

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ENGAGING SYRIA: NEW NEGOTIATIONS, OLD CHALLENGES

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. We'll be getting underway in a moment, but it's Brookings policy to eat and talk at the same time, so please begin your meal.

(Pause)

MR. INDYK: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome again. I want to say a special welcome to Ambassador Imad Moustapha, the Syrian Ambassador. Thank you for joining us today.

We're very glad to have the opportunity to host members, Syrian members, of the Search for Common Ground's U.S.-Syria Working Group. We also have here today Tom Dine from Search for Common Ground, who will say a few words about what exactly this organization or operation is about.

Tom is known well to me because he gave me my first job in Washington. He's actually the reason why I'm in the United States, when he was the Director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Since then, he's gone on to have a distinguished career in government and now wears this new hat working with Search for Common Ground.

Our featured speaker today will be Dr. Ahmad Samir al-Taki, a good friend from Damascus, who is director of a think tank there, the Brookings of Damascus, is it?

MR. AL-TAKI: No. Micro.

MR. INDYK: The Orient Center for International Studies. And he's a -- I believe I have it right, but he's a heart physician by training and has really built his first career as a doctor and as a consultant to the Syrian Minister of Health, but, in recent years, has become very committed to working for peace. And, it's in that context that he has taken on a role in society as promoting ideas in the political realm and very actively. He's very prominent in Damascus as an advisor to the government of the Prime Minister in that capacity.

He's published numerous articles on political and strategic studies in both English and

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Arabic.

Samir Seifan, on my left, is a prominent Syrian economist, a managing partner of ADC Consulting, president of Syrian Management Consultants, the Syrian Management Consultants Association.

He's also a fellow at the Orient Center and has also been a fellow at St. Andrews University and has been a member of the Syrian negotiating team for the EU-Syrian Association agreement, where his economic expertise was very important to those negotiations. And he's also authored several books on the Syrian economy.

And on my right, Sami Moubayed is a political analyst, historian, author of several books on modern Syria, including his latest, published here in the United States, called "Steel and Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria from 1900 to 2000."

He's written extensively about the Arab world, and he is a rising star in the Damascus intellectual scene.

So Tom is going to say a few words about Search for Common Ground's U.S.-Syrian Working Group, then Dr. Al-Taki will make an opening presentation. And then we'll field questions and both Samir and Sami will participate in responding to those questions.

We're on the record here. And we are very grateful that you spared the time to share your thoughts with us. Thank you very much. Tom?

MR. DINE: Thank you very much, Martin, and good afternoon to everyone. I'm so pleased to see so many people. When I was a fellow at the Brookings Institution in 1979, this room did not exist. So we -- it's good to see that you, Martin, are surrounding yourself --

MR. INDYK: Well, the Saban Center  
(inaudible).

MR. DINE: Thank God for Saban. Okay. The U.S.-Syria Working Group is about 15 months old. It was formed under the auspices, as Martin indicated, by Search for Common Ground, which is located two blocks from here, and began to work with the Orient Center

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for International Studies in Damascus.

There are eight Syrians, and, as the three that are with us today indicate, they are prominent. They are highly intelligent, and they are deeply involved in Syrian policy in the region.

There are eight Americans, two of whom are with us, former Ambassador Ted Kattouf and former Ambassador Sam Lewis. I didn't see any others that may be with us, but my colleague Sonya Reines is here, and thank you for all the work that you've done to help put together this schedule.

So far, they're going to be spending a week in Washington, meeting with several senators, several representatives on the House side, committee staffers, obviously think tanks, media, as well as this morning, for instance, we met with a representative of a corporate outfit that is here in Washington.

And then over the weekend, we're going to Houston. We'll be at the Rice-Baker Institution, the Houston Chronicle, and other such sites; off to Los Angeles, Rand Pacific Council and again the Los Angeles Times and others.

So the trip here is part of our purpose, which is to find ways to build trust, to find ways to overcome the very bad state of U.S.-Syrian relations, and since the governments aren't going to do it, Track 2 is the now acknowledged way of trying to do it. And we're trying to get to the point where, in fact, there might not only be improved bilateral relations, but, in fact, normal bilateral relations.

So on that note, I thank all of you for being here, and I, too, look forward to what our visitors have to say.

DR. AL-TAKI: I should excuse first for my weak English, and because -- but to begin, the only thing that I'm allowed to speak on behalf of my colleagues is to say hello to you. Otherwise, we are independent researchers. We don't have any official hats in terms of our visits here. We came just to achieve a better reading about what's going on in Washington, to have better contacts, and you really feel the pulse of what's going on; parallel to that to

try to put on the table our concerns, and how Syria to think about things in the area.

To begin with, I have to explain something. In the Syrian perception, by the beginning of the year 2001, the Syrians were very much concerned because of the new attitude of the American administration that came after the meeting between Mr. Sharon and Mr. Bush as to give the Israelis the possibility to close the Arab-Israeli conflict, to close the fields of confrontation between the Arabs and the Israelis without going through a peace process, meaning that that's how the Syrians did understand the withdrawal from Gaza, building the wall, pressuring Syria to sack some Palestinian leadership, pressuring Syria to get rid of some of its armament and the attempts which grew up 'til the decision 1559 to attempt to disarm Hezbollah..

All those measures altogether would have meant that there is an attempt to close the fields of confrontation between the Arabs and the Israelis and to give the Israelis the possibility to do whatever they would like, the kind of a de facto Israeli peace without a peace process.

Frankly speaking, the Syrians thought that this policy is very dangerous. If you come from my office in Damascus, from our office in Damascus, five kilometers, or even if you go to the roof of the building of my -- of our office, you will begin to see the Israelis on the Mount Hermon.

So nobody in Damascus could rule Damascus without putting the issue of the Golan Heights at the priority, at the top of his priorities in that respect. That's what the Syrians were just gambling this will fail. You cannot close the Arab-Israeli conflict without solving it in a fair way.

The other threat, the other gamble, for the Syrians is that the American approach to the problems of the region, as it was crystallized by the occupation of Iraq, the American approach about considering that this is a failing region, a collapsing geopolitical structure, where nation-state is collapsing. And we have now, since the arrival of

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Mr. Bush to power, we have about eight collapsing states unfortunately in the region. And this is very dangerous.

And the more you destroy states, the more you'll get non-state players, and the more you get non-state players, the more sophisticated will be the asymmetric war to the level that it is creating a level of deterrence now with the region.

So practically speaking, Syria found not only the danger in attempting to close the Arab-Israeli conflict without solving it, but also in the American attitude towards the region, which was perceived in Damascus as to try to remodel the whole structure of the region according to a certain perception in the region, about the region.

Jumping to a period 14 months ago, in Syria we felt that the United States unfortunately was losing control on the element of the crisis in the region; moreover that the crisis in the region -- we have four of them -- and those four crises are becoming more and more overlapping, more and more intermingling and intersecting. And every one, by itself, tends to a level that it can explode at any moment of lack of mediation. Second, it will have a domino effect on the other crises.

Subsequently, the perception is that it's too dangerous to try this to be going on. So the attitude that I think all over the region was to try to cool down. Unfortunately, the fact that the American administration was not able to reformulate new initiatives, new policies to get out of the impasse in which American policy in the region had practically incited the other local main players to think about "What if we try to do things on our own?"

I think this was the main incentive all over -- all the reconciliatory attempts that are going on now in the region, including the Palestinians -- between the Palestinians -- between the Palestinians and the Israelis, within Lebanon, and between Syria-Israel and on many other axes.

So, but still all what's being done now is just cooling down. Everything is so very precarious,

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fragile, and we have too many players so that at the end of the game any inadvertent happening really make up lots of step back, and will result in some dramatic.

So in spite of certain groups growing up now, the situation is very, very, very risky in the region. And what's left is that this region, because of too many contradictions in ethnicity, geography, history, resources, endogenously, and because there are -- it is a focus of intersection of too many interests between greater players will need an external help to establish itself as a system for peace and security. It cannot do it by its own.

And that's why the presence of the Americans is very, very much necessary, and here there mainly I think we have to take in account that the attitude of the American administration, the approach to the problems of the region, is a problem rather than anything is; rather than the deep interest of the American people, of the American state.

So [inaudible] the region needs a kind of a network, a safety network, to hug it, to prevent it from collapsing, because it's too risky, too many players, and contradictory intentions. And I think that's why we need to create certain international support to try to make those developments [inaudible] all over.

In the Syrian mind, we are very much interested to say and to show in practice that if the confrontational attitude is withdrawn vis-à-vis Syria, if the demonization against Syria, which has been very much fabricated, we are ready to be a solution provider -- partners in the solutions, et cetera.

I spoke too much. Yes, even to affect your appetite. So I stop here.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. Let me follow on from that in a couple of respects and perhaps your colleagues would like to join in in answering it.

There are two issues that grow out of this presentation. One is the fact that Syria has not waited for the demonization to end. It has taken a rather big step, which is, of course, to resume

negotiations, although at the moment indirect negotiations, with Israel.

And so I wonder if one or all of you would like to address that specific issue of the reason for resuming the negotiations and how you view the prospects for them.

The second relates to the high risk factor that you referred to and the way things can get out of control, the need for what I understood to be a kind of safety net, and an American safety net to deal with this.

If I could be a little more blunt about it, it seems to me that if I were to try to understand what you were referring to, the role that Iran has played in the most sensitive issues in the Arab world has been one of these escalatory factors, risk factors.

And we know from the previous negotiations between Israel and Syria that when those negotiations started to move forward in a serious way, the Iranians, through their proxies, took a number of steps to disrupt those negotiations. It was particularly visible in 1996 and particularly effective in putting a halt to Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

One is struck these days that while Iran has a strategic relationship with Damascus, there seems to be somewhat of a contrast between President Ahmadinejad, who threatens at almost every opportunity to destroy Israel and President Assad, who seems at every opportunity to say that he wants to make peace with Israel. So I wonder if you would address those two dimensions of the same coin, if you like, Israeli-Syrian negotiations and their prospects and what impact does that have on the Iranian-Syrian relationship?

MR. AL-TAKI: Thank you, Martin. As it's well known, the Syrian-Israeli indirect talks began by the mediation of the Turks and had been accelerated -- very much were stabilized after, exactly, the war on Lebanon in 2006.

And practically, the Turks were very smart

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and very delicate in designing the whole procedure. For the time being, everything is going quite well I think in terms of delineating the gaps.

So everything is now being built toward confirming that this is a process that can survive. And, in such case, it's obvious that the negotiation could turn into direct ones, but still it is now in the term of preparation.

What was the incentive in my mind. I speak on my own behalf. The incentive, I think, from the Israeli side after the war on Lebanon, the Israelis, I think, to know now very well they need neighbors powerful enough to control (inaudible] players, and meanwhile with whom they have peace process.

From our side, the Syrian side, and here it's linked to the Iranians, the fact that this carte blanche was given to Mr. Sharon to try to make his own peace a l'israelienne, and impose a de facto peace, trying and destroying intentionally with the approval of the quartet the Palestinian Authority, and building the wall, et cetera, had created a tension in the region -- this decision to try to do that, to negate the possibility of peace, to pretend that there is no Arab interlocutor and we've seen how Yassir Arafat, one of the most courageous Arab leaders towards peace, was treated by the Israelis and the Americans unfortunately, regardless of all rhetorics, this what gave all kind of extremist feeling and programs a real push in the region.

When you try to close the conflict, this is a room you give to all kind of extremist solutions, because so there is no peace. What to do?

And it was a challenge.

As for Iran, I think, we have -- this is also personal -- a personal assessment. Unfortunately, the triangle between Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt is no more working. It was working even after Camp David, even after all the peace agreements that happened in the region. But unfortunately, since Wye, it is no more working. Egypt has de facto now concentrated on its own economic interests. Saudi Arabia has its own vision.

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I think it's no more working, simply.

And that's why Syria has a right to think about local and regional alliances. But this alliance is not necessarily a military one. When Syria now thinks about threats, it thinks Iran. When we think about opportunities, we think Turkey.

And this is very important. In this region, we need such forces, and simply Syria will not change its alliance with Iran, but the type of this alliance, the aim of this alliance will change drastically if the region would be tending toward a kind of a peace.

In the interim period, what will be game? Yes, that's why I'm speaking about international network, safety network, around the process, because we need -- and that's why we need the United States. You cannot deal. Now everything what's going on, for example, between the -- within the indirect negotiations between Syria and the Israelis, it's about the bilateral issues. When we will be embarking on the regional issues, the Americans must be there. You cannot deal with that. The Americans are our neighbors now. I think Fallujah now is much nearer to the White House than the New Orleans, for example.

So -- yes, yes. I think so. So it is there. You cannot just say you do whatever in the region. At a certain moment, they hinder any peace process between Syria and the Israelis. And this we know.

So that's my reply.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. Okay. Thank you very much. That's very interesting. Let's move to other questions now, please. Please identify yourself.

MR. ABDUL HUSSEIN: Thank you, Martin. I'm Hussein Abdul Hussein with (inaudible] newspaper. And my question -- hi, Sami.

MR. MOUBAYED: Salaam.

MR. ABDUL HUSSEIN: My question to Mr. al-Taki is about the peace that is needed in the region. We know that there has been no violence whatsoever between Syria and Israel since 1974. On the other hand, the actual active front and hot spot is Lebanon.

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And since Syria and Hezbollah are allies and since I see, Mr. Taki, you're advisor to the Syrian Prime Minister on this paper, do you know of any efforts that the Syrian government consulted Hezbollah about seeking American help for this piece? And if serious signs peace with Israel, does this mean that there will be peace between Hezbollah and Israel because, you know, that seems to be the active and hot spots of the region. Thank you.

MR. AL-TAKI: Syria seeks its own interests, first of all. Syria is not a puppet to anybody. First, it is loyal to its alliances, and I think at the same time regarding the peace, at the end of the game, a non-state player can never win. He can only bring his enemy to the table.

A non-state player can only deter, can only make his enemy bleed chronically, but what is the end game? It's to bring him to the table. It is only because there had been this pretension that there is no Arab interlocutor or peace that inflamed the region. And now it had been proven it's wrong.

So I think here why Syria did not use its border, et cetera. I think what's prevailing now in the whole region is asymmetric war, and the asymmetric war is the tool now to counterbalance the big imbalance of force, and this is the way to do it. And at a certain moment I think even Syrians were [inaudible] during the war on Lebanon in 2006, Damascus was very near.

So, in my mind, it's not about how to -- what is the relation between Syria, Hezbollah, et cetera. If the region is going toward a trend of peaceful agreements, I think all the collateral issues to be dealt with. And during the past, in the 1990s, Syria had proved practically that this is doable. And it's committed to what it's saying.

MR. INDYK: I'm going to take a list, but Gary Mitchell, please.

MR. MITCHELL: Dr. al-Taki, thank you. A couple of weeks ago, a famous American comedian left the scene. His name was George Carlin, and he had a routine that made him most famous, which was the

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"Seven Things You Can't Say on Television".

So I want to ask you about one of the seven things I suppose I shouldn't ask you about, but I'm going to anyway, and that is given, as you described, that asymmetric warfare is the danger in the Middle East today, the thing to be most worried about, why was Syria engaged in the process of building nuclear weapons with North Korea.

MR. INDYK: You want me to take the others?

MR. AL-TAKI: Yeah. All right.

MR. INDYK: Nora and then Barry.

MR. AL-TAKI: You know, I'm not an expert in nuclear issues, but, you know, the Israelis had killed a man, buried him, and then accused him. I'm speaking about the pretended place. They bombarded it, and then said it is so. It was so. Anyhow, to come to the end, I don't think -- I think Syria will be committed to the international rules and will be committed to the requests and the commitment of the IAEA. It will cooperate. It will go through it. No other problem.

I don't believe that one building could be a program, whatever, I'm not an expert, and it's a very delicate issue. I don't know. But frankly speaking, man to man, it's very difficult for me that even, you know, even the North Koreans, the most closed country wasn't able to hide anything. Nobody can hide that. If you are intending, you will do it. But it's not our intention, regardless of anything.

But the attitude was very funny, let's say, to kill the man, bury him, and then accuse him. And then now we are hanging on the photos of the CIA to prove whether it is or not, just like the tube of Mr. Powell.

MR. INDYK: Nora?

SPEAKER: (Off mike)

MR. INDYK: Okay. Microphone, please.

SPEAKER: Dr. Taki, if I understood you correctly, you have said that Hezbollah, a non-state actor that is allied with Syria and partially strengthened due to demands that Syria has placed on Lebanon and let's say regional countries and the

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international community.

And now Syria is going towards what everyone hopes will be peace with Israel. How are you going to deal with this non-state actor? Will it be disarmed? What will the price be? Will you demand to come and do it yourself in Lebanon? Will you allow the Lebanese army to do it? Please answer.

MR. AL-TAKI: First of all, we are no more in Lebanon, so this is the (inaudible), first of all. It's not our job.

Second, to be frank with you, Syria cannot afford for the time being to have one strategy and to close other opportunities. We've seen in this Middle East how suddenly things could shift drastically away from peace.

So Syria will keep its cards available until there is a fair feeling that this process is the future. And here, there, what -- where we need is a level of confidence building, to improve confidence building, and especially vis-à-vis -- I'm now, you know, considering the United States.

So the United States came to Iraq and was coming having dreams about using Iraq as a platform to spread all over, et cetera. It was a major threat for all the states in the region.

So we cannot afford to just have the luxury thinking of having -- nobody's been (inaudible) unfortunately in this. We learned that very hardly in this world. So we have to keep all opportunities.

Of course, peace is our strategic choice. We will do it, and if it's possible, as soon as possible. But if not, what can you do? If you are not the decent entre guillemets, interlocutor?

SPEAKER: Can I follow up quickly?

MR. AL-TAKI: Yeah.

SPEAKER: You said it's up to the Lebanese to take care of Hezbollah.

MR. AL-TAKI: I'm not saying. I'm saying first of all, it is a Lebanese issue.

SPEAKER: It is a Lebanese issue.

MR. AL-TAKI: Yeah.

SPEAKER: But it is still, as you describe

it, one of your opportunities or options you would like to keep open. So if the Lebanese state decides to integrate Hezbollah into its army or disarm it or -  
-

MR. AL-TAKI: The Lebanese state will decide. Yes, definitely.

SPEAKER: And Syria will stand aside and not do anything?

MR. AL-TAKI: First of all -- first of all, I think we have to take in account the strategy during the different mediation was if you want to (inaudible) on Lebanon to pay the price of all the crises of the region, let's postpone the issue of Hezbollah. This was the soul of all the mediations. Let's spare on Lebanon to pay what is demanded by the Israelis, Americans, et cetera, and allow it to be cooled down, opening room for reconciliatory use, and then if there is peace between Lebanon -- and Syria, from one side, and Israel, I think the normal development will come by the Lebanese themselves.

So can Mr. Siniora, for example, do anything other than the issue of Hezbollah? He has to build up his state, his army, his economy. He has lots of things to do to save -- to rebuild the nation states there.

And this is very important.

MR. INDYK: Well, I personally think it was a mistake and it should have been the other way around. It still should be -- I can say we should have disarmed Hezbollah first, as 1559 called for, and Lebanon would have been much better off. But I wonder whether you would accept the proposition that it is Lebanon's responsibility to disarm Hezbollah, but it is Syria's responsibility in the context of peace to stop arming Hezbollah.

MR. AL-TAKI: You want me to reply?

MR. INDYK: Yes. It was a question. Would you agree with that proposition, the principle that Lebanon should be responsible for disarming Hezbollah, but in the context of peace it's Syria should be responsible for --

MR. AL-TAKI: When Lebanon --

MR. INDYK: -- stopping the arming of Hezbollah.

MR. AL-TAKI: -- when Lebanon as Lebanon, as a unity, as a people, will find that it's time to gradually integrate Hezbollah within the army and put regulation for that, I think the Syrians will be cooperative.

SPEAKER: I didn't hear the last few words.

MR. AL-TAKI: That the Syrians would be cooperative.

MR. INDYK: Cooperative is the (inaudible].

SPEAKER: All right. My assumption is well

--

MR. INDYK: You want to press the microphone?

SPEAKER: Sure. Barry (inaudible], Associated Press. Presumably, and if I'm wrong, I withdraw the question.

Your end goal here is bilateral peace talks with Israel, and you obviously accept the fact that the United States is the mediator. 2000, the year 2000, Clinton's last year, with some help from Martin Indyk, there were talks that offered Syria full withdrawal from the Golan Heights -- I don't know if you're going to get a government like that again -- but full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and, if accounts are correct, talks failed because Israel wouldn't also give Syria access to the Galilee, to its main source of water.

What's different now? I mean, I know things have changed. There's Hezbollah. There's Iran threatening. There's been the Iraq experience, but basically doesn't it always come down to territory for peace and there's that little wrinkle about the Galilee, you know?

MR. INDYK: The Sea of Galilee.

MR. AL-TAKI: I think --

SPEAKER: The Sea of Galilee.

MR. AL-TAKI: -- first of all --

SPEAKER: I'm sorry. I meant the Sea of Galilee.

MR. INDYK: -- our presence is not about

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only this American (inaudible), which is very much necessary, but it's not the only goal.

Second, I would like to say we feel now the crisis is ripe. The attempt to close the conflict à l'israélienne didn't work, simply. And practically, there is a return in the international community toward finding solutions. At a certain time, it was given up that we stop. And this is making the crisis itself erode itself by itself. The margins of differences.

So I think this is in itself, we feel that mainly the psychology and the incentives and the strategic thinking had also shown the necessity for peace.

SPEAKER: Am I wrong that the -- one of the Syrian goals will be a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

MR. AL-TAKI: Definitely. This is --

SPEAKER: All right. What else do you want from Israel for peace?

MR. AL-TAKI: Peace.

SPEAKER: You want peace?

MR. AL-TAKI: Mm-hmm.

SPEAKER: You have peace now.

MR. AL-TAKI: No, it's not peace.

SPEAKER: Except for the infiltrator the other day, you know, was intercepted --

MR. AL-TAKI: No, no, no.

SPEAKER: -- trying to get into Israel from Syria.

MR. AL-TAKI: It's not peace. I don't think I can define peace.

SPEAKER: Well, I mean, it's not war, anyhow.

MR. AL-TAKI: Yeah. Yeah. Right.

MR. INDYK: Please.

SPEAKER: Okay. Thank you.

MR. AL-TAKI: It was a no war, no peace.

SPEAKER: No war, no peace. Okay.

MR. INDYK: Jeanine Sacari.

MS. SACARI: Mr. al-Taki, I'm wondering if you do get a meeting with Assistant Secretary Welch



this week, what will be your message to him? Are you saying it's beyond the current negotiations? Will you be looking for an easing of or recommending an easing of U.S. sanctions, deeper U.S. engagement in these talks? And I'm wondering, too, if you could just give us a little bit more of a flavor of the Turkish mediated talks in terms of what are the sticking points? What are you trying to clarify from the Israelis? Is it, as Barry suggests, the question of the Golan? Is it a question of whether Israel will have further demands about Syria's relationship with Iran, for example, in the future?

MR. AL-TAKI: If I am to advise the next president -- I'm not speaking about the current administration -- I am. I don't know. All the Americans I've met, either in Damascus or here, we are on the same wave. Who is not on the wave I don't know in Washington. This is a problem. And my advice for the next president, for example, would be about the embassy, about the involvement in the peace process, establishing relations vis-à-vis Iraq, and because in my mind, Syria has no -- feels the biggest danger now -- it's not Lebanon. It's no more Lebanon.

The biggest danger is from the possibility of a federal confessional state in Baghdad, a weak federal confessional state. This is very contagious. We will have then another Lebanon on our eastern borders, and, as a secular country, with our ethnic and religious structure, it is the most dangerous thing we can think about; that we have our concerns.

So we need to work on, together with all the neighbors of Iraq, about Iraq. Of course, with the president of the Iraqis first of all, and there all their decision, but at least we have concerns.

This is a message, I think. But your second question, please?

MS. SACARI: I was asking for a bit of a flavor of the talks that are going on right now. I know you didn't come just to talk about the talks and trying to get a better understanding of what the Syrians are seeking to clarify from the Israelis --

MR. AL-TAKI: The commitment for peace, for

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land for peace.

MS. SACARI: Simply that. It doesn't go beyond that?

MR. AL-TAKI: This is the main stone in the whole issue for Syria. We were ready for negotiations all over this last period. It's the Israelis who felt that yes, and our main condition is land for peace, full land for peace.

MR. INDYK: For full peace.

MR. AL-TAKI: For full peace, as you know.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. Thank you. Next is Bob Lieber from Georgetown University.

MR. LIEBER: I would think that most people or virtually everyone in this room would share the notion that peace and normal relations would be a good thing. However, it would not surprise you that there is a great deal of skepticism in Washington and elsewhere. As you will recall, years ago, when Martin and others were so engaged and committed in those efforts at the Syrian-Israeli peace process, there was, nonetheless, a debate in Washington and elsewhere about whether Syria's real interest was in peace or in the peace process.

Since that time, if one looks at Syria's actual record, one sees at least five things that stand out -- its role, especially in the early years of the insurgency in Iraq, of being the principal entry point for foreign jihadists into Iraq; in Lebanon, its role in intimidation and much worse in the Lebanese political process; its role with Hezbollah and in its complicity in the violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions concerning Lebanon; its headquartering of Hamas, including the most lethal and rejectionist elements of that extremist group; and its dancing with the North Koreans on nuclear issues.

Now, for those who may be, as I say, somewhat skeptical in light of these events of recent years, is there anything that you can say to us that would help to understand Syria's thinking about why, given that picture, circumstances have changed and the motivations and policies of Syria have changed rather than merely a desire for a process, a peace process,

which conveys some respectability, but may not change anything on the ground.

MR. AL-TAKI: Thank you very much. This was an expected question. I wanted to deal with it.

First of all, the first demand that Hafez al-Assad had made when Mr. Baker addressed him to participate in the war against Saddam Hussein, the first demand was the establishment of negotiations about the Golan.

Second, I told you if you go south to Damascus from my office, five kilometers, you will begin to see the Israelis. Damascus, strategically speaking, is in the range of one tactical operational day of the Israeli army. Who can rule Damascus without that?

Third, the important issue here is that we are addressing all those issues because we felt that there is an attempt to close the conflict, and if Syria appears to be, yes, we gambled, we will make this fail. We will make the attempt to close the Arab-Israeli conflict without solving it. We will make it fail. And we think we succeeded.

We succeeded, but here, as I said, the endgame what would it be is to come to the table and to have a fair negotiation based on Madrid. And Syria had proved, either in Iraq, and I can speak on Iraq if you want to. We can shift the discussion about Iraq. You know, you cannot ask the Syrians to act devotedly helping the American interests while you are threatening Syria everyday.

But still, Syria had made immense effort. We have our army on the southern borders. Now we have 500 -- Ambassador Moustapha, correct me -- 553 stations on on the borders, yes? I think so, something like that.

And we transported lots of our capabilities there, but what is being done on the other side? We have 1,500,000 Iraqi refugees. Suddenly, in one and a half years, we found 10 percent of our population increasing with a huge burden on our infrastructure, on our education, which is free, on our health system, which is completely free, all that coming as a burden

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on our lives. And the United States is doing nothing, simply nothing. They cared only about 3,000 people who came from Iraq for special purpose, to transport them to the United States. This is the only thing they care about. They cared about the refugee issue and some other decorations. Unfortunately, we need lots -- and here there -- there are lots to do positively in helping the reconstruction of Iraq. The Japanese are suggesting cities, are suggesting lots of things, and I think that keeping Iraq kidnapped by the decision that "We will not compensate Syria, we will not allow any kind of trade, we will not allow the pipeline, we will not allow the gas line, we will not allow any kind of cooperation between Iraq and Syria unless they do one, two, three, four" -- this is not a way to do it.

And we are having the burden, and we are very much afraid that at a certain moment, the Americans will leave their garbage and go and leave the garbage for everyone to repair it in the region.

This is really -- I suggested she take our place and feel what's going on on the other side.

So speaking about the insurgency, is Israel capable of controlling its own borders with Jordan or with Egypt? It's always -- you know, you can never make them waterproof, but at least we needed some measures to be done by the Americans.

On the other side of the borders, nobody is saying anything. You see nobody there, neither are Iraqis nor Americans. Out of 1,500,000 refugees, our assessment is that we have about 25 percent of them with falsified passports. Who is issuing the falsified passports?

And what a dangerous security issue to speak about here. So and simply just demonizing Syria and neglecting the impact, neglecting the fears, the threats we are feeling, this will not help.

MR. INDYK: I'm going to take a few questions together. First of all, Mark Gopin, Michelle Kellerman, and Hilary Krieger.

MR. GOPIN: Dr. al-Taki, I just want to ask you if, assuming that the next few months until

January are critical for the survival of this process, which is why you're here as part of the Search for Common Ground effort, what do you think would be the most important thing for Syria, Israel and the Track 2 world to do to make this process irreversible until there's a new president in the White House here?

MR. INDYK: Michelle?

MS. KELLERMAN: Yes, you've talked a couple of times about the U.S. demonizing Syria. The U.S. has changed its approach on Iran and North Korea. I wonder if you see any sort of changes at all going on when it comes to Syria right now. And also who exactly are you meeting with, official-wise, here in Washington?

MR. INDYK: And Hillary.

MS. KRIEGER: Hi. I think the Israelis share of the skepticism that you just heard from the American perspective of Syria not being really genuine in peace talks, partly because they don't see gestures, either substantive ones, like, kicking Khaled Mishal out of Damascus or symbolic ones, like, handshakes, something that shows that there is real intent for change there.

And I'm wondering what kind of gestures, what kind of things might be possible at this point to reassure Israelis, and if there's not, if you have some message for the Israeli public that could make a difference in how they view this.

MR. INDYK: You want to take those three?

MR. AL-TAKI: Yes. I'm not seeing any sign of lessening the demonization process vis-à-vis Syria. And sanctions are everyday released in a very non-constructive way. That is, you know, if you do something good, and you see that the Americans are insisting not to see it, then the game is not about behavior change. It is about something else.

When you try to do and to show you can be part of the solution, and we are -- what we are doing is for our interests practically. It's not for the Americans. But when we -- things are tending in the region toward the reconciliatory solution and we are ready to be a partner, and we are partners. And then

we see that they are still insisting on demonization. This doesn't mean that the aim is not to change behavior.

As I said, put yourself, please, in our position. Unless there is a real perspective towards peace, all the other elements of the conflict will continue to be there. There is no prepayment. There is no benevolence here. It's a major strategic issue. Syria will not close all -- any of its opportunities just in case, you never know. We've seen what happens. This is just; this is fair, what I'm telling you. But if there is, if the region will be tending towards something else, I think the Syrians will be real partners.

And about gestures, I think the Israelis do not wait from us now to do something about Hamas or Hezbollah or something like that. I don't think.

I think rather they would think about some tactical trust building, confidence building measures and this is doable.

MR. INDYK: This is what?

MR. AL-TAKI: Doable.

MR. INDYK: Doable. Doable.

MR. AL-TAKI: My message to the Israeli public: It's not by power that you can build up your security. It's not by weakening your neighbors you can build up your security. It's by peace. The peace is the best way to build up security. This is my message.

MR. INDYK: I think there was Mark's question was also about steps that you think should be taken to make sure that the peace process survives this interim period, transition to --

MR. AL-TAKI: I have no big hopes about the possibility -- the capability or the possibility of the American administration, current American administration, to do something now. Unfortunately -- personally -- this is my personal position. It was.

SPEAKER: (Off mike) How can we get to January without a (inaudible)?

MR. AL-TAKI: This is where we need the international main players. Unfortunately, the

Americans are not there. Now we are tending -- extending our hands to the French, for example, the Europeans, to try to compensate for lack of the hegemonic player in the region. So we are trying to compensate, and this feeling is all over, and all directions -- the Norwegians, the Swiss, the -- I don't know, the South Africans, many other players are very much keen to support it awaiting the -- trying to fill -- but nobody will fill the gap that is created by the United States. It's now our -- as I said, you are our neighbors.

MR. INDYK: Just to follow up on that. There is a transition in the United States that will take place in January, but there's a transition that may take place any time between September and March perhaps in Israel in terms of elections there. How does that affect serious calculations, the possibility that you may be dealing with a different actor in Jerusalem. Does it lead you to want to speed up your negotiations with the current leadership or slow down or what?

MR. AL-TAKI: Well, I think what's needed is a real serious, steady negotiation. But still, our reading for the situation in Israel is that this experience, this exercise, is not coming only from Mr. Olmert in spite -- from one side Mr. Olmert had shown that he's a big survivor. He knows very well -- he's very well determined since a while in this access.

But I think there are other centers of power in Israel that are interested, and they are -- we can read some signals in their positions. So, yes, we could be concerned about the future of Olmert, but I don't think it is the only determinant in that.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. Khalil Al-Anani and Ori Nir.

MR. AL-ANANI: Thank you, Martin. I just have three very quick points. The first is, how can you evaluate the current developments in the French-Syria relationship? And do you think that these developments may affect the relationship between Syria and Lebanon positively or negatively?

Second thing, do you think that there is any

possibility for Syria to play a constructive role between the United States and Iran or not?

Third thing: I know that you are independent and you are talking from an independent perspective, but for how much the internal situation inside Syria affects the negotiations between Israel and Syria. Thank you.

MR. INDYK: You asked for group questions, but we're going to take --

MR. AL-TAKI: Hold if you can hold.

MR. INDYK: Ori ?

MR. Nir: Hello. I'm Ori Nir with Americans for Peace Now. I'll have to press you a little bit on the question regarding public diplomacy. Your answer was that peace is best for Israel's security, is the best tool for Israel to achieve security, which is what our organization says and our sister organization in Israel, Peace Now, which is Israel's largest peace movement.

However, I think that it would be very instrumental in order to mobilize Israeli public opinion, which is a necessary condition for peace in the Middle East, in order to mobilize it can support for peace, for Syria to try to chart for the Israeli public what that kind of peace will look like, and what peace with Syria will offer for the Israeli public.

MR. AL-TAKI: Of course, I think that you cannot make by contract to people to love each other. It's by building relations that you do that. It's not contractual. So that I think what kind of a peace, it would be a full peace.

But the type of relations, what kind of alliances, et cetera, et cetera, will happen in the region, in the post-peace era, I recall a discussion that had been -- happened about the role of Syria in the post-peace era, and Syria -- that was in 1999, and Syria now is redefining its regional role practically, according to geo-economics and geo-cultural main parameters. And I think here for the Israelis the problem is that they have to be convinced that they should be integrated.

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I think the main problem about the wall is that it created the illusion that Israel can live behind walls without being -- giving any attention to its neighbors. And, you are no more in the Middle East. Twenty-five percent of the Israelis have a European passport. I think 18 percent do have American passport.

You are not there. Make your peace and go on. This didn't work, simply. So what kind of signals? I think both sides as to make confidence building, and this is -- good (inaudible] I think. Yes, yes. I know. I know.

So there is a question about the relation with France, et cetera. It is, you know, the suggestion to freeze the lines of demarcation between the two camps in Lebanon as a main philosophy, no matter who would be the President, the vice -- the Prime Minister, et cetera, was the main -- the basis of our thinking at that time when the French initiative was still active. And practically the events in Lebanon had just proven that this is the only way to do it. If you put on the I -- still insist trying to now to disarm Hezbollah and not to leave it to the Lebanese state and under a consensual issue to solve the problem of Hezbollah and its integration within the general defensive strategy of Lebanon, what had happened practically is we had converts with the French in our vision vis-à-vis the future of Lebanon. And I don't think there will be major contradictions between the Syrians and the French vis-à-vis Lebanon now.

At least I'm not seeing any real differences now. At the contrary, I think because the French perceive that what had been requested in their eyes had been achieved in Lebanon so that there is no more -- an obstacle I think they made this important move that was very well received in Syria and received (inaudible].

So I think the Syrian-French relation would be helping Lebanon as a state, as a nation, to build up itself as an independent state.

Vis-à-vis U.S.-Iran, I think President Hafez

-- Bashir al-Assad had explicitly said that we are ready to play a role, and we already played a role. You know, previously between the Arab -- some Arab Gulf countries who incited Saddam Hussein to play the role of the -- opening the war, et cetera, et cetera, and I think it was useful role. And at that time, you can ask the Saudis now, it's completely another issue, but in my perception the future is toward activating all potential mediators in the region toward solving the issue of Iraq.

I have another question about the internal impact. I'm sorry, yes. I think to the contrary. Let's take the experience in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, Europe and Germany especially, by its ostpolitik, it was able by withdrawing the external threat on the Eastern European countries to allow the flourishing of domestic chemistry.

Why this area doesn't deserve peace? Why this Middle East doesn't deserve peace? So the threat perception is the main factor in prioritizing all political choices in our region, and you know that. Why we accept it in Israel? We do not accept it in Syria, for example. Thank you.

MR. INDYK: So peace brings democracy, not democracy brings peace?

MR. AL-TAKI: Try it. You tried it.

MR. INDYK: We did try it. We tried it both ways and it didn't work.

Congressman Steve Solarz, and then we'll take two more from that part of the room.

MR. SOLARZ: Mr. al-Taki, about three months ago --

MR. AL-TAKI: I would be very much happy if my colleagues would like to see anything, you know. I'm hungry.

MR. INDYK: Please, Steve.

MR. SOLARZ: Three months ago, I was in Damascus and had an opportunity to meet with President Assad and Foreign Minister Moallem.

During the course of the meeting with President Assad, he indicated, as you have today, that he was eager for a peace agreement with Israel, but he

went on to say that before negotiations could begin he would need some assurances, privately if necessary, or in public that Israel was prepared to go back to the June 4, 1967 lines in the context of a comprehensive settlement.

A few days after I left Damascus, Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey arrived presumably carrying a message from Prime Minister Olmert and shortly afterwards the proximity talks between Israel and Syria, under Turkish auspices, began.

So my first question, and I have one other, is whether it would be prudent for us to assume that President Assad has, in fact, received that kind of assurance that Israel, in the context of a comprehensive settlement, would be prepared to go back to the June 4<sup>th</sup> '67 lines.

The second question has to do with a comment that was made to me by Foreign Minister Moallem. I pointed out in our conversation that if Israel went back to the June 4<sup>th</sup> 1967 lines, it would make Syria a riparian power, at the Sea of Galilee, which would give it a right to lay claim to some of the water of the Sea of Galilee, which presumably, from Israel's point of view, would be unacceptable given its dependence on that source of water.

So I asked him whether, in the context of Israel's return to the June 4<sup>th</sup> line, would Syria be prepared to relinquish its riparian rights to the Sea of Galilee. And his response was that Syria would be prepared to relinquish its riparian rights if it received compensation in three forms: first, more water from Turkey; secondly, a desalinization plant on the Mediterranean; and thirdly, access for some of its farmers on the Golan to some streams on the Heights that they could -- they need for their own agriculture. And if they could get that compensation, Syria would be prepared to relinquish its riparian rights.

So my second question is, is that an accurate reflection of serious position on the issue of whether or not it would be prepared to relinquish its riparian rights if Israel goes back to the June 4<sup>th</sup>

line?

MR. AL-TAKI: First of all, I will try to reply to the second question first. I cannot be more accurate than Minister Moallem, because he's the accurate.

But at least I would hang on this idea that Syria would accept.

Second, I think the issue of the water was dealt with separately from the borders itself. The theory was about a common basin in the region, et cetera, et cetera. So I don't want to enter in the techniques of that.

So if we set the principle, the issue of the water is not there. And, as you realize maybe, that what Mr. Moallem said is related to that factor exactly.

So in principle, I think it's solved. It's easy to imagine lots of solutions in this respect.

About the commitment of the Israelis, I don't think that the Syrians would embark in any serious negotiation before being sure that this would be the end of the negotiation. This is something that Syria won't bargain on, and it's understandable. I think this was a situation with Egypt. This was a situation with Jordan, to a certain extent. But I think the Syrians will have it.

MR. INDYK: Okay. We have -- please identify yourself.

MR. MAKSAD: Sure. Firas Maksad, the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation. Mr. al-Taki, you spoke about the number of positive steps that local actors in the region have taken to bring the region back from the brink, as you put it.

Arguably, the exchange of prisoners between Israel and Hezbollah last week was one such positive step. However when Foreign Minister Moallem was in Beirut this week, he was met by angry protests from the families of detainees who are documented by international human rights groups to still be in Syrian jails.

What is preventing the Syrian government from dealing with that case as a step towards

normalizing the relationship between itself and Beirut?

MR. INDYK: And over here. Please identify yourself.

MR. SEWELL: Daniel Serwer from the U.S. Institute of Peace.

I wanted to ask you to elaborate on something you referred to several times, which is a possible realignment of serious relations vis-à-vis Turkey and vis-à-vis Iran.

Could you tell us more about what that might look like?

MR. AL-TAKI: Yes, first of all about Lebanon, I think about you mentioned the prisoners, yes? I think it was prisoners.

I don't know a lot about that. But what I can say is that the Syrian forces in Lebanon were in a situation where they were (inaudible] between forces and sometimes having some battles with this part and that part, and then came the Israeli occupation with lots of maneuvers.

And I think that was when Syria was a part of the civil war and was trying to (inaudible] between -- within the civil war.

So I don't know. I think it is a subject that will be debated, if there is any left problem hanging on during the mutual relations between Lebanon. And I think Syria do have major interests in normalizing everything, to close.

As a Syrian, I will tell you, we have a major interest to get out of the Lebanese internal debate, because it's just a harassment, for, in our perception as Syrians, the main danger, the main problem is no more Lebanon. It is Iraqi.

Lebanon is always a harassing, urgent issue, yes. But the strategic challenge is in Iraq now for us.

So I think the Syrians will be really tending to work on it with the Lebanese, but what we need in Lebanon now is a benign government, nothing else than that, nothing more than that, either -- a benign government.

SPEAKER: What do you mean by benign?

MR. AL-TAKI: Benign, you know, I recall the last period where some Lebanese leaders were calling for the killing of Bashar al-Assad for upheaving the regime, making (inaudible]. So this is -- if Syria did have any diplomatic relations with Lebanon at that time, it would have severed them.

So benign. Decent. Whatever.

MR. INDYK: Okay. There was a question about Syria and Iran and Syria and Turkey.

SPEAKER: Oh, Iran and Turkey and the realignment.

MR. AL-TAKI: For example, now we have -- we are making in our center lots of studies about potential big economic projects for gas, pipelines, for major cities, economic cities, targeting the rebuilding of Iraq by cooperation with the Turks, by cooperation with the Iranians. Why not? Who's against it?

So this is really a complex, economic complex and a strategic complex that if it works well, it would be very much important.

That's why I think Syria do have a major interest in the improvement of the relations with Turkey, and you are now in a very, very good terms. Problems are down to zero between us.

And they -- about confidence building, it's really because I think there is a high level of trust between the two leaders and the role that Turkey had played within the peace negotiations is a very positively seen, positively seen.

MR. INDYK: I'm not going to take any more questions. Instead, I'm going to ask Samir and Sami, who have been very quiet, letting Dr. al-Taki take the heat, if they would like to say a few concluding words on any of the issues that we've discussed here. Sami?

MR. MOUBAYED: Okay. Thank you. Thank you all for coming. It's a pleasure to see old friends and colleagues over here. I actually just wanted to raise one, which the gentleman at the far end of the room raised, which is how has Syria's attitude changed or what do we -- how can the United States be certain

that Syria's attitude is changing?

One of the major problems that we've had is the difference in perception. The American administration has been saying that we are agents of destabilization. We've been saying we -- if that is correct, that if we are agents of destabilization, that means, by default, we are agents of stability as well. And just as like we are accused of being able to wreck the Middle East, we can bring stability to the Middle East on a variety of issues. The two examples that would come to mind immediately are the case of Alan Johnston, the BBC reporter who was taken in the occupied territories, who Syria played a role in setting him free.

The second case would be that of the 15 British sailors who were abducted in Iran and who, again, Syria's diplomacy played a major role in releasing, under invitation of the British, which brings me up to where Syria's main role can be, which is in Iraq.

Contrary to what many people believe, a Lebanon is not number one on Syria's priority nowadays. It's Iraq.

The threats coming from Iraq are colossal, and that's why Syria has very much in its own interest to play a stabilizing role. The Syrians have done that with case -- on the case of the border. They've done a very good job, and I think His Excellency Ambassador Moustapha knows that and has heard that from several field commanders at the border, although the Syrians have not been acknowledged for the service that they've done on that border.

And I always use the case that there are limits to what Syria can do on a 605 kilometer border. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein used to send car bombs to Damascus. They used to go off in the garbage cans throughout the capital, and we were unable at keeping full control. So, to the best of our abilities, we have been trying to keep a secure border with Iraq.

We've got the -- we've got a very important issue of legitimacy. We were asked in late 2006 by an envoy from Tony Blair to help support the political

process in Iraq, and the Syrian answer was forthcoming. Walid Moallem went to Baghdad. We opened our embassy in Iraq. It's one thing when a country like Syria recognizes Nuri al-Maliki. I mean, Syria happens to still be Baathist; happens to be Arab nationalist; happens at odds end with the Americans over that very same occupation. It's very symbolic for the Syrians to support someone like Maliki.

So there's a lot of legitimacy that comes into there. There is also the case of rapprochement. The Syrians have tried to bring all sides together. They've had talks with the Sadrists. They've had talks with the Sunnis, with the Iraqi Accordance Front. So they have tried to play the role of an honest broker in Iraq.

Then finally comes the story of the refugees, which is a great embarrassment. Actually, it's one of the major issues. The Syrians have put in a lot of effort for these 1.5 million refugees, and, on the contrary, all they've been getting is foul talk from Washington. There has been no acknowledgment. There has been no praise. There definitely has been no financial compensation, although the -- it's the ordinary Syrian taxpayer who pays for the mess that the Americans have left behind in Iraq. And, plus, while we are paying that price there comes more talk for security cooperation, and, yet, at the same time, an equal amount of bad political talk coming into Syria.

That's one of the things that has gotten the Syrians very upset, and the Syrians have been saying, "We don't want you to praise us." If that's the case, we don't even acknowledgment. All we want is for the negative attitude to stop. And that hasn't come.

Therefore, I mean, these are all of the positive points that Syria has been playing. Syria has not been the devil itself over the past couple of years, and it has tried to show that it can play a stabilizing role, particularly in Iraq, which is very much in America's interest. That's basically in a nutshell.

MR. INDYK: We're past two o'clock. We

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normally close at two o'clock. But if you would like to say just a few short words.

MR. SEIFAN: Just a couple of minutes, actually. I wouldn't go into details, but there is a key question always repeated: is Syria interested in peace or not, or interested in the process itself? This is always Syria accused in this issue.

Two things that I want to say. When you analyze the benefit, the impact of the peace on the Syrian regime, on the Syrian economy, and I am an economist, you discover that it brings for Syria a lot more than the situation now. Now, Syria pays with peace. Syria can earn. So when you go into details, you discover Syria is serious in peace, and the history of the negotiation, it makes this issue very clear.

Syria was ready in '96 to sign with Israel, where Rabin killed. And now Syria is serious to sign peace agreement. Just a question for us as Syrians: Does anybody expect Syria, when the Syrian territory occupied part of Lebanon, Palestine, and you expect that Syria is still calm, not to do anything? This is a very simple question actually.

And let's imagine what will happen actually if there is peace between Syria and Israel, Syria and Lebanon, and Syria-Palestine, and the whole situation actually, objectively, will move forward, will be very positive. The relation of Syria with the regional countries will be changed actually. Our interests first of all with Arabic countries and with our neighbors and with European countries. So, in reality, Syria interested in all these issues actually.

We believe in this time there is light and there is many things changing or start to change, and it's a time to do something benefit, and our trip here -- we thank our friend Tom Dine for his effort and the efforts of Search for Common Ground and Sonya for to organize this trip. Actually, six decades of conflict and war in our region, it's more than enough, it also the very difficult situation for the United States in Iraq, and now it's five years, and also it's more than

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enough.

So we believe that it's the time to do something different. Thank you.

MR. INDYK: And so say all of us. Thank you very much. Please, but we're well over time.

MR. AL-TAKI: I just want to thank you, all. And thank you for your very important questions. And I have to thank also Mr. Tom Dine and our -- Martin. He has been always very much caring about all our common ground.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. And I'll add my thanks to Tom and Search for Common Ground, as well. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for participating in what I think you will all agree has been an intriguing and thought-provoking session. I want to thank Dr. al-Taki and his colleagues very for sharing their thoughts with us today. Thank you.

\* \* \* \* \*

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