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# "INHERITING SYRIA: BASHAR'S TRIAL BY FIRE"

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(TRANSCRIPT PREPARED FROM A TAPE RECORDING.)

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to a special policy briefing from the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Before we start, I'd appreciate if you could turn your cell phones off.

As you're probably aware, yesterday the bulk of the remaining Syrian forces pulled out of Lebanon, and tomorrow there will be an official departure ceremony between the Lebanese Government and the remaining representatives of Syrian presence in Lebanon.

I venture to guess that this is not exactly what President Hafez al-Asad had in mind when he handed over power to his second son, Bashar al-Asad, more than four years ago. It's been a rough ride for the younger Syrian leader, and those who have tried to deal with him as well, from domestic reformers to Western statesmen and diplomats. Many have been frustrated by the gap between the expectations of the young, Western-educated ophthalmologist and the performance, which at times seems to be reminiscent of the British behavior of the Syrian Baath Party of yesteryear.

What exactly is going on in Damascus? That's the question that we brought Flynt Leverett to the Saban Center to answer, and he has done so in this book, which has just been published this week. It's called "Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire," available at your bookstore today, including the one outside.

We brought Flynt to write this book because of our commitment to in-depth research and, in particular, the application of experienced policymakers to that task. Flynt himself has had decades of experience in the U.S. Government as an analyst and then a senior analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, then as a policy planner in

the State Department, finally as senior director for Near East Affairs in the National Security Council in the first Bush administration.

He brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the challenge of trying to decipher how Bashar al-Asad and the ruling Baath Party are coping with the legacy of Hafez al-Asad.

He will speak today first about the book and his main conclusions, and then we're honored to have two distinguished journalists, Sy Hersh and James Bennett, to open the discussion.

Sy Hersh is probably well known to you all as one of America's, if not the premier investigative reporter. He first came to prominence in 1969, many of you will remember, as the man who wrote the first account of the My Lai massacre in South Vietnam. Since then he has gone on to break a number of important stories as a result of his extraordinary investigative work and publish a number of books. He worked for the New York Times for some time during the '70s and '80s. He is now a journalist for the New Yorker Magazine, where he was the first to break the story of the Abu Ghraib Prison treatment by U.S. soldiers and since then has published his latest book, "Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib."

James Bennett is currently a staff writer for the Sunday magazine of the New York Times. He served with great distinction as the New York Times Jerusalem bureau chief from 2001 to 2004, and he's an astute observer of the Middle East scene.

So it's my pleasure to ask Flynt to give us a synopsis of the book, "Inheriting Syria." I must say that I'm biased, of course, but I think it's a fascinating read. And I'm very proud that we've been able to bring you, Flynt, to the Saban Center to produce this. Go ahead.

MR. LEVERETT: Thank you. Thank you, Martin, and let me add my own words of thanks to Sy Hersh and James Bennett for coming out today for this book launch.

I also want to take a moment to thank a couple of other people. First of all, I want to thank Martin. It was Martin really who gave me the idea of writing this book, and more than that, he gave me the material and institutional resources to get started on it at a time when I was making some very difficult personal decisions about leaving government service. And I will always be in Martin's debt for that.

If Martin is the person without whom I couldn't have started the project, then I also want to thank the person without whom I couldn't have finished it, and that's my wife, Hilary. You really have to love someone to live with him while he's writing a book. And I'm very pleased to have had the chance to dedicate "Inheriting Syria" to Hilary.

I wish I could say that when I started working on this almost two years ago, I had the strategic genius to foresee that April 2005 would be the ideal moment to put out a book on Syria, you know, it was ready four months ago and I told Brookings Press to sit on it, the moment wasn't right.

That wouldn't be entirely accurate, and I'm not too proud to accept dumb luck as the source of good fortune. But by whatever means this book has come to be put out now, I think this is really a critical moment for Syria. It's a critical moment both in terms of the strategic challenges that Syria is facing. And it's also a critical moment, I think, in terms of U.S. policy toward Syria. I want to talk about each of those things for just a moment.

First of all, it seems to me this is a critical time in terms of the strategic challenges facing Syria. As I have given interviews and done speaking engagements, I'm oftentimes asked if Bashar al-Asad is in charge in Syria. And I usually answer yes. Often, there is a kind of challenging follow-up: "Well, is he in charge in the same way that his father was in charge?" And to that I usually say, "Well, of course not, and why at this point in his evolution as a national leader would you expect him to have the same level of authority that his father enjoyed for the last 15 or so years that he was President?"

Hafez al-Asad, if you look at his career, didn't really become the uncontested master of Syria and this perceived brilliant player of the regional game until at least a decade or so into his Presidency after he had gone through a series of defining challenges. He established Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. He defended that hegemony against both Israel and the United States. He put down a challenge to his regime from Sunni fundamentalists. And he put down a challenge to his own position from his brother. It was after that that he was Hafez al-Asad, the Lion of Damascus, but not before.

Bashar, not quite five years into his Presidency, I don't think has gone through those kinds of defining challenges. I think he is going through one now. And how he handled that defining crisis will, I think, say a lot about his future as a national leader and about the future of Syrian politics and Syria's regional position. That's why I say it's a critical moment in terms of Syria's strategic situation.

I also think it's a critical moment in terms of the evolution of U.S. policy towards Syria. Since I left government two years ago, I have often criticized the Bush administration for not having a Syria policy during its first term in office. Like its

predecessors, the Bush administration has had a long list of complaints about Syrian behaviors—support for terrorism, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, hegemony in Lebanon, shall we say not cooperating with U.S. goals in Iraq, all these things. We've had a long list of complaints, but we've not had a policy, if by policy you mean an integrated set of public positions, diplomatic initiatives, other measures all rooted in a strategy for changing Syrian behaviors that we think are problematic.

Now, though, I think the administration may be inching toward a policy, but basically a policy of regime change in Syria. We certainly haven't adopted a declaratory policy of regime change, but I think more and more, people in the administration are inclined in that direction.

I think that the administration has accepted an assessment of Syrian politics that, by forcing Syria out of Lebanon, this regime is not going to be able to recover from that blow and will start to unravel.

It struck me—a couple weeks ago, I appeared on the NPR show "Fresh Air," and I would really encourage you—the interview is up on the Saban Center website. Don't go and listen to me. Fast-forward to the end of the interview when, after I've been talking for a while, they put on Liz Dibble from the State Department.

Now, Liz is a very experienced officer, someone that I worked with when I was in government. She's done public diplomacy. She's served in Damascus. She certainly knows the talking points for U.S. policy towards Syria. And what really is striking is that, after she's gone through this long list of complaints about Syrian behavior, Terry Gross asks her, "Well, are you out to change Syrian behavior or are you out to change the Syrian regime?" And there is several seconds of dead air. Okay? And

Gross keeps coming back at the question two or three more times, and Liz won't give an answer.

Now, six months ago, if you had asked a State Department official if we were out to change Syrian behavior or out to change Syrian regime, you would have gotten an unhesitating answer that we were out to change Syrian behavior. Nowadays at the State Department, they're not sure that we're just out to change Syrian behavior. I think we are kind of inching toward a regime change posture. And so for that reason, I think it's a critical moment in terms of U.S. policy towards Syria.

So at this critical moment, I put out "Inheriting Syria," and I hope it does make a contribution to the policy discussion. The book from my perspective has two objectives: First of all, I wanted to provide an actionable analytic portrait of Bashar al-Asad as a national leader. This is something that I think is very much needed.

If you look at the really outstanding books that have been written on Syria in the last 20 years, you would certainly include the political biographies of Hafez al-Asad by Moshe Maoz and Patrick Seale, but both of those books are more than 15 years old.

There has been some very good writing on the Israeli-Syrian negotiations by Itamar Rabinovich, by Dennis Ross, others. The Israeli scholar Eyal Zisser wrote a nice book on the last decade of Hafez's Presidency. But there's really nothing out there on Syrian politics and policymaking under Bashar. So I thought it was time that something tried to fill that void, and I hope "Inheriting Syria" does that.

The second objective of the book, though, is to take that actionable analytic portrait developed in the book and draw the implications for U.S. policy. As you may have deduced, I don't think very much of the way that the Bush administration has

gone about trying to deal with Syria and achieve U.S. policy objectives towards Syria. I think there is a smarter way of going about things.

I said I think that there is a pressing need for a more solid analytic assessment of Syrian politics and policymaking under Bashar. One of the things that strikes me at this critical moment is that there really is a good deal of analytic uncertainty and even confusion about Syria, with a focus on Bashar's leadership.

In the book, I identify what I think are the three dominant perspectives that tend to govern our discussion of Syria. One I describe is Bashar as closet reformer. You know, he is the Western-educated, Internet-savvy, younger-generation leader who recognizes Syria's many problems, wants to make things better, wants a better relationship with the United States and the West generally, but is constrained by a so-called Old Guard.

A second perspective I identify is Bashar as loyal son. In this image, Bashar is really a force for continuity in the system, not for change. He is seen as a thoroughgoing product of a system his father created. And he is very much from this perspective part of the problem in Syria, not in any way part of the solution.

And then the third perspective I identify is Bashar as neophyte, or even in some more pejorative formulations Bashar as idiot, as in a Slate magazine article I found. The subtitle was "The Evil Moron Who's Running Syria." In this image, Bashar is presented as someone who is too inexperienced, ill prepared, uninformed, et cetera, to carry out his responsibilities as a national leader.

In reality, I think the picture of Bashar has to be a more nuanced and mixed picture. In my view, Bashar has genuine reformist impulses. He recognizes that Syria has a lot of problems economically, socially, politically. And he wants things to be

different and better. But I would argue that his reformist impulses are attenuated. He doesn't have a full-fledged vision for transforming Syria.

People talk about his Western education, but let's keep in mind what that experience really was. It was a little over a year in London in what we in the United States would describe as an ophthalmology residency program.

Now, if any of you have had friends who went to medical school and then went through that kind of postgraduate medical education, you will know that first-year residents don't have lives. You know, they work and they get what sleep they can, and that is their life. Bashar himself told me, when I asked him about his experience in London, he himself said, you know, "I got to know very well the route between the hospital where I worked and the flat where I lived." He says, "I still don't know London very well."

Okay. Yes, he had some experience in the West in an essentially technocratic field, but let's not overstate this. He wasn't doing a Ph.D. at LSE. So while he has reformist impulses, he doesn't have on his own, I would say, a really thorough, well-elaborated vision for transforming his country. He does indeed face constraints from the so-called Old Guard, but I think here, too, there is sometimes a caricature at work.

When I was able to interview him for this book, this was certainly a topic I wanted to ask him about, but I thought: I'm going to ease into this; I'm going to be here for a while before I raise the subject of the Old Guard.

But literally, within the first quarter-hour that I was with him, he raised the subject, and I said, "All right, Mr. President. You've raised a very interesting topic. What would you want people in the United States, in the West to understand about your

relationship with this so-called Old Guard?" And he said—well, he said a number of things, but the most interesting thing to me was he said, People need to understand that the Old Guard is not just two or three guys who occupy senior positions at the top of the system. The Old Guard is literally thousands of mediocre and fossilized—those are his words—"mediocre and fossilized" bureaucrats who are throughout the system and who have been entrenched in their positions over years and decades and have no interest in doing anything in a different way.

The Old Guard is also a private sector that's a private sector really in name only and exists in a kind of unhealthy symbiosis with this entrenched bureaucracy. He said, ‘Now, you look at that, that's the Old Guard and that's a real obstacle to change here.’

So he is constrained, but the constraint is not just two or three old guys at the top. It's more systemic than that.

Bashar is trying to find ways, in my view, to work around the Old Guard, both the two or three guys at the top and this more diffuse and entrenched Old Guard in the bureaucracy. And I document in the book how he is basically setting up his own alternative network of technocrats—people with Western advanced degrees in fields like economics, computer science, business; people who've had experience in the private sector outside Syria or with international institutions like the World Bank. And he is over time building up a network of these people and placing them in, for the most part, second-tier positions in the Syrian system. Occasionally he gets one up into a ministerial level appointment. And I think he's trying to build up this network over time.

Another part of that network—and it's part of the confirmation for my argument that Bashar really does have reformist impulses—is his wife, Asma. I'm saying

this not only because my own wife is here; I think who a man marries says a good deal about him.

Now, the woman that Bashar chose to marry, and chose to marry over his mother's objections, which is not insignificant in his cultural setting, that woman is the daughter of an expatriate Syrian physician, a world-class interventional cardiologist who's made his career in the United Kingdom. She was born, raised, educated entirely in the U.K., has a degree in computer science from the University of London, went through the investment banking training program at JP Morgan, worked at Deutsche Bank, and had been admitted to the MBA program at Harvard Business School at the time that Bashar proposed to her.

Now, you may question what it says about her judgment that she gave up Harvard Business School to accept that proposal.

[Laughter.]

MR. LEVERETT: But I'm more interested in what that says about Bashar's judgment, that the person he selects to be beside him on a daily basis is someone who is going to bring exposure to absolute world-class standards and practices in the globalized economy of the 21st century. I find that a very striking statement about him.

So he's trying to develop this alternative network of technocrats, but I think he still suffers from some pretty serious capacity deficits. He does not have around him the range and depth of technocratic expertise that he needs to craft serious reform initiatives, particularly in the economy. He himself will admit this, acknowledge this in conversation; that when he has tried to do various sorts of reforms, banking reform, introducing private banking, for example, the process goes unnecessarily slowly and the

impact of it is reduced because he doesn't have the kind of expertise he needs to do things in a systematic way. So inevitably what he does has this kind of ad hoc and inadequate or insufficient quality to it.

So if I think about Bashar as a national leader, you know, the picture, I think, needs to be more subtle than the perspectives that tend to dominate our discussion of Syria will allow for. Reformist impulses, but they're attenuated; doesn't have a full vision, trying to develop an alternative network of advisors and experts around him, but he still doesn't have the technocratic capacity he needs to move things forward in the way that I think he would like.

He is constrained by the Old Guard. I think on the whole he does not want to have a confrontation with the Old Guard. He would basically prefer to work around them. And I think he also assumes that biology is on his side. He will turn 40 this year. You know, I think if Syrian politics played out its natural course, you know, he's not term-limited. I don't think he has to worry about losing an election anytime soon.

I think the way he sees reform unfolding is over a very long period of time, a decade or more. But the real question is, given the strategic challenges that he's facing, does he really have that kind of time? And that brings us back to the notion of this being a very critical moment.

I think that the administration is embarked on a course where the risk of unintended consequences is very high. The risk of unintended consequences is certainly high in terms of what could happen in Lebanon, but I will let others talk about that today, and we can return to it in questions if you'd like.

But I think it's also unintended in terms of what could happen in Syria. I said the administration is inching toward a regime posture. I don't think we're gearing up

to invade Syria. Don't take me the wrong way. At this point I don't think we're gearing up for that. But I think the administration believes it can achieve regime change on the cheap. As I said, you know, the idea of being if we push Syria out of Lebanon, the Asad regime can't recover from that blow.

I actually don't think that's the case. I think this regime is more resilient than that. And I actually take seriously a scenario in which if four months, five months, six months down the road it's clear that Bashar al-Asad can still set the outer limits for Lebanese policy on the issues that really matter to Syria. I think that Bashar could conceivably emerge as a stronger figure domestically and regionally. If, on the other hand, he is seen as someone who has squandered an important strategic resource for Syria, that could have consequences for him at home.

Even if we were able to bring down the Asad regime on the cheap, it's not really clear to me what interests of the United States are being served by that. You know, what would follow in a society that is as complicated as Syria's? And I would argue that Syrian society is at least as complicated as Lebanese society or as Iraqi society. What would follow the collapse of the Asad regime would be certainly chaotic, and what might emerge or what would be likely to emerge from that chaos would be, in my view, heavily Islamist in character. And I'm not really sure what American interest would be served in that scenario.

I think there is a better way to achieve American policy objectives towards Syria, and that is through a strategy of what I describe as conditional engagement. It's not rocket science. It's carrots and sticks. In a previous era, we used to call it diplomacy.

[Laughter.]

MR. LEVERETT: My experience with this administration is they find diplomacy a very challenging undertaking. And they've certainly not, in my view, tried strategically rooted diplomacy with Syria.

I think that we could make real progress toward our objectives with Syria through a carrots-and-sticks approach. I think that Bashar wants to make a strategic understanding with the United States. I think he realizes this is critical to his own interests in reforming Syria. And I think he is open to making, in effect, a bargain that addresses our most important concerns. But he wants to know what is in it for him.

He said to me very clearly on this point, Syria is a state, not a charity. If we are going to give something up, I need to know what we're going to get in return. And that is a conversation that he has been unable to have with this administration. We make demands of Syria, and I think, by and large, the demands are justified and warranted. But we do not spell out what is in it for Syria to cooperate with us. And, therefore, we don't get very far.

I think if we were prepared to have a serious strategic conversation with Bashar and apply a carrots-and-sticks approach, we could do much better at achieving our policy objectives than on the course we're embarked on now.

So I lay out that argument in the book, and if you haven't bought the book, you can pick it up today at the Brookings bookstore. I encourage everyone to read it, and thanks to everyone for coming.

[Applause.]

MR. INDYK: Thank you, Flynt.

Sy Hersh had a chance to talk to Bashar al-Asad also.

MR. HERSH: Yeah, I have a problem with that. I actually was seeing him right at the time, the critical time in early February. The problem I have is I'm still doing work on it, so I have to—you know, I'm a professional journalist, but I have some things I can say without getting into a lot of details.

First of all, I found—I read his book "Going to Syria." I read an early version of it, and it is—it's absolutely—you can understand why he's not at the White House.

[Laughter.]

MR. HERSH: Absolutely balanced, reasoned view of what to do . . . what Flynt said at the end, of course, is, you know, he is willing to play, he's willing to deal. I'm always reluctant to tell you—I can't tell you how nice he is. He's a very open, friendly, almost disingenuous person. Of course—and I think it's real. And so any journalist will tell you, worth his salt, that you always have to discount the affection you feel for somebody because he is a warm person. There are some wonderful ironies about all this, and to get back to the real world, I'm always amused by democracy in Lebanon being touted by the United States since, let's see, RCA was fixing elections in Lebanon before Bashar was born, you know, promote — in the '50s, you know, some of you know—some of you in the government probably know firsthand — and all the stuff that was going on then. There was an awful lot of stuff going on. So we're not innocents in all of this.

I'll just take us back to some of the questions that fascinate me about the current event, what's going on now is Hariri. We really don't know who killed Hariri. I had a friend in the government. There are some people—some of the people, the neocons, like to chat to me. I don't know why, torture me, probably. But anyway, I had a

friend say to me, "It doesn't matter. Why are you worrying about the fact there's no empirical evidence for who killed him?" And there isn't. I don't like the UN report at all, the Fitzhugh report. I mean, if you go back and look at the same report he wrote in Kosovo, he wrote one that was also—you can read between the lines of the report. It doesn't establish anything. And Hariri in death was, just like Ronald Reagan, much more wonderful than Hariri in life. You know, when I knew about Hariri, he was always about the enormous amount of money he was peddling into Chirac and into other people, his representation of the Saudis, not that he didn't have some ideas and not that he wasn't a key player in the rebuilding of Lebanon. But the God-like affectation that he has in death wasn't there in life.

Hariri's death, as somebody in the government said to me, he said, Sy, why are you worrying about it? It doesn't matter what the reality is. It's—Syria did it. That's all we say and that's all the world wants to believe and that's it. Syria did it, whether Bashar—the big issue is Bashar doing it, did he know it, or was it done by Ghazali and is there some of the intelligence people behind his back in Lebanon. And I don't think that is the big issue. I think the real question is I don't think we should rush to judgment on all these things, and we shouldn't be so quick to rule out anybody investigating it as corrupt as we have, except for the UN.

So it's—for me it's an open question. I do think that in death Hariri—the best thing that has happened to French-U.S. relationships has been the death of Hariri. You know, and so now you have—and you can't discount—you know, in all foreign policy discussions—you know, as Tip O'Neill would say, all politics is local. You can't discuss the friendship, regardless of its basis, between Hariri and Chirac, and Chirac's venom right now towards Bashar. Chirac is really very angry. He believes that Bashar or

the Syrian Government, whether there's evidence or not, is directly responsible for the death of his long-time friend, long-time benefactor, another issue that, by the way, Flynt gets into a few times in his books—in his book. It's very interesting. He does—Flynt does get into the notion that Hariri is—had another life in terms of this payola. And so I think that colors our policy.

In a nutshell, I don't think there is much give in our policy. I think as—not surprisingly, I think the essential American policy is—it's been stated to me—is that Bashar is Saddam Hussein for many of the people, the main players in this White House. He is simply—you know, not literally but figuratively he's somebody that in their view must go. Will it happen? There's so many imponderables. We're really in an amazing situation now in which the game plan against—the initial White House game plan for redoing the Middle East, which I think is very real, was very real—they got a bonus with Hariri's death. But the basic game plan involves Syria and Iran, obviously.

And it's pretty much up in the air. No matter what they tell you, no matter how much good stuff they want to spin about the election process and all that, we're in real trouble in Iraq. And the real issue and one of the big focal points for us is obviously you can't control what's going on in Iraq right now in their view without controlling Iran. And so do we go frontally to Iran? What do we do?

I think Syria inevitably is in second place or a back-burner position in the hegemony—hegemonical instincts of this government. I think they have to figure out what to do with Iran. As long as—with Iran there, there's no real safety in Iraq. I think in their view they see a direct connection between—you all read. You all know what Abdullah has been saying publicly in Jordan, and the Saudis are saying and certainly the Egyptians are saying nobody wants the spread of Iranian—an Iranian revolution—an

Iranian revolution into the—south into Iraq. Nobody in this government does. So there's a lot of issues there.

Will they end up choosing to decide to isolate Syria? One attractive thing in talking to people about getting rid of Syria, of course—or getting rid of this regime is then you isolate Iran more. You have it surrounded by potential enemies. Do they think that's an impossible position? No, I think they're—I think they think he's going to fall from inside. And I think that's—that's my sense in talking to people, that he's going to erode his own position. I don't know how much we're really going to do overtly.

The tragedy of all of this in terms of—as Flynt gets into, in terms of what we could achieve that would be useful in the Middle East—and we could achieve an awful lot with carrot and sticks, I even think in terms of Hamas and Jihad and support. He's an orientalist in a way. If we don't go facially or frontally with him, we probably could have accomplished much more. And we've also—he's made a lot of steps in the right direction, but he doesn't get rewarded. And don't forget, you know, this whole process began with 9/11, and Syria was a very, very valuable, much—people in the CIA will tell you, an extremely valuable ally in the first months, first six months or first year of our war against terrorism because of their longstanding—you know, this is a country that, like Iraq, didn't have much use for jihadism, the Muslim brotherhood, and the files they turned over I think—my understanding was were in, if not the hundreds, thousands of files and an enormous help in the beginning to us as we began sort of belatedly to figure out what's going on in that world, the world of terrorism.

And so we butchered that relationship even though Bashar has been—I could just tell you, turned the other cheek at enormous stupidities by our CIA in dealing with their intelligence, I mean enormous, confounding sort of stupidities. He's

maintained, still would be willing to maintain a relationship. He doesn't get anything for it. And he did provide, I can tell you again, specific information that saved American lives in the first year of the war on terrorism in other places in the world, including in the West. He had information that was incredibly valuable to us and was dealt with in such a way—I think there was a split between the intelligence agencies and this administration.

But the overwhelming picture is very bleak because we've got a government run by people that do not want to look at the world that Flynt Leverett describes – the world of nuance, as he said – and balance and carrot and stick and long term. There's a short-term goal here that I think defies logic, defies sensibility, and is American policy.

MR. : One of the interesting things, and perhaps we can get into it in the discussion, is that, on the one hand, Bashar has, as you've pointed out, helped out in the war on al Qaeda; but, on the other hand, he has enabled the insurgency in Iraq to have support and in some cases direction from Syria—

MR. HERSH: Hold on. There's a lot of controversy about the extent to which that exists. There is. I mean, it's—in the reporting I've done recently, I've had an awful lot of people who once had high official positions in the government, recently left, telling me on the record—I haven't written it yet—that, in fact, he's been a restraining force very often.

Yes, there are many former Baathists living in Syria, there's no question. But I'll tell you right now, they're all over the world. They're all over the Middle East. There's certainly as many in Jordan, UAE. Everybody's getting the hell out of there, anybody with any money. So not that you're wrong, but the general notion that he has

been an invaluable ally of the insurgency I don't think is so. I think there's a lot of restraints on it. I don't know what you think. What do you think, Jim?

[Laughter.]

MR. : Staying out of that one.

MR. BENNETT: I'm not remotely qualified to talk to you about Syria, certainly not as qualified as these gentlemen, so I've kind of assigned myself the role of starting off the questioning.

I have read Flynt's book, and I congratulate him on it, both on the book itself and on his timing, because just at the moment a lot of us have a lot of questions about Syria, he has fortuitously driven up with many answers and a sense for the complexity and nuance of Syrian politics, how the world looks from Damascus, and our own relationship to Syria that's largely missing, I think, right now from the discussion in this country.

I have done a fair amount of thinking about Syria's role in the region, particularly from the perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it's sort of from that base that I'll try to ask a few questions and get the conversation going.

Flynt, in your remarks just now, you referred to the test of President Asad's success or failure in managing the withdrawal from Lebanon being his capacity to set the outer limits of Lebanese policy. Can you talk a little bit more, in a little more detail about what that means? What's his big fear or worry about this withdrawal? And what tools does he have available to him to prevent that fear from being realized?

MR. LEVERETT: I think if you look historically, the biggest challenge that Bashar's father faced to Syrian interests in Lebanon came in 1982 when, in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Israel, the United States, several of our

European allies supported the installation of a Lebanese government that was prepared to sign a separate peace treaty with Israel—in fact, signed such a treaty. It was in the aftermath of that treaty signing that Hezbollah really emerged as a very important and potent paramilitary force in Lebanon, carrying out terrorist attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, against the Marine barracks; the French Ambassador in Lebanon was killed. And as a result of those attacks, the United States withdrew its forces from Lebanon. The Israelis retreated into what became the security zone in southern Lebanon. And the Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty was abrogated in 1984.

I think that's really the worst case from a Syrian perspective: that you could get in the aftermath of parliamentary elections in Lebanon, whenever they happen, that you could get a government organized by the current opposition, and there are opposition figures in Lebanon. I don't know that this is a dominant threat of opposition argument, but there are those in Lebanon who will say things like, well, you know, Lebanon doesn't really have a dispute with Israel, we could make the '49 armistice line a border between Israeli and Lebanon and sign a peace treaty with them tomorrow.

I think the first thing, the first and foremost thing that Bashar wants to keep from happening is just that scenario, to make sure that Lebanon does not sign a separate peace with Israel. I think he will have levers of influence that he can use to keep that from happening. I think Hezbollah will be an important leader of influence. There will still be other pro-Syrian players and factions in Lebanese politics. So I think that is really the first and foremost interest that he is out to protect.

I think there is a range of economic interests that he will want to try to preserve, and I think to some degree market forces are going to help him do that. A lot of the recent reporting and analysis, it sounds as if the Syrian-Lebanese economic

relationship is a one-way relationship that operates entirely to Syria's benefit. I think the reality is more complicated than that. There are a lot of ways in which important people in Lebanon have benefited from that relationship, and I don't mean entirely through corruption or illicit kinds of ties.

Syria is Lebanon's most important export market. If it wants to be able—Lebanon wants to be able to send its exports out to the wider Arab world, its only overland routes are through Syria. So I think there are going to be ways that Bashar can, as I said, set outer limits on the most important aspects of Lebanese policy and keep the more important aspects of the economic relationship going.

MR. BENNETT: Do you think—I'd love to hear both you guys on this question—that the administration—you spoke about the administration envisioning some process of unraveling here, but I'm very unclear on what the precise mechanism would be. Do you think that they actually think in terms of pushing a new Lebanese Government towards signing some sort of peace agreement with Israel or sealing the border, economically that is, with Syria as ways to start pushing the regime over? How would they actually go about accomplishing this kind of unraveling?

MR. LEVERETT: Well, the causal logic is also unclear to me, which is one reason I don't think this is a particularly smart way to plan policy on our part. I think you could argue there are a couple of dynamics in play that people in the administration who would like to see the Asad regime unravel, that they may be counting on. One is an argument that if Syria loses its position in Lebanon, if, for example, all the hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers who've been employed in Lebanon have to come back, that this is going to put such pressure on an already strained Syrian economy, it will increase

popular discontent, and you can get a popular uprising. I think that may be one causal mechanism that they are looking at.

I think another causal mechanism they may be looking at is the idea that if Bashar is seen by those around him in the power structure as having squandered Syria's position in Lebanon, that people will start to wonder if Bashar is really their best bet, it could start different factions in the power structure sort of competing with one another, and over time the regime is unable to maintain its cohesion. I don't think either of those scenarios is particularly likely.

MR. HERSH: I'm just interested in a couple of things. I've always—every—all the anecdotal evidence I have from people who travel to Damascus and my own personal perceptions, which are useless when it comes to this, is that he's popular, Bashar is popular. He's seen by many people—

MR. : In Syria.

MR. HERSH: In Syria, in the streets, in the people. You just don't see that much evidence of any significant—he's not very popular among the Old Guard, some of the old, wealthy, you know, Mercedes and BMW crowd. They seem him as not very strong, at least some of those I know and have known. Some of them talk about him as somebody whose time is short. But among—in the street he's—I don't know how much it means.

I also think there's a lot of basis for believing that he seriously wanted to talk to Israel very much on the Golan Heights, wanted to renew those talks, and he has said the same thing I've been told in Washington. Before I talked to him, I had been told in Washington that the White House was very, very active in telling Sharon—which is hard to do, anyway, but telling him not to participate in these talks. I don't know if you

heard that. So the pressure was against participating in the talks, whether Israel wanted to or not, came from Washington. Washington's view was—this is at the time of the Iraqi incursion or war—don't do it right now. Is that correct? That's my understanding. That's his understanding, too. He said that, too.

MR. LEVERETT: It's very interesting on that point. I think that Bashar's position on resuming peace negotiations has evolved over the time that he's been President, and I try to chart that evolution in the book. But I think you're right. Basically from roughly the time of the Iraq war, or shortly thereafter, Bashar has been saying pretty steadily, pretty consistently that he wants to resume peace negotiations with Israel. And this has started a very lively debate in the Israeli national security establishment. Very serious, credible people, like the head of Israeli military intelligence, their country's chief intelligence officer, the former IDF chief of staff, have all argued that this is serious, that Bashar really is prepared to do a deal with Israel. I think a deal under the right conditions from Bashar's perspective, but, still, he's ready to do a deal; and that Israel should pursue this, it would be in Israel's interest to conclude a peace with Syria.

On the other hand, there are those in the professional national security establishment in Israel who are not so sure that Bashar really wants to do a deal. Generally, these are the people who also argued during the '90s that Hafez al-Asad never really wanted to do a deal, that the Syria track was all, from the Syrian perspective, some kind of charade.

I believe that Hafez wanted to do a deal in the '90s. I believe that Bashar would, with the right conditions, do a deal now. But it's kind of moot because I think Sharon, looking at what he has on his plate, he doesn't want to have to deal with the

domestic politics of negotiating a peace with Syria at the time that he's dealing with a lot of domestic problems in connection with implementing his Gaza disengagement plan.

And I think you're right, to the extent that there were people, serious people in the Israeli Government who were arguing in favor of resuming peace talks with Syria, the administration has been telling them don't do this now, and this is one favor that Sharon is willing to do—

MR. HERSH: But let me just say, the question Martin's going to ask, I bet, what about Hezbollah? What about support for Hezbollah? What about support for Hamas? What about support for Islamic jihadism? Was there much play, was there a chance to really get Bashar to do something on those issues?

He would say and he has said to me, 'Why do you ask me to do things in public I can't do? You know what I'm saying? This orientalism. Why are both sides talking, you know, in the funny way they are?' In other words, we want him to do something he can't do, and he wants something from us we can't do, in a way, you know, at least this administration can't. But do you think there was a chance that we could have—and this is before the Gaza Strip. These talks began—the talk about Israel was almost two years ago before the Gaza negotiations got serious. There was a time then—Elliott Abrams being the point man — [tape ends].

— telling the Israelis not to go ahead. I don't know if that's your understanding, Martin. But in any case—

MR. INDYK: Let's just say there was no enthusiasm in the White House for taking this challenge up.

MR. HERSH: But could they have gotten a deal from him? Could they have gotten something or cut back in support? You know, the big issue is going to be obviously Hezbollah in the next year.

MR. LEVERETT: I think we all know, if there's going to be a peace deal between Israel and Syria, what the deal looks like. Bashar is going to have to get something that he can plausibly portray as full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. He is perfectly prepared to talk about security arrangements, DMZs, limited force zones, third-party monitoring, other things like that, to ensure from an Israeli perspective that the Golan couldn't be remilitarized.

I think he's prepared to meet Israeli requirements on normalization of relations, and I think Bashar understands that, as part of that deal, you know, support for groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad would have to be stopped. And I think he also understands that Hezbollah's disarmament in Lebanon would be part of the package. The—

MR. : Can he just snap his fingers and make that happen, though?

MR. LEVERETT: I wouldn't say snap his fingers, but as part of an overall settlement in which Syria and Lebanon were getting peace treaties with Israel, I think it would be understood that the Lebanese Armed Forces would be disarming Hezbollah and, at least before Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon, Syrian forces would backfill the positions that the LAF would have to give up in order to go into the south and take care of the Hezbollah weapons caches.

MR. : In your dreams.

MR. : Look, here's the crux of the problem. You know, the three of us, each individually had a chance to talk with President Asad, and I think we've all come

away with the same conclusion: nice guy, talks a good game about reform and peace with Israel, but when you leave the room and you look at what happens, he doesn't seem to have the ability to follow through.

In my case, my experience with him was he explained very—he was very candid, in the same way he was with you, in terms of explaining his problems and very clear about what I thought was a fairly—from his perspective, fairly shrewd strategy, which was that he was going to make peace with Israel and cooperate with the United States over Iraq, and his assumption, unspoken, was that we'd leave him alone in Lebanon.

But he didn't follow through on making peace with Israel, and it's not enough just to say, well, you know, Sharon didn't respond or Bush didn't respond. There are plenty of things that he could have done if he was serious about making peace. I think he was serious, but there's a lack of follow-through. If he was serious about stopping the support for the insurgency that was coming from Iraq—from Syria into Iraq, he could have done a lot more than that.

So it isn't really the case that your analysis of his reform capabilities, which is, quote, constrained, applies also to his foreign policy, that he's constrained there, too, and that what you've got is nice guy who wants to do the right thing but isn't able to do it.

MR. LEVERETT: Well, I think there's a bigger question, particularly in terms of his foreign policy. It gets back to that line I quoted about how, you know, if he's going to give something up, he needs to know what he's going to get in return.

You asked—Sy asked about or you asked about what he's doing in terms of the insurgency in Iraq. Look, I think it's pretty clear at a minimum that Syria is not

doing everything it could to constrain the flow of weapons, people, money, et cetera, from Syria to support Iraqi insurgents.

Okay, periodically Syria does something to show that it could be helpful. You know, it affects the turnover of some important former regime people. It cooperates with us on some aspects of the funding problem. You know, there are a number of things that he does periodically to show "I could be helpful here." But he is still waiting to understand from us if I'm helpful in a sustained way here, if I, in a sense, give up this card that I have, what is it that you're going to do for me? And it's a particularly unfortunate mismatch of diplomatic styles or perspectives because he's looking to have it spelled out for him before he really commits, what do you want to get in return? And he's dealing with an American administration that has basically decided as a point of principle and a point of policy that it will not spell out for him what he could get if he cooperates.

And so, therefore, we are in the situation where, you know, he says these things, indicates that he would be prepared to move down certain paths, but then there is no real movement because in my view, the diplomatic context isn't created.

MR. INDYK: Okay. Let's go to—my goodness—questions. Please make sure to identify yourselves and ask questions. Ambassador. . Wait for the microphone. Is there a microphone?

MR. LEVERETT: Oh, just yell, Ted.

MR. : First of all, let me compliment Mr. Leverett on a masterful presentation, a good critique, good questioning from the panelists.

It seems to me that there's been a symbiotic relationship between President Bashar al-Asad and the Old Guard, and I don't know if you'd agree. But

basically, besides having the name Asad and being his father's chosen heir, whether it was ever admitted it or not, Bashar, as you noted, married well, [inaudible] attractive man in his personal characteristics, as we all know. He can go to the capitals of Europe or he could go to the capitals of Europe and be well received. He could go to Rome. He could go to London, Paris, Berlin, and be well received in all those capitals, and even learn some PR while he was there.

But right now it appears that the administration intends, as Sy indicated, to hold him responsible for the murder of Hariri and give him the Arafat treatment. Since he is not known to be—particularly known to be a tough guy, at a time when there's a need to keep—you know, if you're worried that the U.S. is up to something and you can exaggerate their ability to be successful, the question is: Might elements of the Old Guard start to look at Bashar as having exhausted his usefulness to them if he is no longer—if we can bring—if the U.S. administration can bring Europe around to their point of view in terms of isolating Bashar? I mean, the Turkish President broke ranks recently, but he's the only one I know that did. And then how do things look internally in Syria?

MR. LEVERETT: That's a very good question. I will address it. I just want to say I'm not sure I entirely accept the premise of the question in that I think that the current unity between the U.S. and the major European allies on this issue could well decrease in coming weeks. Let's assume, you know, as of tomorrow Syrian troops are out. Let's assume at some point in the next few weeks we have Lebanese parliamentary elections. I think then that the next issue that's going to come up is going to be, well, what about Hezbollah? What's its role in Lebanese politics? Does it keep its guns, et cetera? And I think there you have some real potential for the U.S. and Europe to go

back on separate paths. So I'm not so sure that the current unity is going to last for very long.

But that aside, let me take the premise of your question. If Bashar is seen as not really able to deliver in terms of cultivating a better position for Syria in Europe, at least, if not in the United States, could he be seen as less useful from the standpoint of the Old Guard? It's possible, but then they're still left with the question, assuming that they begin to question Bashar's value to them, they have to have an alternative. And my own sense is they don't really have a ready alternative to propose to put into Bashar's place.

Certainly I don't think any of the people who had senior positions under Bashar's father could step in and play that role. If you were going to look for people of a younger generation, I think you would probably have to look within the Asad family. You would still be talking about an Asad regime, just maybe a different Asad. And in that context, I guess the two possibilities that people mention most are, first of all, Bashar's brother-in-law, his sister's wife—sister's husband, sorry, Assaf Shawkat, who is now the head of Syrian military intelligence. The other possibility that people identify is Bashar's younger brother, Maher al-Asad.

I mean, people talk about them as possible alternatives to Bashar, but I don't know that we have any evidence at this point that they're really willing to play that game. In the past, there is a precedent, Hafez al-Asad was challenged, most significantly by his own brother, Rifaat. He was challenged at a time of real personal weakness in the sense that Hafez had had a heart attack, he was laid up in bed, and it's in that context that his brother, Rifaat, mounted a challenge to his position.

I think Bashar is certainly challenged now, but he's challenged strategically. I don't think he's challenged personally. And so we can identify those as possibilities. If the Old Guard began to look around for an alternative, maybe they could look within the family. But I don't think we have any evidence right now that either Maher or Assaf Shawkat is really inclined to play that sort of game.

MR. INDYK: Down in the middle there, please.

MR.al-Barazi : My name is Tammam al-Barazi, and I'm an Arab journalist—I'm a Syrian—for the last 28 years writing about Syria.

The basic question which I really want to ask you, Mr. Leverett, in Syria they don't believe that, you know, turning a republic into a monarchy can happen without, you know, [inaudible] power consent. I mean, the North Korean paradigm cannot be repeated again and again, and there are now Libya, Yemen, and—you know, count. You can count many Arab countries waiting for this paradigm.

If you are preaching now that engagement, you know, conditional engagement, what an Arab academic called jamlakiya [ph], a republic/monarchy, you know, slash. That's, you know, giving like green lights to other dictators and authoritarian regimes that they can really, you know, turn a republic into a monarchy and have the blessing of the United States and have the conditional engagement with them.

MR. LEVERETT: When I argue in favor of a strategy of conditional engagement, I try to make clear in the policy chapter that I think this is also the best way for trying to promote liberalization and greater openness in Syria, because for me, conditional engagement would have a couple of dimensions. It would involve this kind of carrots-and-sticks strategic bargaining with the regime. But it would also entail more direct engagement with Syrian civil society than we've done so far.

And I think that it's one of the ways in which, if you engage Bashar in this way you can actually empower him to pursue internal reform at a somewhat faster pace than he would in the absence of that engagement. I don't think it's, you know, making a deal with a dictator and allowing him to stay a dictator. I think it's basically a process of engagement in which U.S. strategic concerns are met or addressed, but in which you also create dynamics which are more favorable to reform and to liberalization inside Syria. I don't think it's an either/or proposition.

MR. INDYK: We heard from a Syrian journalist. We'll hear from a Lebanese journalist now. George?

MR. : I'm Palestinian, actually.

MR. INDYK: Palestinian. Do you still want to ask a question?

MR. : Yes. The question is: I'm curious whether you can provide us with a scenario of what happened on the Syrian decision to pull out from Lebanon? Who took the decision—the President, the Old Guard? Were they in together on this? But, really, my real question is: Who in the administration is pushing the administration on this very shortsighted policy vis-à-vis Syria? Is it the neoconservatives? This lovely term everybody uses.

MR. LEVERETT: Let me take the second question first, administration dynamics. I think there's both a push from within and a push from outside. The push from within is coming from—if you want to refer to them generically as neoconservatives, okay. I don't resist that language. I think you're talking about civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, people around Vice President Cheney, who really have believed almost since the beginning of the administration that this was a particular vulnerability of Syria's, that Syria's hegemony in Lebanon was so important to

the Asad regime, that if you could find a way to push on it, this would give you important leverage over the Syrian regime.

I know for a fact—I mean, I know from personal experience that Secretary Rumsfeld believes this very much. He basically believes it from the time that he was President Reagan's Middle East Envoy presiding over the collapse of the first-term Reagan administration's policy in Lebanon and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon. You know, exactly why that's the lesson he learned from that experience was never clear to me, but it is very much the lesson he took from his time as Reagan's Middle East Envoy.

So I think you've had a core of people in the administration who really from the beginning have seen pushing on Lebanon as a way of pushing on Syria. They've been making this argument for a long time, but they, through what I assume is coincidence, what I think is coincidence, basically were able to match up with the external source of pressure, and this is kind of ironic, particularly when you look at the cast of people in the administration, within the administration who are making this argument, their biggest support from outside the administration has come from President Chirac of France.

President Chirac had a very long and close personal friendship and association with Prime Minister Hariri, a lot of people in France who will tell you that Hariri was a significant financial supporter for Chirac's political career. And when Bashar al-Asad began to resist some of Hariri's policy initiatives in Lebanon after Hariri returned as Prime Minister, by the time of the summer of 2004, Chirac was willing to take French policy in a direction that wanted to put pressure on Syria over Lebanon. And

it's really that intersection of neocons in the administration and French policy that gives you UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in the summer of 2004.

Now, I actually thought 1559 was a good idea because it did give us some real leverage over Syria on something that Syrian leadership took as important. My complaint about the way we've used 1559, particularly since Prime Minister Hariri was assassinated, is that we have used it not as a source of leverage to change Syrian behavior on things that really matter to U.S. interests, like the insurgency in Iraq, like support for anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorist groups. We have used it basically as a way of driving Syrian forces out of Lebanon, and that has become the be-all and end-all of our Syrian policy at this point. And I think that's a strategically shallow approach.

MR. INDYK: Okay. Here, please.

MR. LEVERETT: Oh, troop withdrawal, sorry. Every indication I have is that President Asad took the decision to do that.

MR.Steinberg : Let me just say one thing. The same week that [inaudible] was extended, Ben Ali in Tunisia, despite being warned by Secretary Powell, declared himself President for Life in Tunisia. We didn't seem to be bothered by that.

[Laughter.]

MR. INDYK: Please identify yourself.

MR. STEINBERG: Jeff Steinberg with EIR magazine. The second event that I guess is also a big plus for the timing of your book release is the controversy over the appointment of John Bolton to the UN position. And one of the things that I recall was a controversy about a year and a half ago between the CIA and Bolton over a speech

in an intelligence assessment. Are we in another spin cycle on Syria similar to Iraq vis-à-vis intelligence assessments and how they may be used?

MR. LEVERETT: We may be. I hope that people learned some lessons from the debacle of pre-war intelligence on Iraq, but, you know, assuming learning curves is always a little bit dangerous.

Look, to my mind, on Syrian WMD—and I lay this out in the book—I feel very confident—even in a post-Iraq environment, I feel very confident about saying the things that I've said which are consistent with U.S. Government representations about Syria's chemical weapons capabilities and its Scud missile force. I think we have absolutely solid information for making the kinds of statements we make on weaponized CW agent and Scud missiles.

I do not believe the case is there on nuclear, and I don't think there's any evidence there of significance indicating offensive B[iological]W[eapons] capability. I mean, BW is such an inherently murky area because of the dual-use nature of pharmaceutical and biotechnology. You know, lots of people could have offensive BW capabilities, and we wouldn't be able to say with great reliability that they had it. I guess it's theoretically possible the Syrians have it, but I don't know that we really have the evidence to indicate that they have it.

The nuclear stuff, people occasionally will try to say that Syria's, you know, somehow pursuing covertly a nuclear weapons program. After the disclosure of the A.Q. Khan network, there has been a lot of speculation that Syria was somehow a customer of that network. I haven't seen any real evidence of that, and I will just note that as recently as late last year, Mohamed ElBaradei was saying that there is no—you

know, Syria cooperates with the IAEA inspection process, and that there is no evidence of any kind of illicit or covert Syrian nuclear activity.

MR. INDYK: [inaudible].

MR. : [inaudible] . I'd like to thank you very much for your presentation. I just had a question for you. Through your interviews with President Bashar al-Asad, did he give an explanation why isn't he pushing at all towards the internal political reform process? I mean, Syria until now remains to be almost among a few Arab countries which doesn't really have like plurality of newspapers. Does he even consider like limited experience, like Egypt in the late '70s, you know, with a few political parties and a few free press? Thank you.

MR. LEVERETT: Well, I said that President Asad has a kind of gradualist approach to reform. You know, he views this as a process that plays out over many years, I think probably longer than a decade. He also in a way views it as going on in phases, or at least on different levels.

I think in his view economic reform definitely gets primacy, that you need to work on the economy first. Some people have described this as a Chinese model of economic reform. Whether you want to call it the Chinese model or not, I think it's something that he very much believes in, that economic reform gets primacy.

I think the second aspect of reform is social reform, which in his view largely means the attenuation of sectarian identity in Syrian society and the development of civil society in Syria, which basically means organizations, associations, other kinds of fora in which people define their identities in some way other than by religious sect. That's essentially what civil society is about.

And political reform is for him the last part of the reform process, and he's very explicit about saying you don't want to move on that too early; otherwise, you get an outcome like we got in Algeria in 1992.

Now, you know, could he move faster on political reform? Yes, he could. I think it's going to be very interesting to see what is announced at the upcoming Baath Party Congress this June. He laid down a marker in his own speech to the Syrian Parliament on March 5th in connection with Lebanon that this reform—that this Party Congress was going to be an occasion for significant reform announcements. Certainly political cognoscenti in Damascus are looking to this meeting as a potentially important event, whereas some—I mean, perhaps changes in the party law, allowing parties outside the National Progressive Front to form. I mean, I don't know what's going to get announced, but, you know, I think that will be something to look for in June.

MR. INDYK: Unfortunately, we're going to have to bring this session to a close. I apologize to everybody who wanted to ask questions. It being noon, we need to finish up here.

I have a closeout—a McLaughlin-esque closeout question, which is: In ten years' time, will Bashar al-Asad still be President of Syria? And will Syria have a peace treaty with Israel?

MR. LEVERETT: I think the odds are ten years from now, if I had to bet money up or down, I'd bet that Bashar will still be President of Syria. I'm less sure about the peace treaty with Israel.

MR. INDYK: Okay. I want to thank Sy Hersh and James Bennett for participating in this discussion, and especially Flynt for all the hard work you did to produce this on such a timely basis.

Thank you all very much for coming.

[Applause.]

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