strikes was perceived among Arabs as a political triumph for Hezbollah and Iran, while accentuating the weakness of the moderate Arab regimes led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Pragmatic Modus Operandi of the Secular Syrian Leadership**

One could draw the outlines of a counterfactual “what if?” scenario in which American efforts to co-opt Syria early on and prevent it from partnering with Iran could have made it less likely that Hezbollah, lacking the backing from Damascus, would have risked its position by challenging Israel on the battlefield. In any case, a more pragmatic U.S. policy could have averted the formation of the partnership—which never

amounted to a strategic alliance—between Syria and Iran. That is not to say that Syria would have been transformed into an “ally” of the United States. But as in the case of Pakistan, there was—and there is now—no reason why common interests between Washington and Damascus could have not evolved into a working partnership.

As a PINR analysis put it, “Damascus and Tehran are currently fellow travelers that will extract what they can from one another. Their relationship does not rise to the level of a full-fledged alliance, however, and it is a partnership that has its limitations.”<sup>27</sup> Through Syria, Iran could strengthen its ties with the Shiite Hezbollah and sustain its power in the Levant vis-à-vis Israel and the United States. In case of an Israeli and/or an American attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, Tehran counts on Hezbollah to retaliate against Israeli and American targets. At the same time, confronted with the threat of isolation and perhaps even “regime change” by Washington, Syria sees its partnership with Iran as way of counterbalancing U.S. and Israeli power.

If anything, being the weaker player in this partnership, Assad knows that Iranian hegemony in the region or a growing conflict between an Iran-led Shiite bloc and an Arab-Sunni coalition would threaten his Ba’ath regime, led by members of the minority Alawite sect (an offshoot of the Shiite denomination) that controls a majority of the Arab-Sunni population. “The Syrian regime will be threatened by both the example of a minority’s regime fallen just next door and the radicalization of that

country's Sunnis," according to Middle East expert Vali Nasr.<sup>28</sup> Hence Syria's long-term strategic interests lie in preserving the status quo in the region, a goal it shares with Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Moreover, contrary to the neoconservative spin that depicts it as a member of a coalition of Islamist political movements and regimes, Syria is, in fact, a Western-style republic whose leadership is committed to a secular nationalist ideology of the Ba'ath (the Arab Renaissance) party, that was founded by Syrian Christian intellectuals in the 1940s, and that also ruled Iraq until the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Ba'athist doctrine promotes secularism, socialism, and Arab nationalism. The secularist trend was reflected in the country's provisional constitution that ignited riots by Islamist political groups. The constitution was later amended and now insists that the president be Muslim but does not make Islam the state religion. Islamic jurisprudence, however, is required to be a main source of legislation. The constitution and the judicial system in Syria—like Syrian society—is an amalgam of Ottoman influences and modern secular tendencies (imported from France) as well as Islamic values. Hence, not unlike in Israel, religious courts in Syria handle personal and family issues. Christian Arabs, who compose 10 percent of the population, have played a prominent role in the political and economic life of the country, which also has small non-Arab minorities, including a politically restive community of Kurds.<sup>29</sup>

If anything, the Syrian Ba'ath regime, especially under the rule of the first Assad,

has regarded Islamic fundamentalists, led by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement, as the main threat to its power. Between 1976 and 1982, the government was challenged by the fundamentalists, who used violence, including terrorism, as part of a campaign to oust the Ba'athists. The Ba'athists were able to suppress the revolt with considerable brutality, as demonstrated by their leveling of Hamah in 1982.<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the Syrian leaders have been very worried over the rising power of Sunni fundamentalist groups in the Middle East and, in particular, over the terrorist threat posed by al-Qaeda and its networks. At the same time, the Syrians also recognize the danger that their growing ties to the Shiite fundamentalist regime in Tehran could help radicalize the Sunni majority in Syria. That explains Damascus's interest in cooperating with Washington; an action that could help them kill two birds with one stone: fighting al-Qaeda and distancing themselves from Tehran.

What has been surprising is the failure of Washington to comprehend that reality, instead taking steps that made it more likely that Syria would work with Iran to secure its interests in the region while at the same time helping to strengthen the Syrian Islamist opposition forces that want to oust the Ba'athists from power. In fact, according to a report published by *Intelligence Online*, France's equivalent of *Jane's*, the U.S. government has been putting out feelers to a number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are opposed to the Syrian regime.<sup>31</sup>

## **An Opportunity for Rapprochement with the United States?**

An American administration that refrains from applying a Manichean and dogmatic-ideological framework through which it considers U.S. interests in the Middle East—in which it supposedly is leading a struggle against the Evildoers, the Axis of Evil, or Islamo-Fascism—and recognizes that its relationship with movements and governments in the region has to consider first and foremost concrete U.S. national interests, would have to conclude that maintaining diplomatic ties with Syria—a leading Arab nation-state in the Levant, bordering Lebanon, Israel, Iraq and Turkey—could help Washington advance its interests in the following areas:

### *Iraq*

In the case of Iraq, the Iraq Study Group noted that Syria could help establish political stability in a way that would permit the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region. Syria could work together with Iraq and the United States to prevent radical fighters from infiltrating Iraq. Assad and his government have no desire to see an al-Qaeda state established in parts of Iraq. They can be expected to cooperate, because it is in their interest to do so.

### *Lebanon*

Lebanon's ability to maintain its independence and expand and strengthen its political and economic institutions depends upon Syria's forbearance and cooperation. International pressure following the Hariri

assassination was instrumental in forcing the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, but Syria must work with others to ensure that chaos does not return; otherwise that unrest could threaten the lives and property of Syrian citizens. In the short term, Syria must rein in Hezbollah by ending the financial and military support the group received through Syria from Iran.

### *Peace with Israel*

Ending Syria's political and economic isolation could create the conditions for the resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria, as well as between Israelis and Palestinians, that could eventually lead to peace and security for Israel. Syria could demonstrate its commitment to peace by closing down the offices of Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups and by forcing Palestinian leaders who reject peace to leave Syria. In return, Israel should respond favorably to Syrian entreaties to settle the dispute over the occupied Golan Heights. There is a model for Israeli rapprochement with other Arab regimes: Israel achieved peace with Egypt in 1979 and has enjoyed good relations with Jordan since 1994. There is no reason why a similar accord cannot be struck between Syria and Israel.

### *The Kurdish Issue*

Syria also has a role to play in managing the Kurdish problem in a way that does not threaten Turkey and other governments. Syria has previously worked with Turkey in handing over Turkish terrorists who had taken refuge in the Kurdish regions of Syria.

This past cooperation could lay the groundwork for future collaboration with Turkey and Iran to prevent the Kurdish autonomous area in Iraq from becoming a threat.

### *The Regional Balance of Power*

In a more general sense, a decision by Syria to distance itself from Iran would ensure that the balance of power in the region does not shift still further in Tehran's favor. Should Iran's power continue to grow, that could lead to a regional war between the Arab-Sunni governments and an Iran-led Shiite bloc that would be devastating to the region and a threat to U.S. interests. Every effort should be made to encourage Syria to end its partnership with Iran and to join the moderate Arab camp led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

### *Eradicating al-Qaeda*

Finally, improved U.S.-Syrian relations would help in the global effort to eradicate al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations. Syria has already played a constructive role by cooperating with U.S. agencies in the search for terrorist leaders and the individuals and organizations who support them. This cooperation could and should expand in the context of improved U.S.-Syrian relations.

In some cases, Damascus has already demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the United States. In other instances, Damascus has held out offers of cooperation in exchange for U.S. assistance in matters of urgent concern to the regime.

As noted, the Syrians have taken some steps to accommodate U.S. interests. In

other cases, short-sighted and ideologically driven policymakers in Washington have blocked renewed diplomatic negotiations between Syria and Israel to the detriment both of the interests of the region and ultimately of the United States. And with respect to Iraq, it is ironic that Washington has been celebrating the emergence of a democratic government in Baghdad, which is contrasted with the authoritarian regime in Damascus, at a time when Syria has been welcoming an estimated 1.2 million Iraqi refugees, many of whom are secular, middle-class professionals, including a large number of Christians.<sup>32</sup>

### **Syria as a Pragmatic Partner, Not an "Ally"**

By refusing to pursue a policy of engagement with Syria and by trying to isolate the Ba'ath regime, the Bush administration has failed to provide Syria with incentives to play such a constructive role in the region. In fact, it has also encouraged it "to play the role of de-stabilizer, as was seen during the crisis in Lebanon last year," according to PINR, adding that "if engagement with Syria continues, however, it is likely that Damascus will slacken its ties with Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah." Moreover, American policy has helped strengthen the strategic position of Syria in the region, which may explain why the Bush administration has concluded that it has no choice but to start engaging Syria and separating it from Iran, as demonstrated by Secretary Rice's recent meeting with Syria's Foreign Minister al-Moalem.

In an interview with MSNBC Television on May 7, 2007, Assad played down the sig-



nificance of the meeting in Sharm al-Sheik, saying it is difficult to make progress on Iraq's security when there are "bad political relations." "It's too early to say it's a breakthrough.... We are still waiting to see how they [the U.S.] want to start," Assad said.<sup>33</sup>

The Syrian president seems to be suggesting that his government wants to put the American demand that Syria prevent the infiltration of insurgents through its border into Iraq into a wider political agenda that considers other Syrian concerns, including an end to the U.S.-led sanctions on Syria; Syria's removal from the list of governments that sponsor terrorism; and American backing for negotiations with Israel over the future of the Golan Heights. Indeed, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* on December 15, 2006, the Syrian president said clearly that he wants to play a constructive role in Iraq and in the overall region but, drawing attention to Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, he added that "states work for their interests, always; and Syria works for its own interests. These interests for us are recognizing our occupied land and the whole situation in the region. Will America recognize them? This is the main question."<sup>34</sup>

Washington should respond in a positive way to such Syrian diplomatic feelers and welcome a diplomatic engagement with Damascus under which both sides recog-

nize their common interests as well as their differences. It should recognize that unlike the case of Iran and its leadership, the secular and western-oriented leadership of Syria does not see itself as engaged in a "clash of civilizations" with the Americans. Like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and most of the other governments in the broader Middle East, Syria's regime does not share American values but could play a role as a pragmatic partner in cooperating with Washington in specific policy areas, including the war on terrorism and the efforts to establish stability in the Persian Gulf and the Levant. The United States should try to separate Syria from Iran by promoting Syria's rejoining the Arab-Sunni moderate camp led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt and encourage the European Union, and especially France, to play a leading role in resolving the differences between the Americans and the Europeans over the investigation of Hariri's assassination. At the same time, political and economic engagement between the United States and the European Union and Syria could help strengthen the hands of the reformist forces, led by the professional middle class and business community in Syria, and could bring about gradual moves toward more political and economic reform. Isolating Syria would only ensure that such a process does not take place.

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