



HOW TO TALK AND HOW NOT TO TALK TO SYRIA: ASSESSING THE OBSTACLES TO AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A FUTURE ISRAELI-SYRIAN-AMERICAN PEACE NEGOTIATION

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INTRODUCTION

In the ebb and flow of Middle East diplomacy, the two interrelated issues of an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement and Washington's bilateral relationship with Damascus have gone up and down on Washington's scale of importance. The election of Barack Obama raised expectations that the United States would give the two issues the priority they had not received during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration.¹ Candidate Obama promised to assign a high priority to the resuscitation of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and separately to "engage" with Iran and Syria (as recommended by the Iraq Study Group in 2006).

In May 2009, shortly after assuming office, President Obama sent the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, and the senior director for the Middle East in the National Security Council, Daniel Shapiro, to Damascus to open a dialogue with Bashar al-Asad's regime. Several members of Congress also travelled to Syria early in Obama's first year, including the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, John Kerry, and the chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Howard Berman. In addition, when the president appointed George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East, Mitchell named as his deputy Fred Hof, a respected expert on Syria and the Israeli-Syrian dispute. Last summer, both Mitchell and Hof visited Damascus and began their give and take with Syria.

And yet, after this apparent auspicious beginning, neither the bilateral relationship between the United States and

Syria, nor the effort to revive the Israeli-Syrian negotiation has gained much traction. Damascus must be chagrined by the fact that when the Arab-Israeli peace process is discussed now, it is practically equated with the Israeli-Palestinian track.

This paper analyzes the difficulties confronting Washington's and Jerusalem's respective Syria policies and offers an approach for dealing with Syria. Many of the recommendations stem from lessons resulting from the past rounds of negotiations, so it is important to understand what occurred (and what went wrong) over the past two decades.

PART I THE NEGOTIATIONS OF THE 1990S AND 2000S

The 1990s augured well for the effort to resolve the Israeli-Syrian conflict. Two American presidents (George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton) and three Israeli prime ministers (Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak) assigned priority to the Syrian track over the Palestinian track of the peace process. They saw Israeli-Syrian peace as the key to a geopolitical change in the region, viewed the Israeli-Syrian dispute as easier to resolve than the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict, and believed that Hafiz al-Asad, the authoritative leader of a powerful regime and functioning state, would be a more reliable partner than Yasir Arafat.²

While there was an initial hurdle in Asad's insistence on a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights as a

precondition to a serious discussion of the terms of peace, Prime Minister Rabin overcame this when he decided to “deposit” with the Clinton administration a conditional willingness to withdraw fully from the territory in return for a package of peace and security acceptable to Israel. This enabled the parties to draw through the hypothetical contours of a settlement—full Israeli withdrawal in phases, a full-fledged peace treaty including normalization of relations, a security regime, and a Syrian endorsement of a parallel Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement—while satisfying the Syrian precondition.

While Israel and Syria negotiated directly throughout the 1990s (and at several points did so at a senior level), the negotiations were in fact trilateral. Not only was the United States the sponsor and coordinator of this effort, but it was quite clear that the United States was the object of Asad’s interest. Asad was, of course, anxious to regain the Golan Heights, but he saw peace with Israel as the unpalatable prelude and precondition to a different, positive relationship with the United States. In this respect, ironically, he was walking in the footsteps of Anwar al-Sadat, the object of his fury and contempt in the late 1970s.

And yet, an Israeli-Syrian agreement was not reached and the negotiation collapsed in March 2000 during Bill Clinton’s and Hafiz al-Asad’s ill-fated summit in Geneva. The reason for the failure of the Geneva meeting remains to be fully explained and is a matter of controversy, but a principal cause of the breakdown seemed to be Asad’s realization that he was close to dying. As a result, he decided to assign priority to ensuring a smooth transition of power to his son, Bashar. Indeed, the failure in Geneva was followed in short order by Hafiz’s death and Bashar’s accession to the presidency.

Aside from the Geneva episode, how can the overall failure to reach an Israeli-Syrian deal during the Clinton presidency be explained? The single most important reason was that Israel and Syria were willing, but not anxious, to forge an agreement. For two adversaries like Israel and Syria to cross the gap and pay the costs entailed in a peace settlement, the rewards of peace and the price of a lingering conflict have to be compelling. But in the 1990s, Israeli leaders faced the pressure and temptation of the other tracks of the peace process. Israel could, and indeed did, shift to another track when the preferred Syrian track appeared intractable.

The Israeli leaders’ reluctance and ambivalence were reinforced by Hafiz al-Asad’s negotiating style—an un-

shakable insistence on regaining a hundred percent of what he defined as Syrian territory (the line of June 4, 1967) and refusal to engage in any public diplomacy that would help his counterparts sway Israeli public opinion to support full withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the evacuation of some 18,000 settlers. Asad also believed that diplomacy should be conducted from a position of strength and that bargaining assets and sources of leverage should be held until an agreement is reached and should not be abandoned a moment too soon. To his Israeli counterparts, that approach conveyed a sense of ambivalence that cast doubt on the sincerity of his intentions. Finally, the Clinton administration devoted immense resources and creative diplomacy to the negotiations, but in retrospect it seems clear that it should have been tougher on both sides.³

The Transformation of 2000

Beginning in 2000, the trilateral Israeli-Syrian-American relationship that had existed throughout the 1990s began to transform. Several events and developments in Damascus, Washington, and Jerusalem, explain this:

- In Damascus, it took Bashar al-Asad several years to consolidate his power and to start mastering the management of Syria’s foreign and national security policies. But even the better established and more dexterous Bashar of today still has yet to reach his father’s stature, authority, and ability to manage complex geopolitical affairs. For instance, Hafiz al-Asad conducted his relationship with Iran as an alliance of equals and he treated Hizballah and its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, as a client. Under Bashar, Syria has become the subordinate party in the partnership with Iran, and Nasrallah has become Syria’s peer. Additionally, Bashar mismanaged his relationship with the Bush administration, particularly in the Iraqi and Lebanese context, and turned George W. Bush into a bitter enemy.
- In Washington, the transition of power from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration led to a change in the United States’ view of Syria. The Bush administration saw Syria as a squalid dictatorship, a close ally of Iran, a sponsor of terrorism, and a country

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building and acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Yet, prior to and immediately after the invasion of Iraq, the administration tried to build a dialogue with Syria. However, these efforts failed and the failure's impact was exacerbated by Syria's support of the "Sunni insurrection" in Iraq and by its suspected role in the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, in February 2005. These issues—Iraq and Lebanon—were new elements in Washington's relationship with Damascus. Prior to the Bush presidency, in the 1990s, Iraq was not as big an issue, and the Clinton administration (as well as the Israeli government of the day) was willing to acquiesce to Syria's hegemony in Lebanon as part of a settlement package. In contrast, beginning in 2003, Washington became incensed with the fact that Syria was the principal gateway for anti-American foreign fighters on their way to Iraq, and attached great importance to the protection of Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy.

Having weighed its options, the Bush administration decided on a middle course: It would not use force against Syria, nor would it enter into dialogue with Damascus. Instead, it opted to isolate the Asad regime and penalize it with sanctions. By the same token, it opposed the resumption of the Israeli-Syrian negotiation track. In its view, such a resumption would endow Asad with the very legitimacy that the administration had sought to deny him.

- In Jerusalem, Israel's view of Syria and the prospect of an Israeli-Syrian settlement altered several times during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Soon after the failure of the March 2000 Clinton-Asad meeting, Prime Minister Ehud Barak withdrew unilaterally (in coordination with the UN, but not with Lebanon and Syria) from southern Lebanon. In doing so, Barak severed the link between Israel's security challenge in Lebanon and the Israeli-Syrian peace process. The impact of this development was magnified by Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The overall result was a much stronger and less dependent Hizballah that posed a greater security challenge to Israel, and more than in previous years, was an extension of Iranian power rather than a Syrian proxy.

Ariel Sharon, who became Israel's prime minister in early 2001, had no interest in a peace

process with Syria. Not only was Sharon focused on the Palestinian issue, he was opposed to the notion of withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and was quite happy pursuing a policy that was congruent with that of the Bush administration. As a result, he rebuffed at least two attempts by the Asad regime to restart the negotiation process. After Sharon fell ill in 2006, Ehud Olmert, as acting and then as the elected prime minister, initially followed Sharon's Syria policy. But in February 2007, Olmert changed course, agreeing to Israeli-Syrian talks mediated by Turkey. The involvement of Turkey in the Israeli-Syrian talks would bring yet another element into what had never really been a bilateral relationship or process to begin with.

The Turkish Mediation

A few years earlier, the notion of Israeli-Syrian talks mediated by Turkey would have seemed somewhat unusual. But under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish-Syrian relations improved dramatically, and not at the expense of Turkish-Israeli relations—Ankara's link with Jerusalem remained healthy. Olmert, who kept a cordial relationship with President Bush, apprised him of his decision to open a channel to Syria. The American president did not conceal his unhappiness, but refrained from expressing outright opposition to Olmert's decision.

As the secret talks began to pick up steam in mid-2008, both sides had an interest in going public. Olmert's personal problems were mounting (he was facing the possibility of being indicted on charges of fraud), and he was therefore interested in publicizing the negotiation in order to create political capital. In addition, he hoped that by announcing the talks, pressure would be created to expedite them, and he would be able to forge a legacy before leaving office. On the Syrian side, Damascus was interested in publicizing the indirect negotiations in order to break out of the isolation into which the Bush administration had been seeking to push it.

Many details of the negotiations remain unknown, but Olmert, apparently, found his own way of conveying the equivalent of Rabin's "deposit." Yet, the Syrian negotiators attempted to garner a more formal, binding commitment from Israel regarding withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967. At the same time, Olmert tried to obtain from Syria a commitment to realign its regional policy away from Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas as a new, updated Israeli sine qua non for a deal. Additionally,

Israel reiterated its longstanding demand for normalized relations and security arrangements.

The whole venture crashed around the time of Olmert's December 22 working visit to Ankara, partly as a result of events outside the contours of the Israel-Syria dialogue. Olmert had hoped that Syria's foreign minister, Walid Muallim, would be joining the negotiations at that point, but this did not happen (Olmert's expectations may have been too high). To make matters worse, five days later, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, incensing Erdoğan, who was not just critical of the operation but of being put in an awkward position—Erdoğan was concerned it would appear like Olmert had advised him of the imminent operation.

While the indirect talks failed to produce an Israeli-Syrian agreement, they did pave the way for Syria's emergence from the United States-imposed isolation. For instance, President Nicolas Sarkozy invited Bashar al-Asad to visit Paris in July 2008, and other European suitors soon followed suit, all happy to defy the will of George W. Bush.

At the same time as the talks mediated by Turkey were occurring, another significant issue was developing. It was during this period that Israel discovered the joint Syrian-North Korean construction of a nuclear reactor in northeastern Syria. The 2007 Israeli operation against the reactor, as well as other unpublicized operations against Syria that took place while Damascus and Jerusalem were engaged in indirect talks, illustrated two important things about both sides: The Olmert government learned to adopt the Syrian modus operandi of talking and striking simultaneously. At the same time, Asad was willing to make bold, and in many respects, irresponsible decisions, but once hit over the knuckles, was capable of controlling his temper and not retaliating.

PART II

THE ARCHITECTURE OF A NEW NEGOTIATION

As mentioned, the Syrian track of the peace process of the 1990s was essentially a trilateral Israeli-Syrian-American negotiation. Yet, the task facing Washington today—the only actor who can orchestrate and see through a comprehensive peace effort—is far more complex and daunting than it was in the 1990s. The roles played in the region by Iran and Turkey, the position held by Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza,

the complexion of the Israeli government, and the questions regarding Bashar al-Asad's persona and leadership all compound the challenge of forging an agreement.

If and when the current circumstances and outlook change and a decision to invest a major effort at reaching an Israeli-Syrian settlement is made, a comprehensive policy should be formulated in order to orchestrate and implement three parallel efforts: an Israeli-Syrian negotiation, an American-Syrian bilateral negotiation, and a realignment of Syria's regional policies as part of a broad effort to transform the politics and geopolitics of the Middle East.

Israel and Syria

Syria may insist that it wants Turkey to play an important role in any new talks with Israel. Despite, or perhaps because of, Israel's current tension with Turkey, Israel may agree to assign a role to Ankara (especially if it serves to change Turkey's regional policies and leads to a better bilateral relationship with Israel). But while Turkish participation may not be a bad idea, Turkey should not be the mediator. It would be up to Washington to play the major role in reviving the Israeli-Syrian track.

Any U.S. initiative should begin with exploratory talks with Israel and Syria in order to ascertain whether both parties are ready to go the distance. Specifically, Washington's discussion with Israel should begin at a working level (i.e., Senator George Mitchell and his team meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and their teams) and continue in a meeting between the president and the prime minister. The president would want to hear from the prime minister how far he is willing and committed to go, and the prime minister would need to hear what commitments the United States would plan to obtain from Syria and what the United States would be willing to do in order to offset the security and economic costs to Israel of a peace deal with Syria.

At present, though, such an initiative does not appear on anybody's radar, not even the United States'. President Obama and his team have assigned priority to the Palestinian issue. Additionally, they are having a difficult time forging a common policy with Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government with regard to that issue, and realize the impracticality of pushing a parallel, major initiative on the Syrian track.

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Yet, if a move to advance peace with Syria is made, it is important the American administration understand where the Netanyahu government stands. During his election campaign, Netanyahu spoke clearly against the notion of a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and has maintained this stance since being elected. The prime minister and his spokesmen have publicly said that Israel would like to reach a peace agreement with Syria predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan Heights—something Netanyahu knows full well is not acceptable to Syria. Yet, despite the prime minister's stance, his government's position may not be as iron-clad as it appears.

In 1998, during his first term, Netanyahu used an American businessman, Ronald Lauder, as his emissary to Hafiz al-Asad. Lauder conveyed Netanyahu's version of the "deposit," indicating Israel's willingness in principle to withdraw to the line of June 4, 1967 in return for an acceptable package of peace and security from Syria. While Netanyahu denies this version of the Lauder episode, it is important to note that his government is not uniformly against a serious dialogue with Syria.⁴

Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and even more so the professional defense establishment, think it is critically important to forge a deal with Syria. They assign the highest priority to dealing with the Iranian security challenge and view an Israeli-Syrian deal as an important step toward regional realignment and blunting the Iranian threat. Indeed, earlier this month, the Israeli media began to report in rather dramatic terms on a split between the national security establishment and the prime minister and his immediate circle regarding the Syria track.⁵ (While Washington may be tempted to try to take advantage of this fault line, it should bear in mind that earlier efforts to meddle in Israeli politics have often proved counterproductive.)

Israeli policymakers understand that it would be difficult to shift from the Palestinian track to the Syrian one. They are well aware that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is real and needs to be addressed. They are also aware of the Obama administration's conviction that progress on, if not a resolution of, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is important for U.S. interests in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

For the current configuration to change, one or more of the following developments needs to occur:

- The severity of the Iranian challenge would lead both the United States and Israel to conclude that pulling Syria away from Iran is an urgent necessity.
- Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would begin, but permanently stall.
- Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would bring about the prospect of a partial or limited agreement (such as an agreement on a provisional Palestinian state) that would enable the Israeli government to move ahead on both tracks.

Should any of the above occur, and negotiations with Syria become a priority for the parties, Washington's talks with Syria would have to begin at a working level. A Barack Obama–Bashar al-Asad summit in the style of Bill Clinton's meetings with Hafiz al-Asad is currently not likely, nor would it be in the United States' interest. It could become a useful policy tool at a later stage, once significant progress is achieved.

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Bashar al-Asad has said in public that he is ready to sign a peace treaty with Israel in return for an Israeli withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967 (while building the option of initiating hostilities in the absence of a diplomatic process), but has hardened some of Syria's positions relative to those taken by his father in

the 1990s (Bashar has spoken in public against normalization of relations with Israel and has insisted on linkage to the Palestinian track). Getting him to go back to the Syrian position of the 1990s may take some effort, but would not be a major obstacle. Much greater difficulties are likely to be presented by other issues:

- On the issue of Israeli withdrawal, Bashar al-Asad has said publicly that he is ready to sign a peace treaty with Israel if Israel withdraws to the line of June 4, 1967. The difficulty rests on the familiar Syrian insistence on getting an explicit Israeli commitment to withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967 as a precondition to entering into negotiations, and the familiar Israeli refusal to grant such a commitment at the outset. In order to jumpstart the negotiations, the Obama administration would have to find a formula that would overcome this obstacle.

- Another lingering issue from the 1990s is Israeli's insistence on Syrian recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee). At the same time, Syria insists that it is entitled access to the lake, as demarcated by the line of June 4, 1967.
- Even if an initial breakthrough is achieved, a host of issues will have to be resolved, including the establishment of a security regime, the creation of a timetable for Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and the implementation of Syrian "normalization" measures that coincide with Israeli withdrawal. On this last issue, Israel demands that any withdrawal be phased and that in the early, modest phases, Syria offer generous doses of normalization in order to help build support in Israel for the concessions. Many Israeli policymakers see this as particularly critical because current Israeli law states that a majority (sixty-one votes) in the Knesset is required for territorial concessions in the Golan Heights, and the Israeli prime minister may decide that a referendum is required to approve and legitimize a major withdrawal.
- The above point is related to the larger issue of public diplomacy. As mentioned above, one of the major obstacles to reaching a settlement in the 1990s was Hafiz al-Asad's refusal to engage in public diplomacy or reach out to the Israeli public. On a number of occasions, when under American pressure, Asad agreed to acts of public diplomacy, but because he and his emissaries acted with such evident reluctance, the results were counterproductive.⁶ While Bashar (and his influential wife) seems to understand the importance of media and public opinion in parliamentary democracies more so than his father did, he may be reluctant to offer, what to him may seem like, another Syrian concession.

But the greatest hurdle will likely arise when the United States raises the demand of Syrian realignment—namely that Damascus distance itself from Tehran, Hizballah, and Hamas, as a condition of an American-Syrian accommodation and of an Israeli-Syrian deal. This notion—that a fundamental reorientation of Syrian foreign policy is a critical U.S. and Israeli demand—has been known for quite some time, and several Syrian spokesmen have already responded to it. Syria claims that any demand that a country alter its foreign policy or sever its relationship with a third party is not legitimate. Syria also argues, more specifically, that it is not in the United

States' interest to isolate Iran, since doing so would only serve to radicalize it. Instead, Syria maintains, someone should speak with the Iranian leadership, and the country best qualified for that role is Syria. In short, Damascus's response to the demand that it reorient its regional position in order to gain an improved relationship with Washington is that it should be able to keep its channels with Tehran open and build channels with Washington, and then serve as an effective go-between. In other words, Syria would like to continue its traditional policy of straddling the fence.

Most recently, in a speech in Damascus, Asad revealed that he had rejected an offer transmitted to him by President Shimon Peres for direct Israeli-Syrian negotiations, provided that Syria sever its relationship with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas. Asad stated that Syria had no intention of breaking its bond with Iran, and denounced those (namely Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO) who "have decided to eliminate the option of armed opposition and have become prisoner to the option of peace when they should be ready for both options [at the same time]."⁷

The American-Syrian Bilateral Relationship

Syria's ultimate interests are to normalize its relationship with the United States, be removed from the State Department's list of states supporting terrorism, have all the sanctions against it rescinded, become the beneficiary of U.S. aid, and become an interlocutor, if not a partner, with regard to U.S. policies in the Middle East. From Damascus's perspective, a trilateral Israeli-Syrian-American negotiation can help Syria realize these goals.

A successful diplomatic venture that would break Syria's bonds to Iran, distance Syria from Hamas and Hizballah, and lead to Israeli-Syrian peace and a new American-Syrian relationship could constitute a major exploit, the contemporary equivalent of what Henry Kissinger and his successors were able to accomplish with Egypt in the 1970s. But Asad is not Sadat. Sadat decided to reorient Egypt's politics and policies, and leaped from the Soviet train before he was assigned a seat on the American one. It is not at all certain that Asad has made such a decision, but even if he did, he would insist on seeing and checking his new seat and then drive a hard bargain over the terms.

During the past few months the difficulties inherent in any attempt to draw Syria away from Iran were illustrated by two sets of events. In the first case, Iran sought to flex some of its diplomatic muscle in Syria in the aftermath of Under Secretary of State William Burns's February visit to Damascus. Burns's visit was

another step in the Obama administration's effort to develop a bilateral dialogue with Syria. It must have worried Iran because Tehran responded by organizing a "resistance" summit in Damascus, attended by the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hizballah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah. During the public part of the meeting, Bashar al-Asad chose to ridicule Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's call for Damascus to distance itself from Tehran.⁸

In the second case, in April, both American and Israeli sources (followed by official statements) revealed that Syria had transferred to Hizballah a new set of upgraded Scud missiles. Several explanations have been offered for this weapons transfer, including that it is designed to facilitate Syria's return to direct military presence in Lebanon and that it is yet another way of signaling to Washington that Syria must not be ignored. But an additional, plausible explanation is that it is an indication of Syria's subordination to Iran's calculus. The revelation led to congressional pressures on the administration to delay the departure of Robert Ford as the new U.S. ambassador to Syria.⁹

On April 21, in the aftermath of Syria's weapons transfer, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeff Feltman appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia in order to explain and defend the decision to send Ambassador Ford to Damascus.¹⁰ Feltman argued that, indeed, the United States had many difficulties in its relationship with Syria, and was critical of several aspects of the latter's politics and policies. But, Feltman argued, while Syria is a close ally of Iran, there are important differences between the two. In addition, Feltman said, engagement with Damascus has made some progress and having an ambassador in place is a good way of improving the dialogue and the likelihood of positive outcomes. Feltman's testimony was a rare exposition of the administration's perception of Syria and of its own policy toward Damascus, and there is value in examining it in detail.

After defining Washington's principal concerns in the Middle East, Feltman went through the familiar litany of Syria's misbehavior—sponsoring terrorism, undermining stability and democracy in Lebanon, undermining U.S. efforts in Iraq, supporting Hamas, and pursuing nuclear capabilities—but also offered that Syria could be beneficial to U.S. interests: "Syria figures prominently in each of these issues—often as part of the problem, and *potentially as part of the solution.*"¹¹ Feltman then articulated

three main reasons the administration supports dialogue with Syria. First, Feltman said, past dialogue with Damascus has yielded some results, particularly with regard to Iraq. Second, efforts to isolate Syria were undermined by U.S. allies, including France, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (under Olmert) who engaged with Asad. Lastly, Feltman said, there is a prospect of distancing Syria from Iran: "Syria's relationship with Iran seems primarily based on perceived political interests, rather than cultural ties or complementary economies. But as with most partnerships, there are clear policy differences. With respect to Israel, the Syrians have a clear interest in negotiating a peace agreement for the return of the Golan Heights, whereas Iran opposes any form of peace with Israel. Syria has a secular government, whereas Iran has a theocratic one."¹² Feltman never spoke openly of distancing Syria from Iran, but said Damascus should be confronted with a clear choice: "One path leading toward participation in a Middle East of greater openness, prosperity and peace and another leading to continued stagnation and instability."¹³

But the administration also took a tough approach. On May 4, shortly after Feltman's testimony, President Obama renewed U.S. sanctions on Syria. The president used strong language in his message to Congress, writing that Syria's actions and policies "pose a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States."¹⁴

As stated, Washington's core interest in negotiating with Syria is the possibility of distancing Damascus from Tehran and linking this reorientation to a peace deal with Israel. Some of the other outstanding issues, including Syrian support of terrorist organizations and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction would in effect be resolved through a realignment of Syria's foreign policy, if such realignment is achieved. But two other issues will have to be addressed separately:

Iraq: Over the past seven years, the U.S.-Syrian relationship has been poisoned by Syria's direct and indirect support of anti-American insurgents and terrorists in Iraq. The Syrians are fully aware of the political and diplomatic costs of this policy, but in their eyes, the penalties inflicted on them by Washington are outweighed by their desire to see Iraq free of the United States' presence and dominant influence.

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leaving behind a functioning, fairly stable Iraqi state, an American-Syrian understanding on Iraq could conceivably be reached. Syria does not want an Iraq dominated by the United States, does not want fragmentation of the Iraqi state, and does not want a Saddam-like, powerful, hostile regime to its east. Damascus is also not interested in seeing Iraq turn into an Iranian client-state; having Iran as both an ally and a neighbor may be too much for Damascus. Over the next few years, as local forces and external actors try to shape the course of events to their liking, one can envisage a measure of American-Syrian collaboration. But, despite some common interests with Washington, challenges exist. It will be difficult for Damascus to overcome the temptation to use another instrument—in this case, Iraq—to demonstrate to Washington its ability to cause nuisance when ignored.

Lebanon: The United States became committed to the protection of Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy under the George W. Bush administration. During that time, the United States helped force the Syrian military to withdraw from Lebanon and viewed the Fouad Siniora government as the one successful example of its policy of fostering democracy in the Middle East. Much has changed since then.

The 2006 war in Lebanon played into the hands of the Iran-Hizballah-Syria coalition. The lack of a clear-cut Israeli victory is widely interpreted in Lebanon and in the region as an achievement for Hizballah and its two patrons—Iran and Syria. As such, while Sa'd al-Hariri won the 2009 election to be Prime Minister Siniora's successor, and Syria refrained from using violence before and during the election, Damascus was successful in offsetting the election results during the coalition formation and chipped away at the moderate, pro-Western March 14 Alliance. Hariri's and the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's pilgrimages to Damascus were powerful illustrations of the revival of Syrian political influence that occurred without massive military presence.

But appearances can be misleading. Syria may have been successful in these latest political battles, but it has been losing ground to Iran and Hizballah. In the late winter of 2009-2010, Syria, as mentioned, transferred advanced missiles to Hizballah, thus upgrading the group's already impressive arsenal of rockets and missiles. Syria transferred the weapons because it sees its relationship with Hizballah as an extension of its own military posture vis-à-vis Israel. In a manner of speaking, Syria's build-up of Hizballah's arsenal of rockets and missiles is meant to

compensate for the deterrence it lost when its nuclear reactor was destroyed in September 2007. But, since it can be argued that Syria also transferred the weapons because it was doing Iran's bidding, it seems safe to say that Hizballah's arsenal is designed not only to deter Israel from launching new military actions in Lebanon, but to deter Israel or the United States from attacking Iran's nuclear installations. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that Hizballah's arsenal would be employed in a bid to provoke Israel in the event that severe sanctions are imposed on Iran.

Syria's actions raise the following question: has the Syrian leadership thought through what the implications of a Hizballah conflict with Israel or the United States would be for them? In 1976, Hafiz al-Asad launched his original intervention in Lebanon because he was afraid that victory by the PLO and its allies in the Lebanese civil war would drag Syria into an unwanted war with Israel. But, importantly, he did so with tacit American and Israeli approval. Bashar is more reckless than his father, though at some point he may realize that Iran and Hizballah can pose serious threats to Syria's national security, as well as long-term threats to Syria's position in Lebanon.

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in Lebanon, and would offer in return a vague commitment to Lebanese sovereignty and democracy, as well as a very subtle, almost imperceptible, assurance that it would distance itself from Iran and Hizballah. Syria may for instance offer a firmer commitment to stop arms shipments to Hizballah, but given the organization's existing arsenal, such a commitment, even if kept, would be limited in value. Washington and Jerusalem may want a Syrian commitment to help in dismantling Hizballah, turning it into a normal civilian party, but Damascus would be highly unlikely to agree to this.

The Larger Context

As argued, resolving the Israeli-Syrian conflict will take more than bilateral talks between the parties. It will take serious U.S. involvement to address the interests of all sides. But this U.S. effort to resolve the Israeli-Syrian conflict and settle its own bilateral relationship with

Damascus would be conducted within a larger regional and international context, one in which several interests must be accounted for:

Iran: During the early days of the Obama administration, when it set out to “engage” with both Tehran and Damascus, it had to pay attention to the potential tension between its efforts to create warmer relations with Tehran and its efforts to lure away Iran’s chief ally in the region. This no longer seems to be an issue, but Iran will in all likelihood try to disrupt any American attempt to pull Syria away from its orbit. Ahmadinejad’s February visit to Damascus demonstrated Iran’s determination to respond seriously to any American overture to Syria. Should a genuine American-Syrian dialogue begin to unfold, an Iranian counter-effort is to be expected. Iran is likely to exert direct pressure on Syria and might also use its Lebanese and Palestinian clients to provoke a crisis, particularly if an American overture toward Syria unfolds simultaneously with the stiffening of anti-Iranian sanctions.

Turkey: Erdoğan’s government is likely to take a dim view of Syria altering its current regional orientation to a new posture based on a closer relationship with the United States and peace with Israel. Its chagrin would be enhanced if it is excluded from new rounds of Israeli-Syrian negotiation—a process it feels is part of its new diplomatic portfolio. It would be up to Washington to assuage Ankara and find a role for Turkey in a fresh round of Israeli-Syrian negotiations without relinquishing its own leading role.

The Palestinian Track: As noted above, there will either have to be a partial or an interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority or a total collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process for Israel to resume negotiations with Syria. A partial or limited agreement with the Palestinian Authority would leave the Israeli government with sufficient political space for a renewal of the Syrian negotiations and would limit Palestinian and Arab criticism of a “separate deal” between Jerusalem and Damascus. Progress on the Israeli-Syrian track against the backdrop of an Israeli-Palestinian impasse would require a major diplomatic effort orchestrated by Washington in order to prevent a political backlash or violent outburst.

Russia and Western Europe: Russia and several West European countries, France in particular, have a stake in the Syrian and Lebanese arenas. They are not in a position to start or sponsor an Israeli-Syrian negotiation, but once it begins, they would seek to play a role and affect its course. It would be up to the United State to direct their interest to constructive channels.

CONCLUSION

Sketching the outlines and dynamics of a new Israeli-Syrian peace negotiation, orchestrated by the United States as part of a larger effort to reshape the geopolitics of the Middle East, is clearly a hypothetical exercise. While there are indications that parts of the Israeli government are interested in a revival of the Syrian track and while Syria’s stated position is that it wants such a revival, Syria’s ruler is acting with a manifest sense of confidence and is clearly comfortable with his country’s regional position. Additionally, the United States is currently pursuing a Middle East policy that has different priorities, and there are no signs that Washington is contemplating a radical change of course. Yet, should the administration change its mind or should the Israeli government decide to do what its predecessors did in the past and shift tracks in the peace process, a trilateral Israeli-Syrian-American deal is feasible, but negotiating it would be a daunting task, requiring a massive investment of time and political resources, and exceptional diplomatic skills. If successful, such a move would produce an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, a new bilateral relationship between the United States and Syria, Syrian disengagement from its alliance with Iran and the “resistance camp” and a new configuration in Lebanon.

But for such an optimistic scenario to materialize, several major conditions would have to be met: there would have to be a willingness and ability on the part of Israel’s leadership to pay the territorial price of peace with Syria; there would have to be a willingness and ability on the part of Syria’s leadership to disengage from Iran, and to transform Syria’s regional policy and, at least to some extent, its domestic politics; and there would have to be forceful, skillful American diplomacy that would integrate Washington’s sponsorship of the Israeli-Syrian negotiation, its own bilateral negotiation with Syria and the interest of other regional and international actors into a comprehensive strategy.

For the time being, it seems unlikely that a fresh initiative of this scale and boldness would be taken and that in the absence of a new Israeli-Syrian negotiation, the current American effort to build a bilateral dialogue with Syria will continue to face the very same difficulties that Feltman’s testimony revealed.

Additionally, it seems that, with regard to Syria, both the United States and Israel will keep moving in circles without making progress. Israel’s government is focused on the Palestinian issue and in practice has no Syria policy of which to speak (though its policy planners are likely devoting thought to Iran, Syria, and Hiz-

ballah). From Washington's perspective, the effort to satisfy Syria by conducting a bilateral dialogue, absent a renewal of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, is not working.

Yet, should the United States decide to renew an Israeli-Syrian negotiation, it should bear in mind the lessons of the failed efforts of the 1990s: commitment and ingenuity must be supplemented by forcefulness; and a sense of urgency and greater stakes have to be introduced into the equation. In retrospect, it seems that what Washington's diplomacy with regard to the Israeli-Syrian track in the 1990s lacked most was leverage. Today, such leverage could be found through a different formulation of the linkage between the Syrian track and the Iranian issue. The notion of seeking to weaken Iran's regional

position by pulling Syria away from its orbit appears difficult to implement. Instead, Washington could dramatically enhance its leverage by turning the issue around and dealing more effectively with Iran itself. At this point engagement with Iran has yielded no results and the deadline for sanctions has been moved twice. What is called for is at least one tangible act taken or inspired by the Obama administration, such as American and European sanctions in the absence of a consensus in the Security Council. This would affect Syria's own attitude and would also provide Washington with significant leverage on an Israeli prime minister who made dealing with the Iranian threat the main purpose and theme of his tenure.

¹ See Itamar Rabinovich, "Damascus, Jerusalem, and Washington: The Syrian-Israeli Relationship as a U.S. Policy Issue," Analysis Paper number 19, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, March 2009, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/03_syria_israel_rabinovich/03_syria_israel_rabinovich.pdf>.

² For accounts of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations of the 1990s see Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New-York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); and Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

³ American and Israeli participants in the initial negotiation with Syria dispute the reasons for failure. See Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace*, and Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad*, all critical of Ehud Barak (and in Indyk's case, of Rabin). For a pro-Barak account, see the description by his former chief of staff, Danny Yatom, *The Confider* (Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Sfarim, 2009) (In Hebrew).

⁴ See Danny Yatom, *The Confider* (In Hebrew) for the most detailed account to date of the "Lauder episode."

⁵ Ben Caspit, "Asad on a crossroad between war and peace," *Maariv*, May 7, 2010 (In Hebrew).

⁶ See for instance Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara's appearance with Prime Minister Barak in December 1999 that had an adverse effect on Israeli public opinion. Deborah Sontag, "The Israel-Syria Talks: News Analysis; Behind Hard-Line Talk: Willingness to Concede," *New York Times*, December 17, 1999.

⁷ Zvi Bar'el, "Israel rejected Qatar's Gaza offer following Egyptian protest," *Haaretz*, May 20, 2010.

⁸ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria and Iran defy Clinton in show of unity," Reuters, February 25, 2010.

⁹ In 2005, the Bush administration recalled its ambassador from Syria after the al-Hariri assassination. The decision to send a new ambassador to Damascus was criticized as symptomatic of a tendency to offer unilateral gestures to a regime accustomed to charge a price for any goodwill measure.

¹⁰ Secretary of State Clinton also offered a much briefer defense of the decision to dispatch the ambassador to Damascus.

¹¹ Testimony of Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, April 21, 2010, available at <<http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/111/fel042110.pdf>>, emphasis added.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Message to the Congress Continuing the National Emergency with Respect to Syria," The White House, May 3, 2010, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/message-congress-continuing-national-emergency-with-respect-syria>>.

