Missed Opportunities
Cooperation and Confrontation in the U.S.-Syrian Relationship

David W. Lesch

A Century Foundation Report

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This paper is one of a series that The Century Foundation is commissioning as part of its Prospects for Peace Initiative, which focuses on the conflicts in the Middle East that not only destabilize the region but also increasingly threaten American security and empower extremists. The Prospects for Peace Initiative seeks through dialogue and policy research to inform and enrich the American policy debate on long-running conflicts in the Middle East—core among them the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and to advance pragmatic policy solutions to resolve them. The initiative works to bring a wide range of perspectives to the debate to help lay the groundwork for a durable peace supported and guaranteed by the international community.

Introduction

Once upon a time things were not all that bad between Syria and the United States. Syrian troops were stationed alongside U.S. forces in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis and war—to help Kuwait regain its independence from Iraqi control, rather than to assist the Americans, but alongside nonetheless. Syria was a key participant in the convening of the Madrid peace process sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Gulf war, which led to Oslo, a Jordanian-Israeli treaty, and almost a decade of on-again, off-again U.S.-brokered Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. When Israeli-Syrian talks broke down in early 2000, both U.S. President Bill Clinton and his lead negotiator, Dennis Ross, claimed in their memoirs that Damascus was serious about peace and that the unraveling of negotiations was at least as much the fault of the Israelis.[1] Syria was also the only one of the original seven charter members of the U.S.-designated list of "states that sponsor terrorism" that has maintained diplomatic relations with the United States, with embassies operating in each other's capitals (today it is the only one of five).

Even during the heyday of the superpowers' cold war, when Syria was considered a client-state of the Soviet Union, there were important moments of U.S.-Syrian cooperation, such as the U.S.-brokered 1974 disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria regarding the Golan Heights following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, an accord that has been assiduously maintained to this day. Such was the importance of Syria in the Middle East from the point of view of Washington that the man who negotiated that disengagement agreement, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, commented that while there could be no war in the Arab-Israeli arena without Egypt, there could also be no peace without Syria.

These moments of cooperation between Damascus and Washington have become a thing of the past. Since early 2003, the relationship has deteriorated dramatically. The deepening hostility is inimical to America's interests in the

region—the most vital of which are tamping down Islamist extremism and terrorism, building a stable peace within and among the countries of the region, and stabilizing the situation in Iraq.

It did not have to be this way. Although there is plenty of blame to go around, in the author's opinion, much of it lies with the intensifying rigidity and misplaced moralism of the administration of George W. Bush.

The failure to consummate a Syrian-Israeli agreement in the 1990s represents a historic missed opportunity. Yet subsequent opportunities for the United States and Syria to improve their relationship in a way that could have facilitated an Israeli-Syrian peace have also been missed or worse, ignored. By the end of 2006, U.S. policy toward Syria could be described as ill-informed if not outright stubborn, based in part on an almost emotional antipathy. Although the Bush administration made gestures in March 2007 toward Syria that could establish a foundation on which to build a dialogue, the diplomatic environment is still fraught with deleterious opportunity costs.

What is behind the inimical state of relations between Syria and the United States over the past few years? Has the United States—has President Bush—again missed an opportunity in the aftermath of the summer 2006 Hizbullah-Israeli conflict? Can current U.S. policy be adjusted or reversed with regard to Syria? Is Syria truly interested in improving its image and its relationship with the United States?

Opportunity Lost and Created: 1999–2001

As history has already shown—and probably will continue to show—the failure to consummate an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty initiated by the Madrid peace process still casts a shadow across the region. There were two periods of intense direct negotiations between Syrian and Israeli officials brokered by the United States, one in 1995–96 and the other in 1999–2000. The site of both negotiations was within earshot of Washington: the Wye Plantation in Maryland for the former and in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, for the latter. Most officials in Washington and in Israel actually preferred the Syrian track over the Palestinian. This is not to say that it would be easy—its failure indicates otherwise—but that overall it was less complicated than the Israeli-Palestinian

track. The contested area, the Golan Heights, has less population overall and less mixed Jewish and Arab populations than the West Bank; in addition, the issues revolved around land demarcation, security measures, water accessibility, and rates of withdrawal—all issues with specifiable metrics that can be and to a great extent were negotiated.

At the time of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in the 1990s and into early 2000, the thinking suggested the following outcome: once Syria signed along the dotted line, Lebanon would soon follow in step, opening the way for the Arab Gulf states and some North African nations to ease their hostility to Israel, while awaiting a resolution of the Palestinian issue. Furthermore, there seemed to be an inverse relationship between progress on the Arab-Israeli front and Saddam's troublemaking activities; if an overall Arab-Israeli peace developed, the Iraqi regime might have been effectively contained if not circumscribed. Had Saddam Hussein's Iraq been further isolated in the region, it is possible we would not have heard much from Baghdad in the late 1990s—specifically not the fodder that turned into the basis for going to war against Iraq in 2003.

If the Madrid process had been successful, it is unlikely we would have had the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict in Lebanon in summer 2006; indeed, Hizbullah may have been militarily emasculated by now. This is not to suggest that snowballing progress toward peace would have strangled all Islamic extremism or groups such as al-Qaeda in their crib, but it would have lessened their appeal and drained the swamp of Arab ire that incubated tolerance or even sinister sympathy for the massacre of 9/11. And for those who contend that an emerging Arab-Israeli settlement along this line would have weakened the Palestinian position in the Occupied Territories by removing energetic Arab backing (and leverage), thus making the hope for a viable, independent state more remote, it could equally be said that an Israel that finally felt safe and secure in the region might then have been more emboldened to make the necessary tradeoffs leading toward Palestinian statehood and a durable peace.

But this did not happen for a variety of reasons, even though a great distance toward an Israeli-Syrian peace in terms of practical matters had been traveled. When longtime Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad died in June 2000, his second son, Bashar, succeeded him. The untested, youthful new president concentrated on consolidating his position for the time being. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had already made the fateful decision to withdraw unilaterally Israeli

troops from Lebanon in May 2000, when the preferred structure in which he wanted the withdrawal to take place—a peace treaty with Syria—reached a dead end. So when Bashar took over, the peace process was moribund.

In his inaugural address in July 2000, Bashar focused on internal affairs in Syria, especially the need for economic reform and accountability. Toward the end of his speech he addressed relations with Israel, introduced through nationalistic statements regarding Lebanon, revealing the Lebanese link in the Syrian-Israeli dynamic. His language regarding Israel consisted of fairly harsh rhetoric, although he reaffirmed Syria's "strategic choice" for peace to which his father had twice committed a decade earlier. It was expected that a young, relatively inexperienced leader would stake out a tough line vis-à-vis Israel. Bashar tried to reassure powerful elements within his regime that he was not going to make concessions willy-nilly or repeat the tactics used that had failed to result in the return of the Golan.

In this vein, many in the West, with their expectations that the ophthalmologist-turned-president would immediately engage in the peace process because he was a computer nerd and Western-educated modernizer, failed to appreciate the inner dynamics of Syrian politics. In fact this writer told Bashar on one occasion that one of the worst things to happen to him when he became president was that the Western media widely reported that he liked Phil Collins's music, from which many in the West extrapolated to make some generalized—and inaccurate—conclusions about his political tendencies. Bashar had spent less than two years of his entire lifetime of education in the West, and although he loved London, his brief stay there did not translate into instant "conversion." He is Syrian. Most of his life was directly affected by the superpower cold war and the Arab-Israeli conflict, viewing the United States on the opposite side of the cold war divide and Israel as an antagonist and an aggressive strategic threat, all the while championing the return of the Golan Heights and the rights of the Palestinians. To expect anything different was wishful thinking, which set up Bashar and many in the West for disappointment. This came fairly soon when Bashar adopted a more antagonistic attitude toward Israel following the outbreak of the so-called al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000.

The Arab world was inflamed by the course of events of the al-Aqsa intifada, as the Palestinian cause still resonated on the Arab street if not with all of the Arab governments. Leading the way was the young president of Syria, one

of the few countries in the Arab world that can play both sides of the fence. Its Arab nationalist credentials are intact because it served as the cradle of modern Arab nationalism and because it has not signed a peace treaty with Israel. It still confronts Israel indirectly through its support of Hizbullah and Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Despite the Islamic extremism that threatens the Syrian regime, support for these groups is painted as resistance against Israel and placed within a clear Arab-Israeli paradigm. Syria has historically been at the vanguard of the so-called steadfastness front in the Arab world arrayed against Israel in the 1970s and 1980s, especially following the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. So it can legitimately adopt, at least rhetorically, a radical position vis-à-vis Israel when it is advantageous in the Arab world to do so.

On the other hand, because of its track record of serious involvement in the Madrid peace process and its participation in the Gulf war coalition in 1991, Syria has been able to hop over to the other side of the fence when necessary and reenter peace negotiations with Israel and/or adopt a more cooperative stance with the United States when the environment dictates it. In fall 2000, following the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada, Bashar became a leading voice castigating Israel and emerged as a strong advocate of implementing concrete steps (such as reapplying a full Arab economic boycott of Israel) to support the Palestinian cause.[2] Little did Bashar know that this rhetoric only reinforced the negative opinion of Syria that certain elements in Congress and in the Bush administration had long held.[3]

Despite this, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, afforded the United States and Syria an opportunity to improve their relationship. Following 9/11, there seemed to be a brief period for a dramatic reversal in the Bush administration's position in the Middle East. It understood that it needed as many allies as possible, especially in the Muslim world, to go after the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and fight what was now a global war against terrorism. The Bush administration at first appeared to take a certain distance from Israel and draw closer to the Arab states, including Syria. Bashar sent a letter of condolence to President Bush after 9/11 expressing Syrian officials' sympathy for the United States by describing how their country had itself experienced death and destruction from Islamic extremism in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[4] At a more practical level, Syria began to cooperate by sharing intelligence information with its

counterparts in the United States regarding al-Qaeda, to the point where State Department officials were commenting that Syria had helped save American lives.[5]

Toward Confrontation: 2001–2003

Following the flush of quick military victory in Afghanistan that resulted in the expulsion of the Taliban in fall 2001, a rumble could be heard in Washington regarding more ambitions to reshape the region. Regime change in Iraq began to emerge as the next objective. Despite Syria's intelligence cooperation against Islamist terror networks, pro-administration voices in Washington assailed Syrian support for terrorism, citing groups such as Hizbullah and Hamas, both of which Syria considers to be legitimate resistance groups against "foreign occupation." Movement in Congress toward passage of the Syrian Accountability Act began in earnest. All of this would reach a crescendo with the 2003 war in Iraq.

Even before the end of 2001, and certainly throughout 2002, Syria felt itself placed more and more on the defensive. Members of Congress, who had never seen political advantage in promoting an entente with Damascus, found there was now no pushback from the administration to protect the U.S.-Syrian relationship. In hearings on the Syrian Accountability Act, very harsh language was used toward Syria and, in particular, Bashar al-Asad.[6] In testimony before the House Committee on International Relations in September 2002 on whether or not to pass the bill (House Resolution 4483), Majority leader Dick Armey (R-TX) proclaimed, "Our inaction on holding Syria accountable for its dangerous activities could seriously diminish our efforts on the war on terrorism and brokering a viable peace in the Middle East . . . Syria should be held accountable for its record of harboring and supporting terrorist groups; stockpiling illegal weapons in an effort to develop weapons of mass destruction; and transferring weapons and oil back and forth through Iraq."[7]

Certain appointees in the Pentagon were becoming more vociferous in their complaints about Syria, and pressure groups, including Christian Lebanese, Syrian exiles, American evangelicals, and neoconservative think tanks in Washington, heightened their anti-Syrian rhetoric while trying to convince the

administration that Syria belonged with Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in the axis of evil that was announced in President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002. The State Department, the CIA, and even some Bush administration officials, however, still believed that engagement with Syria was strategically important for Damascus's assistance in destroying al-Qaeda and for drumming up support in the Arab world for the planned war in Iraq (especially as Syria held a rotating seat in the UN Security Council at the time). As such, the Syrian regime believed that U.S.-Syrian relations would remain status quo and that the policy of engaging Syria that had been in place for several administrations (the so-called honey and vinegar approach) would stay in place. Notably, this continued engagement approach did not include encouraging Syrian participation in a larger peace process.

Damascus may have grown a bit too complacent, imagining that the State Department mantra—Syria had saved American lives—would insulate the country from the Bush Administration's post-9/11 interventionist thrust of assertive nationalism and democratization. The National Security Strategy of September 2002 represented a merger of these two streams—and a much more aggressive foreign policy posture resting on the premise that the United States would utilize preemptive force as a preventative measure in a reformulated national security doctrine. Regime change became a central U.S. foreign policy objective in order to prevent more regimes, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, from harboring and aiding U.S.-designated terrorist groups, and Syria seemed to be edging closer to inclusion in this category.

Essentially, Bashar al-Asad and his foreign policy advisors did not adequately adjust to the important underlying changes in American foreign policy as a result of 9/11, which heightened Syria's exposure to U.S. regime-change rhetoric, especially as the Bush doctrine took hold. Damascus thought the old rules of the game were still in place, and State Department and other administration officials led them to believe that such was the case, and the Syrians may have been guilty of selectively hearing what they wanted to hear. But at the same time, the new rules of the game were being written in Washington in the corridors of Congress, the Pentagon, and influential conservative think tanks by those who saw Bashar and his regime as part of the problem rather than the solution. The focus of foreign policy power in the Bush administration had shifted to the Pentagon with the wars in

Afghanistan and then Iraq, which led to a more bellicose posture toward Syria. State Department officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, made comments from time to time praising Syria's cooperation against jihadists, which reassured Damascus that the old rules still applied, but in hindsight these statements carried little weight in the U.S. foreign policy-making apparatus.

Thus Bashar's continued verbal assaults on Israel and support for groups such as Hizbullah and Hamas well into 2003 played right into the hands of the ascendant group of American foreign policy ideologues, whose positions seemed to mirror the security concerns and method of the hard-line Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon. Apparently, Bashar was relatively unaware that he and his regime were becoming more of a target. President Bush said in a speech on April 4, 2002, that "Syria has spoken out against al-Qaeda. We expect it to act against Hamas and Hizbullah as well," and on June 24, Bush added, "Syria must choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations."[8] Syria perhaps assumed that the clear differences between al-Qaeda on the one hand and Hamas/Hizbullah on the other were self-evident, as they were understood by all in the region. But these distinctions were apparently lost on the Bush administration.

No longer could the differences between Washington and Damascus be resolved as part of a Syrian-Israeli peace process; Syria now had to meet all of Washington's concerns *before* negotiations could even begin with Israel. From the point of view of Damascus, this was a nonstarter, for it would entail relinquishing its few remaining assets, such as its ties with Hizbullah and Hamas, before the initiation of peace talks. Further, the Bush administration's increasing focus on Iraq rather than the Arab-Israeli arena diminished Syria's utility in the eyes of many in the administration who had been deeply suspicious anyway of Syrian motives during the peace negotiations in the 1990s.

This emerging policy vis-à-vis Syria has its roots back in the mid-1990s, when the Republicans regained control of both houses of Congress, laying the foundation for important shifts in foreign policy. A more propitious environment for the implementation of their foreign policy arose when a sympathetic administration came to power with President George W. Bush, especially when combined with the disaster of 9/11.

Without an acute and transforming event such as an Iranian revolution and subsequent hostage crisis to compel a change in policy direction, it usually takes some time and aligned circumstances for a policy distinct from that which exists to percolate upward. One of the first representations of the emerging view of Syria as enemy to be confronted was a six-page report prepared by the Jerusalem-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies in 1996, titled, "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm."[9] The report was compiled from discussions among the Study Group on a New Israeli Strategy Toward 2000, consisting of, among others, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser, and Meyrav Wurmser (David Wurmser's Israeli-born wife, and fellow at the Hudson Institute). All of these people had important positions either in the Bush administration itself or in groups that are closely aligned to various elements in the administration.

The report was prepared for Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu after his election as Israeli prime minister in May 1996, offering recommendations regarding Middle East policy. In many ways, this report has become a blueprint for the Bush administration's subsequent approach to the Middle East and especially Iraq and for some time thereafter. Most of it was never adopted by Netanyahu in Israel, although this report has gained public notice because it called for the removal of the regime of Saddam Hussein—its primary target for "securing the realm" was actually Syria, and more specifically, the Asad regime. Asserting that Syria "challenges Israel on Lebanese soil," the report calls on Israel to seize the strategic initiative and engage Hizbullah, Syria, and Iran as "the principal agents of aggression in Lebanon." Far from seeking peace with Syria, Netanyahu's American advisers counseled that Israel should militarily confront it:[10] "Given the nature of the regime in Damascus, it is both natural and moral that Israel abandon the slogan 'comprehensive peace' and move to contain Syria, drawing attention to its weapons of mass destruction program, and rejecting land for peace deals on the Golan Heights." The report further states that "Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq—an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right—[and] as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions."

Quoting extensively from this report is important in view of the insight it gives into the mindset of people who become policy influentials under Bush—and the centrality that Syria assumed in their transformationist vision of the Middle East.

In May 2000 many of the same people convened under the auspices of a pro-Israeli (specifically pro-Likud) research group called the Middle East Forum (MEF), along with the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (USCFL), to release a study titled, "Ending Syria's Occupation of Lebanon: The U.S. Role?"[11] The report explicitly calls for the use of military force to eliminate weapons of mass destruction in Syria and end its occupation of Lebanon. The policy document called for a more aggressive U.S. policy regarding Lebanon.[12]

Among the signatories of the document were: Richard Perle, David Wumser, Douglas Feith, Michael Ledeen, Frank Gaffney, and Elliot Abrams. Again, all were either in or intimately connected to the Bush administration. Some are still influential in U.S. policy circles. Abrams is currently the head of Middle East affairs on the National Security Council, and he is widely considered the most influential voice in the administration on overall Middle East policy. Despite the fact that many of these people have left the administration, discredited by the quagmire in Iraq, their hostility toward Syria has become institutionalized in Washington and represents a marked reversal of U.S. policy from prior (Republican) administrations.

Syria's participation in the 1991 Gulf war coalition and its direct and serious involvement in the Madrid peace process tend to be glossed over or trivialized. The fact that both the Madrid and Oslo peace processes sputtered out does not diminish and certainly does not negate the Syrian contribution and role. Both were vitally important to U.S. interests as they helped reshape the regional balance of power, which for about a decade came very close to establishing a paradigm for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Many U.S. officials and commentators over the years needed to do a much better job of analyzing Syria's position in the Middle East from the perspective of Damascus rather than conveniently casting a stiff ideological net over the country. At times Syrian interests are inimical to American ones; at other times they are convergent. In order to determine and identify these convergent interests, there must at least be an attempt to understand the strategic position of Syria.

Confrontation: 2003–2004

The deterioration in U.S.-Syrian relations accelerated with the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. A range of U.S. accusations against Syria appeared soon after the invasion began, from harboring Saddam regime members and hiding Iraq's WMD to supplying military equipment to Iraqi fighters. Then–White House spokesman Ari Fleischer bluntly stated on April 14, 2003, that "Syria is indeed a rogue nation."[13] President Bashar, in response to accusations such as this, stated that "some see me as bad, some see me as good—we don't actually care what terms they use. It is not right to apply this term to Syria—I mean, look at the relationship that Syria has with the rest of the world; if you have good relations with the rest of the world, you are not a rogue state just because the United States says you are."[14]

The most pointed accusation of all, however, would only gain momentum as the Iraqi insurgency took shape: that the Syrian regime was actively assisting the insurgency with financial and logistical assistance.

In short, U.S. officials insisted Syria's putative stance was *costing* American lives. Syria had crossed the line. With the Bush doctrine, Syria could no longer play on both sides of the fence—it had to choose one side. And as the Bush administration shifted its emphasis toward promoting democracy in the region, Syria's authoritarian regime became a natural target. By early 2005, while the Bush administration officially pushed for a change of behavior on the part of Damascus, particularly in demanding that it do more to stop the flow of insurgents crossing into Iraq, it was widely believed that its unofficial policy toward Syria was one of regime change through regional and international pressure combined with support of anti-Asad Syrian exile groups and potential disaffected members of the regime itself.

Of course, as seen from Damascus, the invasion of Iraq implanted 150,000 U.S. troops in a country on its eastern border, armed with the Bush doctrine and fresh off a swift, and to the Syrians shockingly easy, military removal of the only other Ba'thist regime in the world. To the north was Turkey; and while Syria had markedly improved its relationship with Ankara in recent years (and Turkey's parliament refused to allow U.S. troops access through its country on the way to Iraq), Turkey was still a member of NATO.

To the south was, of course, Israel as well as Jordan, with which it had a long-standing mercurial relationship and in any event was a U.S. ally. Bashar looked out from his perch in Damascus and saw that his country was virtually surrounded by actual and potential hostile forces. The only friendly neighbor was Lebanon, and even there various domestic factions were agitating more assertively for a Syrian troop withdrawal and less Syrian interference in their country's affairs.

In the fresh glow of the Bush administration's "mission accomplished," several implicit threats were hurled at Damascus that Syrian officials took very seriously. Remembering that many of the same people who had written "A Clean Break" were now in high-level positions in the U.S. government, the Syrian regime had grounds for thinking it would be next on the Bush administration's hit list. As such, it is no surprise then that the Syrian regime at the very least cast a blind eye at times toward Arab insurgents crossing over into Iraq. Damascus wanted the Bush doctrine to fail, and it hoped that Iraq would be the first and last time it was applied. Anything it could do to ensure this outcome, short of incurring the direct military wrath of the United States, was probably considered fair game.

While certainly under pressure from the United States to do more on the border, Bashar also had to face a domestic constituency that identified strongly with the Iraqi insurgency. The Syrian regime was caught a bit off guard by the popular reaction in the country, particularly among Sunni Muslim salafist groups. Because Bashar had yet to solidify his hold on power, he could not afford to be seen as doing Bush's bidding—nor did he want to. In fact, the more the United States pressured Syria, the more it compelled the Syrian regime to appeal to a combination of Arab, Syrian, and Islamic nationalism to strengthen its base of support. Trying to walk that fine line, Bashar took measures along the border after a series of meetings with U.S. officials in 2004 and into early 2005; it was clear by this time, however, that the United States was sinking in an Iraqi quagmire and not in a position to turn its guns against Syria. At this juncture, there was little harm in improving border control, even if it was meant just as much to control the stream of Iraqi refugees who were quickly overwhelming the Syrian ability to provide for them.[15]

Confrontation Intensifies: Lebanon 2004–2005

The U.S.-Syrian confrontation became more serious following Bashar's perhaps imprudent decision to extra-constitutionally extend pro-Syrian Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's term in office in 2004. Syrian policymakers seem to have seriously misjudged the regional and international outcry over the heavy-handed intervention to prolong an unpopular presidency. With anti-Syrian pressure building in Lebanon, no doubt with the support of the West, Bashar wanted a clear Syrian ally in the office of the Lebanese presidency. It completely backfired. Even France, the European country with which Syria traditionally enjoyed the closest ties and one that had been at odds with Washington over the war with Iraq, joined the United States in sponsoring UN Security Resolution 1559, adopted on September 2, 2004, which condemned Syrian actions and called on "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon" and for the "extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory," the latter aimed at Hizbullah, which had long established a kind of state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon and in south Beirut. Clearly Bashar did not expect the issue of Lebanon to be placed on the agenda of the UN Security Council, with a resolution passed, and with an associated mechanism to periodically check and report on Syrian compliance. With enhanced international pressure, it was at this time that Bashar consented, after meeting with U.S. officials, to take additional measures along the border with Iraq mentioned previously. This move actually produced some positive statements from Bush administration officials.

The deterioration in U.S.-Syrian relations went from serious to grave, however, on February 14, 2005, when Rafiq Hariri, the billionaire businessman and former Lebanese prime minister, was assassinated in a massive car bombing in Beirut. Syria was immediately held at least indirectly responsible for the killing, with many in the region and in the international community—certainly in Washington—suspecting that it was ordered by Damascus. The U.S. ambassador to Syria was recalled the day after the assassination, although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that the killing was the "proximate cause" of the recall. Although the United States maintains its embassy in Damascus, the U.S. ambassador has not returned as of this writing. The United States, Europe

(particularly France, whose president at the time, Jacques Chirac, had close ties to Hariri), and most of the Arab world (especially Saudi Arabia, whose royal family also had close ties to Hariri) were united in calling on Syria to withdraw its 14,000–16,000 remaining troops from Lebanon.

This development was Bashar al-Asad's severest test, and it gave additional ammunition to those who wanted to contain Syria, if not to generate regime change. Although Bashar had reduced Syria's troop presence in Lebanon by over 50 percent since he came to power, he had to succumb fully to regional and international pressure and implement a complete withdrawal. With several bombings and assassinations that targeted anti-Syrian Lebanese figures after the withdrawal, however, there remains suspicion that not all of the Syrian intelligence agents have been removed, and the West worries that Damascus is trying to run things in Lebanon by "remote control" through its remaining allies in the country. Even though an anti-Syrian coalition won the majority of seats in the Lebanese parliament in elections in May and June 2005, it was not enough to remove Lahoud from power; furthermore, Hizbullah won a large bloc of seats, so Syria's influence on its neighbor to the west remained significant.

This was not the only thing the Syrian regime had to worry about, however, for the United States and France, continuing their cooperation forged in 2005, spearheaded the commission of a UN investigation into the murder of Hariri. In October, Detlev Mehlis, the UN representative in charge of investigating the Hariri assassination, produced his preliminary report to the UN Security Council. The detailed report in effect concluded that the assassination could not have occurred without Syrian connivance. The trail of evidence in an early leaked draft of the report led all the way to the heart of the regime in Damascus, including the head of Syrian intelligence, Asef Shawkat (who also happens to be Bashar al-Asad's brother-in-law), and Bashar's younger brother, Maher al-Asad. While it remains unclear whether Bashar was directly involved in ordering the assassination, his reputation was further damaged because if he had not approved the security services' actions, their audacity gives an ominous indication of the lack of power he really wields in the country. Upon hearing the Mehlis report, the UN Security Council unanimously passed another resolution (UNSC Resolution 1636) calling on Syria to cooperate fully with the UN investigation or possibly face further measures, probably entailing more widespread sanctions, this

time including Europe. Most of Syria's trade is with the European Union, so such a move would be sharply felt.

Syria cooperated to a minimal extent with the UN investigation under the mandate that extended into 2006. In any event, UN Security Council members such as Russia, China, and Algeria were opposed to expanding the breadth of the investigation as well as the imposition of a tougher sanctions regime against Syria. By early 2006, the focus of the Bush administration seemed to shift more toward concerns regarding Iran's alleged attempts to develop a nuclear weapons capability. From the perspective of Damascus, the threat environment had receded somewhat with the United States sinking deeper in Iraq. A different threat remains, however; the United Nations is still awaiting the final report due in June 2008 from the UN investigator, Serge Brammertz, who replaced Mehlis. Additionally, the UN Security Council authorized on May 30, 2007, the formation of an international tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination (Resolution 1757, by a vote of ten for, zero against, and five—China, Indonesia, Qatar, Russia, South Africa—abstaining). Part of the political jostling in Lebanon revolved around whether or not the Lebanese government could vote on convening the tribunal before Brammertz's final report is released. The Syrians and their allies in Lebanon were hoping that the Brammertz report would, if not absolve Syria, at least raise enough doubt as to Syrian complicity to destroy any momentum toward convening the tribunal. This is no longer an option. The UN acted in response to Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora's request because the Lebanese parliament has not been able to convene due to opposition from Hizbollah, Amal, and their allies. In August 2007, the Netherlands (The Hague) agreed to host the tribunal.

Lebanon continues to be important to Syria for a number of different reasons. Economically, Lebanon is an outlet for surplus Syrian labor, ranging from three hundred thousand to a million workers depending on the season, which results in about $1 billion of remittances flowing back into the Syrian economy. In addition, overland Syrian-Lebanese trade was estimated at about $600–$700 million in 2005, with 35 percent of Lebanese exports depending on the route through Syria. For Damascus it is a strategic imperative that Lebanon not fall into hostile hands through military or political flanking operations carried out by Israel, the United States, and/or France. Syria certainly considered Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon as one such attempt, and opposed it doggedly via

local allies. Syria is not going to go away easily in Lebanon, in fact, in the current regional and international environment; it will do what it must to maintain enough influence in the country to prevent complete encirclement. No other country has as high a stake in Lebanon, and Syria—whether under its secular regime or a more Islamist alternative—will most likely remain an influential power broker there.

2006 Recovery

Bashar adeptly survived 2005. He is no longer the inexperienced, untested ruler. No one survives as president of Syria for any length of time without political cunning, resolve, and staying power. As Syrian expert Joshua Landis pointed out, Bashar may have lost Beirut, but he gained Damascus. In other words, he used the internal fallout of "losing" Lebanon to push aside internal foes and albatrosses, most particularly the forced resignation of Vice President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam at a Ba'th party congress meeting in June 2005. He also deflected the increased international pressure following the publication of the Mehlis report by drumming up a nationalistic response that strengthened domestic support for the regime and facilitated the portrayal of internal critics as being accomplices of the West. In addition, the external threat environment allowed the regime to heighten political repression in the country, particularly against civil society and democracy activists.[16]

With chaos reigning in Iraq, it was not hard to remind the Syrian populace that U.S.-inspired democracy promotion could likewise rip the fabric of their own society apart. As the Western-educated Syrian deputy prime minister, Abdullah Dardari, stated: "I may not be keen on early morning arrests, but this regime was being threatened. The survival of this regime and the stability of this country were threatened out loud and openly. There were invitations for foreign armies to come and invade Syria. So you could expect sometimes an overreaction, or a reaction, to something that is really happening."[17]

If anything, the United States and the Syrian opposition in exile overplayed their hands following the publication of the Mehlis report. As the general goal of the Syrian opposition in exile is the overthrow of the Ba'th regime and its replacement by a pluralist, democratic political system, there was a great deal

of excitement and anticipation in those circles that Bashar's days were numbered. The Bush administration helped facilitate (and possibly partially fund) the merger of various Syrian exile groups in order to establish the appearance of a coordinated and united anti-Asad front. Khaddam gave some damning interviews in Europe regarding the Syrian regime and then, himself, joined the exiled Syrian opposition, forming the National Salvation Front, led organizationally by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in coalition with a number of secular elements.

But they did not realize that Bashar had to a significant degree already consolidated his position domestically; the fact that Khaddam was outside of Syria giving these interviews was evidence of this fact. With the intense anti-American feeling in the region, the more the Syrian exiled opposition appeared to attach itself to the United States, the more it became discredited in Syria. Finally, the United States did not receive the support in the UN Security Council in December 2005 when it and France pushed for stronger measures against Syria in light of the Mehlis report. As expected, both Russian and China opposed and vetoed U.S. attempts.

For the time being, then, Syria had weathered the post-Hariri onslaught. As further evidence of this, Bashar reshuffled his cabinet in February 2006. This is the most loyal and probably the most capable and independent cabinet during Bashar's tenure in power in terms of the ability to make decisions that used to be the preserve of the Ba'th party Regional Command, which to a certain degree has been circumscribed in recent years by Bashar. The more technocratic composition of the cabinet is reflected in the regime slogan of "modernization and development" (*al-tahdith wa al-tatwir*) from what had been "reform and renewal" (*al-islah wa al-tajdid*) in the early years of Bashar's tenure in power. This is a clear indication that the regime had moved away from tentatively stated political reform and toward primarily economic and administrative reform.

While the UN investigation and associated pressures resulted in Bashar's improved domestic position, the summer 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah war improved his regional position. Israel was unable to "defeat" Hizbullah. As Robert Malley stated, "A war waged to reassert Israel's power of deterrence and to spoil Hezbollah's image has significantly eroded the former while unintentionally improving the latter."[18] With both Israel and Hizbullah appearing to

seek a way out as civilian casualties mounted and a military solution appeared fleeting, the United States belatedly withdrew its objections to the UN Security Council arranging a cease-fire. But by the time UN Security Council Resolution 1701 passed on August 11 and was implemented on August 14 by the governments of Lebanon (which included Hizbullah representation) and Israel, it was clear that the Olmert government had been rattled and weakened.[19] Any talk of further withdrawal (or realignment) from the West Bank was put on hold indefinitely. The policy of unilateralism conducted outside the framework of a negotiated settlement had come home to roost. A negotiated settlement would have held a legitimate entity such as the Palestinian Authority in Gaza (or Syria in Lebanon in 2000) responsible for extending and maintaining the terms of the agreement.

Hizbullah at least won the war of narratives following the conflict. And a "victory" for Hizbullah was a victory for Syria. Bashar had very few strategic assets left as of early 2007, and Syrian foreign policy under the Asads is all about having leverage for quid pro quos, particularly regarding a return of the Golan Heights. The Bush administration had been basically saying to Bashar: there is nothing you can do to hurt us, and you have nothing to offer us. The actions by both Hamas (particularly its more radical wing, with which Damascus has more influence) and Hizbullah in summer 2006, however, showed that these quasi-state and sub-state actors can make a significant difference in the Middle East political and strategic landscape, thus providing Syria with more regional diplomatic leverage than it has had since 2001. In a meeting of this writer with President Bashar in the midst of the Lebanon war, he was very confident and relaxed and spoke with a certain bravado regarding Israel's performance (or lack thereof) against Hizbullah. Bashar was riding Nasrallah's popularity to boost his own on the home front as well as his regime's popular legitimacy in the region. Maybe now Syria could regain a seat at the diplomatic table and utilize its newfound leverage to restart Syrian-Israeli negotiations and engage the United States in a dialogue. There were a number of calls in both Israel and the United States for such talks, especially by former senior diplomatic and military officials and academics, and in Israel by sitting ministers, too.[20] But the Bush administration was adamant that there should be no contacts, either by Israel or Washington, with such a defiant regime.

Syria and Iran

Syria's connection with Iran plays an important role here. It is a relationship that was forged immediately after the 1979 Iranian revolution and then cemented during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, when Syria supported non-Arab Iran against its Arab neighbor in Iraq. It is important to realize that the Syrian-Iranian connection is a strategic relationship at its roots. The sociopolitical systems in each country are vastly different, Syria being a secular, Ba'thist state while Iran is an Islamic republic. Even though the Syria leadership is Alawite (a derivative of Shiite Islam) and Iran is a Shiite-dominated country, there is very little, if any, shared religious ideology. It may be fair to acknowledge a Syrian-Iranian axis, but it is patently incorrect to include the Sunni-majority country of Syria as part of an emerging Shiite crescent from Iran to Lebanon. As such, there has always been a certain level of discomfort among important elements in each country regarding the relationship.

The relationship has shifted over the years. Syria was an outlet and asset during times of trouble for Iran in the 1980s; now, Iran is an outlet and asset for Syria, particularly in terms of providing Damascus with some strategic depth at a time when it is virtually surrounded. There is an economic dimension to the alliance, but not to the point yet that Syria has become dependent on Iran.

Primarily, though, Iran has enhanced Syria's ability to be a regional diplomatic player and to maintain its influence in Lebanon—particularly, of course, through the Hizbullah link. While U.S. officials continuously attempt to damn Syria by grouping it with Iran in any official discussions or pronouncements regarding undesirables in the Middle East, Damascus actually does not mind at all, for it indicates, again, that the United States is thinking about Syria and that it has regained some diplomatic leverage, even by proxy. During the last few years, Syria has had very few friends. Even in the Arab world, U.S. allies and Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan distanced themselves from Damascus after the Hariri assassination, and following Bashar's harsh criticism of them as "half-men" during the Lebanon summer war. As Bashar mentioned to me on one occasion, when one has few friends, one cannot be choosy on who they are, the implication being that Damascus has had no choice but to draw closer to Iran. Equally, however, this implies that if Damascus is given a legitimate option in another direction, it might loosen its ties to Teheran.

In this writer's meeting with Bashar in Damascus on May 30, 2007, he said, "Whoever works more for our [Syria's] interests, I will be their friend. It is about interests, not ideology, and if the United States works for my interests, I will be their friend."

Some close to Bashar advocate looking east toward China, Russia, India, and Iran rather than toward the West in terms of developing economic ties. This view, in my opinion, is one that Bashar seems not to have bought into, for he knows that ultimately the improvement in the economy his country so desperately needs will have to be accomplished through enhanced trade relations with Europe and a revocation of the Syrian Accountability Act. According to various estimates, Syria will be a net importer of oil within five years barring any new reserves being discovered, and at current rates of production (approximately 400,000 barrels per day) the country will run out of oil in the 2020s. On top of a stagnant public-sector-dominated economy with high population growth rates (exacerbated by the stream of Lebanese and Iraqi refugees escaping conflict), Syria's economic forecast is bleak unless systemic economic and judicial reform is undertaken in a way that is paired with increased foreign investment and foreign trade.

Another Opportunity? Late 2006 and into 2007

To Syria's secular regime, Israel is not an *existential* enemy, as it is to many Islamist entities in the Middle East, such as Iran, elements of Hamas, and Islamic extremist organizations. Rather, Israel is seen as a strategic threat to Syria, and it has certainly presented a manifest and serious *strategic* challenge from time to time.

But it is also a country with which Syrian officials have held direct negotiations, and it is the only country that can return the Golan Heights, a prime foreign policy objective ingrained into Bashar's being—and just about every other Syrian as well. Bashar observed to this writer during the Lebanon war in 2006 that he would be a "hero" if he was able to effect a return of the land that Israel seized in 1967, implying that it might be worth cashing in some chips to acquire the Golan Heights, such as Syrian influence with Hamas and Hizbullah, both of which became much more of a concern to Israel in 2006.

There was no shortage of signals emanating from Damascus after the fighting that Syria was prepared to resume negotiations with Israel.[21] A debate ensued inside and outside of the Israeli government on whether to explore Syrian intentions. But Prime Minister Ehud Olmert remained steadfast in rejecting Bashar's peace overtures, in part because he did not want to negotiate from a position of perceived weakness following the debacle in Lebanon. It was also widely believed that the Bush administration was pressuring Israel not to reengage with Syria in order to maintain the U.S.-led isolation of Damascus.

Then came the Democratic victory in both houses of Congress in the November 2006 midterm elections, widely seen as a repudiation of Bush's Iraq policy, followed by the publication in early December of the Iraq Study Group report. The commission was chartered to produce recommendations regarding Iraq, but commissioners soon saw that Iraq's problems were so tightly interwoven with its neighbors' that they concluded that this would have to address the question of improving the U.S. position in the Middle East overall. Accordingly they elaborated a broader regional *diplomatic offensive* and a call for the United States to reengage in a dialogue with Syria.

The Iraq Study Group called for U.S.-Syria talks as part of an overall diplomatic initiative in the Middle East that would restart negotiations on a variety of fronts leading ultimately to that elusive comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, all of which would have serendipitous repercussions (from the U.S. point of view) for the U.S. position in Iraq, and it would by default diminish Iran's enhanced influence in the region. For former Secretary of State James Baker and his panel, Syria is a keystone. As in the 1990s, their thinking assumes the following: with Syria engaged in peace negotiations with Israel amid an improved diplomatic environment with the United States, both Hizbullah and Hamas could be more effectively contained. This would, in turn, lessen Teheran's ingress into the Arab-Israeli arena, improve the chances for a final Israeli peace agreement with the Palestinians, and loosen the ties between Syria and Iran. In addition, Syria would be held to a higher standard in terms of more energetic efforts by Damascus to stem the inflow of support for Iraqi insurgents crossing over the Iraqi-Syrian border, thus helping U.S. efforts to stabilize the deteriorating situation there.

Syria even reestablished diplomatic relations with Iraq in November (broken since 1982), in anticipation perhaps of becoming part of a regional

diplomatic solution to the Iraqi problem. Reports of rumored and actual meetings between Syrian and Israeli elements began to appear in the press and created a buzz about the possibility of a new peace plan emerging. There was a great deal of hope in Damascus that the Bush administration would finally be compelled to give up its objective of isolating, if not overthrowing, the regime of Bashar al-Asad as well as relinquish its support for exiled Syrian opposition groups.

Not so.

The Bush administration made it clear in December following the publication of the Iraq Study Group report that it would not re-open a dialogue with Syria. Quite to the contrary, there were numerous reports and rumors at the time that the Bush administration had embraced with renewed vigor the idea of regime change in Damascus. With the support of regional Sunni Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, all of whom to varying degrees were interested in preventing a "Shiite crescent" from developing, as well as continued admonishment of Syrian opposition groups, the Bush administration wanted to ensure that Syria did not "win" in Lebanon through the political empowerment of its Lebanese allies. Bush administration officials wanted to split Syria off from Iran, but rather than attempt to do so through diplomatic engagement with Bashar, it wanted to do so through continued pressure and isolation. Anything less appeared, from this administration's point of view, to be rewarding Syria for bad behavior.

Any effort to trigger regime change in Syria would be pure folly. The United States has few assets to utilize in any attempt to effect regime change in Damascus, including the divided and delegitimized Syrian exile groups. Moreover, given the administration's track record of inept performance in the region, what would likely be the result? Israeli officials certainly do not want U.S.-led regime change because it would most likely lead to another Iraqi mess on their doorstep, and perhaps another, even more radical, Islamic regime.

There is certainly some question as to who might come to power in Syria should Bashar somehow be overthrown. I doubt any remaining significant regime figures would be any more willing than Bashar to reengage with the West and Israel. America's interests would be even more disadvantaged if a Sunni Islamist group took power, whether indigenously grown or supported

by the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. It is difficult to assess the influence of Sunni extremism in the country because of the repressive apparatus of the Ba'th regime, but from the number of women wearing the veil to more muscular sermons by imams and a few incidents of Islamist-oriented protests and violence, it is clear that fundamentalism is on the rise in Syria as elsewhere in the Arab world.

The Islamist challenge is, indeed, worrisome to the Syrian regime, but several factors mitigate against an Islamic extremist takeover of Syria: (1) The effective repressive apparatus of the regime in terms of historical memory (Hama[22]), including actual detention and arrests to back up Syrian law regarding membership in an Islamist party, and successful infiltration of Islamist groups. (2) State control of the media as a kind of Syrian televangelism preaching a more tolerant and quietist form of Islam. The late Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kuftaro, set this ecumenist tone, one that is currently being carried forward by the new Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Hassoun, and Muhammad Habash, who is director of the Center of Islamic Studies in Damascus and also is a parliamentarian. (3) The large, if fragmented, non-Islamist elements in the country, that is, Kurds, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Sufis, and the secularized Sunni business class—add up their numbers and you have over 50 percent of the country's population presumably ready to act as a bulwark against Islamic extremism. (4) The decision by Hamas and Hizbullah to participate in democratic elections has really placed jihadists in Syria and elsewhere in an intellectual bind.

This, combined with the lack of intellectual rigor and unity among the salafists, provides the regime with a distinct advantage as long as it does not follow the Egyptian model of going overboard to accommodate Islamist trends in the country. This pattern of accommodation facilitates the creation of an environment for Islamic extremism in the long run and concurrently shrinks and restricts secular political space given the repression of democratic activists.[23] The bottom line is that Bashar is securely ensconced in power for the time being; no serious threats to his position exist internally or externally.[24]

In light of these realities, logic dictates that the Bush administration could not possibly be thinking in terms of regime change in Syria. Ideology often trumps logic, however, and moral absolutism buries compromise.

Conclusion

What should have been a sagacious foreign policy of dialogue and cooperation with Syria on Islamic terrorism, peace with Israel, and political space in Lebanon, fell victim to a neoconservative ideological straight-jacket. Because of this, the Bush administration has repeatedly failed to distinguish the trees from the forest in the Middle East.

Syrian officials were tremendously disappointed over the lack of a positive response from the Bush administration in late 2006 to their overtures. Syrian officials met with Iraq Study Group representatives and several U.S. senators visited Damascus and met with Bashar in December 2006. Syrian officials truly believed a corner had been turned with the United States. Bashar can only conclude that he must wait until another administration comes to power in Washington, which, regardless of political party, can only be better than what currently exists with regard to improving the U.S.-Syrian relationship.[25]

The decision by the Bush administration to attend a conference in Baghdad in March 2007 of Iraq's neighbors, including Syria and Iran, and then its participation at the ministerial level at Sharm-al-Sheikh in May (at which Condoleezza Rice bilaterally met with her Syrian counterpart) offers faint hope for rebuilding a constructive relationship. The fact that this came on the heels of a U.S.–North Korean accord, agreed to within regional multiparty talks, suggests that the foreign policy of the Bush administration under Secretary Rice might be shifting in a way that might have implications for the U.S.-Syrian dialogue.

But there are wide perception gaps. Syria apparently gave the green-light to Hamas leader Khalid Meshaal's participation in the Saudi-brokered meetings in Mecca in February 2007 between Hamas officials and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, which resulted in a Palestinian Authority power-sharing agreement. In Syria, as in the rest of the Arab world, this seemed like a major contribution to getting peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians restarted. For the Olmert and Bush governments, this was destabilizing to their strategy. Whether welcome in Washington, at the very least there seem to be tentative steps to bring Syria back into the Arab fold. The Saudi-Syrian relationship, which reached a comparable low during the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah conflict, seems to be slowly improving; Bashar supported the effective reissuing of the Saudi-constructed Arab-Israeli peace plan, unveiled

at the Beirut Arab League summit meeting in 2002, at the Riyadh Arab league summit in March 2007. The fact that it was agreed that next year's Arab League summit meeting is to be held in Damascus is a sign that attempts are being made to moderate Syria's position in the region. On the other hand, Bashar clearly believes that the other Arab states are starting to come around to *his* position rather than the other way around. In addition, Syrian officialdom believes the Saudi rapprochement is only skin deep, and it lies chiefly with Saudi King Abdullah, whereas most of the remaining ruling establishment in the Kingdom has little enthusiasm for it and is still aligned with Washington. In other words, Damascus is not counting on the Saudis and is currently not expecting much diplomatic assistance from Riyadh.[26]

U.S. hardliners' own isolation was spotlighted in April, when the new speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, led a bipartisan delegation of congresspersons, including the chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Tom Lantos, and the chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Henry Waxman—both of whom are close to Israel—for a high-profile visit to Syria and met with Bashar al-Asad in April. Although Pelosi reiterated most of the Bush administration differences with Syria, her effort to implement the Baker Study Group's recommendation for U.S.-Syrian dialogue was a symbolic victory for Damascus, demonstrating the bankruptcy of Bush administration policies aimed at Syria's isolation.[27] This is certainly a far cry from the antagonistic attitude Congress had toward Syria in the period surrounding the passage of the Syrian Accountability Act.

All of this has created an environment, despite Bush administration criticisms of the Pelosi visit, for one last chance to improve the U.S.-Syrian relationship during the Bush tenure. The more assertive posture toward developing a dialogue with Syria adopted by the new Democratic-controlled Congress, exemplified by the Pelosi visit, could nudge the Bush administration to seek out its own avenues of dialogue with Damascus behind the harsh rhetoric. This seemed to be the case when Condoleezza Rice met with her Syrian counterpart, Walid Mouallem, in a thirty-minute meeting in early May in Egypt on the sidelines of a regional conference to discuss the situation in Iraq. While hailed at the time as an important step forward in establishing a U.S.-Syrian dialogue, there may be less here than meets the eye. A high-level Arab official told this writer that Vice President Dick Cheney called the Arab

leadership in several countries (most likely Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia), telling them not to listen to Rice because she does not speak for the administration. If true, this is indicative of a dysfunctional and confusing U.S. foreign policy, but it also had the effect of the Syrians totally discounting the meeting with Rice. According to Bashar, until the Bush administration returns the U.S. ambassador to Damascus, nothing else can happen in terms of U.S.-Syrian cooperation. There must be an overt political process first—no back channels, no Israeli-Syrian overtures without U.S. involvement. From Bashar's perspective, Syria's inclusion in a regional dialogue is the only way to guarantee consideration of Syria's concerns regarding issues such as Lebanon and Iraq, and this can be accomplished through a region-wide conference sponsored in the main by the United States and not one that is narrowly focused on the Israeli-Palestinian situation alone. The return of the ambassador would signal an end to outright U.S. hostility and the beginning of political cooperation.[28] If Syria can be drawn (rather than forced) back into the mainstream Arab fold, perhaps a tacit, de facto alliance between a constellation of Arab states and Israel could be constructed, not unlike that which was formed vis-à-vis Iraq in the 1990–91 Gulf crisis and war, only this time it would be arrayed against Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's Iran. But Bashar's self-confidence in terms of his power position in Syria and in the region has been on the rise for over a year, riding in some ways on the wings of a more assertive Hamas, Hizbullah, and Iran. As such, in a speech inaugurating his second term in office, he toughened Syria's position with regard to re-starting negotiations with Israel.[29] This feeling of new-found empowerment, combined with a weakened Olmert and Bush, does not bode well for an early resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks or re-establishing a serious U.S.-Syrian dialogue in the remaining months in power of the Bush administration.

The bureaucratic and cultural momentum arrayed against renewed normal relations with Syria may also be difficult to overcome in the short term, especially after the success in May of the U.S.-led drive in the United Nations to establish the international tribunal to adjudicate the Hariri assassination. But there are steps that can be taken on which to build a more permanent foundation of dialogue and trust in the future. Starting out in Iraq is a prudent decision, because by now both countries are interested in stabilizing the situation there. The flow of Iraqi refugees into Syria is overwhelming an already brittle

infrastructure. There are an estimated 1.2 million Iraqi refugees in the country,[30] whose presence is leading to rising rents, inflation, and overcrowded schools.[31] Syria has a definite interest in stemming this flow and receiving more aid from the international community to deal with the situation. The formation of committees to examine security, energy, and refugee issues coming out of the Baghdad conference may provide multiple venues for Syrian and American officials to meet and discuss areas of mutual interest. This could possibly lead once again to some intelligence cooperation regarding al-Qaeda, another issue where Syria and the United States enjoy similar objectives. This is especially the case in Lebanon, where Islamic extremist groups such as Fatah al-Islam, an organization claiming allegiance to al-Qaeda, established a threatening presence.[32] First and foremost from the Syrian point of view, however, the U.S. ambassador must return to Damascus, and it is something that the Bush administration should do to at least be in a position to explore important potentialities. This is too important of a time in the Middle East for progress to be stalled by a game of diplomatic "chicken."

The timing may also be propitious. In recent U.S. history, dramatic peace overtures have been attempted during the final two years of second-term administrations. This was the case with the Reagan and Clinton administrations. There are no more presidential elections, and it is past the second-term midterm congressional elections. In other words, presidents begin to think more about their legacies rather than domestic constituencies important to win elections for themselves or their party.

Unless an Israeli leadership breaks away from convention (despite Bush administration hostility) and decides to explore Bashar's peace overtures, these other issues could eventually reestablish a U.S.-Syrian dialogue. That could lead to economic cooperation, such as the revocation (or waiving) of the Syria Accountability Act and the restarting of Syrian-Israeli negotiations. The issue of Lebanon is too divisive at the moment to be placed on the table. In any event, this could possibly be resolved at the inter-Arab level without continuing to sour U.S.-Syrian relations.[33] It seems that under current conditions, small steps that could lead to bigger ones are the order of the day, although a new set of regional circumstances could easily reverse (or accelerate) the process. Perhaps for different reasons today, Henry Kissinger's axiom regarding Syria is still largely accurate.

Historians like to ponder the counterfactual in history, that is, what would have happened had the subject under discussion *not* happened. This is difficult, to say the least, because it is totally hypothetical. In some important ways, though, today we are seeing the counterfactual to peace in the Arab-Israeli arena. An Israeli-Syrian peace treaty *should* have occurred in 2000; therefore, the al-Aqsa intifada, the war in Iraq, and the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah conflict are all the counterfactual turned reality to that should-have-been peace treaty. The United States must take advantage of the current opportunity.

Notes

1. See Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); and Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

2. In support of this, see excerpts of some of Bashar's speeches in fall 2000 in David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 159.

3. These opinions revolved around Syrian actions in Lebanon in the 1980s, as well as what they believed to be Syria's fraudulent involvement the Madrid peace process, that is, Damascus did so to improve its relationship with the United States and Arab Gulf countries who could aid the Syrian economy.

4. Of course, the Syrian regime under Hafiz al-Asad dealt with the threat from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in a ruthless fashion in 1982 at Hama.

5. In particular, see an essay in the *New York Times*, October 30, 2001, on Syrian-U.S. intelligence cooperation. I was informed by a high-level U.S. source that this article was extremely accurate.

6. The U.S. Senate passed the act in November 2003 by a vote of 89–4; in October the House passed it by a vote of 398–4. The act was signed into law by President Bush on December 12, 2003. The act directs the president to block the export to Syria of items on the U.S. Munitions List or Commerce Control List of dual-use items. In addition, it requires the president to impose at least two of the following sanctions on Syria: (1) prohibit export of U.S. products (other than food or medicine); (2) prohibit U.S. businesses from investing or operating in Syria; (3) restrict the movement of Syrian officials in Washington, D.C., and New York; (4) prohibit aircraft of any Syrian carrier using U.S. airspace or takeoff from or land in the United States; (5) reduce U.S. diplomatic presence in Syria; and (6) block property transactions in which the government of Syria has an interest or is subject to U.S. jurisdiction. In May 2004 Bush activated numbers one and four, both of which are mostly symbolic considering the fact that there were no Syrian carriers in the United States to begin with and that trade between the two countries was minimal, less than $300 million in exports and less than $200 million in imports in 2002.

7. In support of the resolution, co-sponsor Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) asserted, "We will not tolerate Syrian support for terrorism. We will not tolerate Syrian occupation of Lebanon. We will not tolerate Syrian making weapons of mass destruction; and we will not tolerate Syria's lack of compliance with the oil embargo against Iraq." He went on to say that "I do not want to witness horrors worse than 9-11. I urge the Administration to get tough on Syria." At the same hearing, Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY) said, "This is not too big a nut to crack. Syria is a small, decrepit, little terror state that has been yanking our diplomatic chain for years." Alluding to President Bashar's background in ophthalmology, Rep. Shelly Berkley (D-NV) stated the following: "I don't care if he's a doctor, a lawyer, a plumber, a carpenter—this is not a kinder and gentler leader. This is a kinder and gentler terrorist, and we don't need another one of those. He is no different from this father; perhaps, even worse because he should know better. This is a disgrace that this country isn't standing up to this terrorist and making sure that this type of behavior is not only condemned, but eliminated."

8. Speeches by President George W. Bush, April 4, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020404-3.html, and June 24, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html.

9. Text of the report can be found at www.iasps.org/strat1.htm.

10. "Israel also can take this opportunity to remind the world of the nature of the Syrian regime. Syria repeatedly breaks its word. It violated numerous agreements with the Turks, and has betrayed the United States by continuing to occupy Lebanon in violation of the Taif agreement in 1989. Instead, Syria staged a sham election, installed a quisling regime, and forced Lebanon to sign a Brotherhood Agreement in 1991 that terminated Lebanese sovereignty."

11. Lebanon Study Group Report, "Ending Syria's Occupation of Lebanon: The U.S. Role," www.meforum.org/research/lsg.psp.

12. Ibid. It is believed that Syria has a chemical weapons capability, and it certainly has the long-range missiles to transport chemical weapons. Syrian officials, including President Bashar, do not openly acknowledge this, but they also do not deny it, commenting that such things should be expected when a small and relatively weak state, such as Syria, is threatened by a much more powerful state, such as Israel, which continues to maintain its position of nuclear ambiguity but is widely believed to have 100–200 nuclear warheads. The report states, "the Vietnam legacy and the sour memories of the dead American marines in Beirut notwithstanding, the U.S. has entered a new era of undisputed military supremacy, coupled with an appreciable drop in human losses on the battlefield. But this opportunity will not wait, for as WMD capabilities spread, the risks of such action will rapidly grow. If there is to be decisive action, it will have to be sooner rather than later."

13. *New York Times*, April 15, 2003. In June 2003, Undersecretary of State John Botlon placed Syria on a "second tier axis of evil" along with Cuba and Libya (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were on the first tier). Syria was termed by administration officials as a member of the "junior varsity of evil," the "ladies auxiliary of the axis of evil," and an "axis of evil aspirant." Quoted in Ross Leonard Fisher, "There's Something About Syria: US Foreign Policy Toward Syria During the Clinton and George W. Bush Administrations, 1994–2004," PhD diss., University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2004, 122–23.

14. Interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, May 27, 2004; interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, June 3, 2004. Then-foreign minister of Syria Farouk al-Shar'a had a more biting response: "You happened to have different teachers in school. One you respect and one you do not respect just because the style or conduct of that person is not attractive to you. But the one that you respect, if he just winks at you angrily, you spend the whole day upset because you respect him; but if you do not respect him, even if he says 'go to hell,' you do not accept it. You say to a friend that this man I do not respect, so whatever he says to me I am not going to respect. It would have been very harsh if it [calling Syria a rogue state] was directed at us by a respectable nation. How dare they put us in accountability, especially now with what is going on in Iraq."

15. There is also evidence to suggest that one reason the Syrian regime was facilitating the sending of insurgents into Iraq, especially salafists, was the hope that it could get rid of them, many of them either getting killed by Americans or rounded up as they attempted to re-enter Syria. Bashar repeatedly pointed out that if the United States with all of its money and resources could not control its border with Mexico, how could a poor country such as Syria even hope to do so.

16. For a delineation of actions against civil society and democracy activists in Syria during this time, see David W. Lesch, "Syria," in *Countries at the Crossroads* (New York: Freedom House, 2007).

17. Michael Slackman, "Syria Imposing Stronger Curbs on Opposition," *New York Times*, April 5, 2006.

18. Robert Malley, "A New Middle East," *New York Review of Books*, Volume LIII, Number 14, September 21, 2006, 10–15.

19. The resolution actually called for a "cessation of hostilities" and not a formal cease-fire, with a combination of the Lebanese army and a beefed up UNIFIL moving into the south to act as a buffer to take up positions that were vacated by Israeli forces.

20. Including one by this author; see David W. Lesch, "Try Talking to Syria," *Washington Post*, July 27, 2006. Breaking out of the diplomatic isolation imposed by the United States is important to Bashar; establishing an official dialogue with the Bush administration will weaken the anti-Asad Syrian exile groups. Evidence of this was his comment to me at the July 25 meeting in response to my query regarding President Bush's infamous expletive regarding Syria that was caught on tape during a G-8 summit meeting luncheon in June 2006. Rather than expressing anger at Bush's caustic remark, Bashar told me that it was actually a positive thing; in other words, at least the American president was *thinking* about Syria, by implication meaning that Syria was having an impact and making an impression—and therefore it had gained some leverage.

21. For instance, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Maqdad stated on August 27 on a visit to Oman that "when Israel, supported by the US, is ready to resume the peace process on the basis of international resolutions, Syria will be constantly ready to achieve results that restore the Arabs' legitimate rights, notably a just peace. . . . We will continue our efforts to bring about a just peace." Quoted in *Times of Oman*, August 27, 2006, www.timesofoman.com/print/asp?newsid=34652. Another important indication late last year was Bashar al-Asad agreeing to receive in Damascus Sir Nigel Sheinwald, a senior foreign policy adviser to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, which was the highest level UK-Syrian diplomatic encounter since the launching of the Iraq war in 2003. "Blair in Secret Overture to Damascus," *The Financial Times*, October 31, 2006, www.ft.com/cms/s/bd8ad28a-690f-11db-b4c2-0000779e2340.

22. In response to Muslim Brethren attacks against the regime since the late 1970s, President Hafiz al-Asad, in February 1982, ordered a devastating military attack against the city of Hama, an MB stronghold, that killed some ten to twenty thousand people. It effectively, though ruthlessly, quelled the Islamic extremist resistance.

23. Stephen Ulph, "Jihadi After Action Report: Syria," The Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, www.ctc.usma.edu.

24. In a nationwide referendum on May 27, 2007, Bashar al-Asad "won" another seven-year term in office with approximately 97 percent of the voters saying "yes" in the "yes-no" ballot (there were no other candidates). While the extraordinary hoopla (concerts, parades, fireworks, etc.) all over the country during the referendum process was most certainly planned and orchestrated months in advance, my personal observations of the festivities in Damascus for several days in a row indicated to me that the outpouring of support for Bashar was, for the most part, quite genuine.

25. Bashar's attitude has certainly become more defiant. When I first met President Bashar al-Asad in May–June 2004, he was perplexed by the downward spiral in U.S.-Syrian relations, but he was also hopeful that it could be reversed, mentioning many of the common interests that the United States and Syria share in the region. When I met with him again in May 2005, one month after the Syrian troop withdrawal from Lebanon, Bashar seemed resigned to the

fact that the Bush administration was out to get him no matter what he did. He believed he had made a number of gestures, including getting out of Lebanon, improving security along the Iraqi border, and continuing to indicate a willingness to reengage in peace talks with Israel from the position at which they had broken off in 2000, but he felt he was not getting any credit for them. He appeared to get angrier as we talked more about it. Then, on meeting with him again in February 2006, he was a different person in this regard, emboldened, if not cocky. When I asked him if there was anything the Bush administration could do to improve the U.S.-Syrian relationship, he replied in a bold tone that "I do not need anything from the United States; I do not want anything from the United States. I am more popular then ever in the country and in the region. Why would I want anything from the United States?" Finally, in both July 2006 and in May 2007 when I met with him, he seemed supremely confident in his position, as if he had been right all along, especially regarding Iraq, and now he was the one in a position to make demands of the United States rather than the other way around—a 180-degree shift. He stated to me on May 27, 2007, that "the United States has lost credibility and lost respect, and no matter how strong you [the United States] are, you cannot work with lies. Terrorism is much stronger and the United States is more vulnerable. You have emboldened the Islamists, not just the Islamic extremists, but the Islamists in general, and you have weakened the secular elements. In a few years if things do not change drastically, all the countries in the region will be ruled by Islamists."

26. Author interviews with Syrian officials, including President Bashar, in Damascus in June and July 2007. This may help explain why there have been recent indications that Syria is turning to Turkey as a possible third party conduit to Washington and Tel Aviv.

27. This is on top of a stream of European officials, including EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, visiting Damascus since last August. Syrian officials are also claiming that Damascus played a positive role in helping to mediate the release of fifteen British sailors captured by Iran in late March for allegedly entering its territorial waters as well as having organized and effected the Meccan agreement in February 2007 between Fatah and Hamas for a national unity government in the Palestinian territories. Indeed, Bashar al-Asad told me that the agreement was actually brought about in Damascus before publicly being done so in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, afterward (author interview with Bashar al-Asad, May 30, 2007, Damascus, Syria—U.S. embassy officials in Damascus informed me that this was quite plausible).

28. Author interview with Bashar al-Asad in Damascus, Syria, May 30, 2007. As Bashar told me, "When political cooperation starts, then we can begin other types of cooperation, such as security cooperation [regarding Iraq and Islamic extremism]."

29. Primarily for demanding a preliminary guarantee for an Israeli full withdrawal from the Golan Heights as a precondition for the resumption of negotiations. Also, with Iranian financial assistance, Syria has been able to modernize its military to a certain degree with modern weapons systems from Russia, itself becoming more assertive in the region. (See Itamar Rabinovich, "Don't Push Assad into a Corner," *Haaretz* [Israel], August 2, 2007.) In addition, Syria's military is attempting to adopt into its own strategic design Hizbullah tactics that were effective against Israel.

30. "Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World," UNHCR, April 2007.

31. USIPeace Briefing, "Syria's Relationship with Iraq," April 2007, www.usip.org. A State Department official, Ellen R. Sauerbrey, the assistant secretary of state for the bureau of population, refugees, and migration, was sent to Damascus in March to discuss the Iraqi refugee situation. Although nothing of any significance occurred in the meetings in Damascus, it was,

again, of some symbolic importance because she was the highest-level Bush administration figure to visit Syria since the withdrawal of the U.S. ambassador in February 2005. For an excellent article on the Iraqi refugee problem in Syria, see Nir Rosen, "The Flight from Iraq," *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.

32. See report in *New York Times*, March 16, 2007.

33. In early 2006, President Bashar responded favorably to a Saudi-Egyptian proposal that arranged for Syria to officially recognize Lebanese sovereignty in exchange for some measure of a Syrian consultative role regarding Lebanese foreign and security policy. Although the extent of this role was left ill-defined, some legitimizing of Syria's position in and special relationship with Lebanon, however symbolic, may be one avenue to explore in resolving the Lebanese imbroglio.

About the Author

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