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DIALOGUE WITH SYRIA:

OPPORTUNITY OR AMBUSH?

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C O N T E N T S

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Saban Center at Brookings. I think most of you are regulars here so you will know that the protocol is to eat while these gentlemen speak, and so I hope you will enjoy your lunch. Also I am glad to welcome Afif Safieh, the PLO Ambassador. It is good to see you here, and your wife. There is no sighting of the Syrian Ambassador yet, but he was invited.

Today we are going to have somewhat of a discussion, perhaps even a debate, between Joshua Landis, a distinguished academic who is Co-Director of the Center of Peace Studies at the International Program Center, and professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Josh is Princeton, Harvard, and

Swarthmore educated, and has achieved a considerable reputation for his analysis of developments in Syria.

Ammar Abdulhamid is part of our family here at the Saban Center. He is a Nonresident Fellow, having been a Visiting Fellow before that. At that time as a Visiting Fellow he was working in our U.S.-Islamic World Project. He is a novelist, poet, and a dissident who heads up the Tharwa Project, a program designed to focus on the role and situation of minorities throughout the Middle East. And he is also studying this generation of Arab intellectuals, examining the parameters for dialogue between secular and Islamist groups.

So we are very glad to have Ammar and Josh here today. Josh is going to start first and then Ammar will respond, and the question

that we have asked Josh to address is the issue of dialogue with Syria, is that an opportunity or an ambush. Joshua, it is very good to have you here.

MR. LANDIS: It is my pleasure, and it is a real delight to be at Brookings, and I thank both Ammar and I thank you for inviting me here today to speak to you all.

Let me begin by saying it is not rocket science why the United States has to talk with Syria. Israel has made peace with Egypt, it has made peace with Jordan and it has turned out for Israel, and by giving back the land taken in 1967 there has been solid peace. There is no reason why Israel cannot have the same stability and the same peace with Syria. Syria is the key, clearly, to Hizballah and can be very helpful on the Palestinian front. Syria is going to arm Hizballah and is going to

arm Hamas so long as it does not have the Golan, and peace is not arrived at between the two countries.

Why would it do that? It does it for the obvious reason that it needs to make itself stronger, it is the weak power, and in order to fight Israel it has to do it. This circle of violence is going to go on and on, and Syria is not going to stop Hizballah or Hamas or agitating until it gets back the Golan and there is some kind of recognized peace.

Look at 1947. When I was doing research for a dissertation a long time ago I stumbled across Secretary of State Marshall's letter of 1947. The Syrians since early 1946 had been asking the Americans to train the Syrian military, supply them with arms and to rebuild the Syrian military and to take charge of matters, President Quwatli had, and he was

even begging the Americans, the Americans had been putting him off, and finally near the end of 1947 Marshall writes there is going to be war between the Jews and Arabs and we cannot help the Syrians on this issue because we will be caught in the middle of this. Almost immediately the shockwaves went through the Syrian upper command. Adil Aslan, who wanted to be defense minister at the time, said we have to go to the Russians. Where else are we going to get arms? By 1951, Maarouf Libi in the Parliament was calling openly for an alliance with Russia to get our arms from Russia. The Syrians resisted this for a number of years, but it was going to happen very quickly. By 1955, of course, the Syrians already had approached the Russians and America was thinking how to make a coup d'état in Syria, and supported in 1956 the British to

make a coup d'état at Suez, and another one in 1957, the American coup, both of which failed, both of which ruined the pro-American aristocracy, got them arrested and in trouble, and led directly to the union with Egypt in 1958 because the pro-American right had been destroyed by this attempt to force Syria into the Western camp without giving it anything.

We have been enemies with Syria ever since. Syria has clung to the Eastern camp or anybody who is the enemy of America in order to get back this land and to even the balance between Israel. And it is going to remain that way because America has chosen to be friends with Syria's enemies, and when it wasn't Israel, it was Turkey or Iraq. Syria unfortunately is small and it is surrounded by more important countries, and America has always been allied with its neighbors, which

leaves Syria no alternative but to fight this sort of bush warfare that it does.

Let me turn to the second reason why we should talk to Syria, and that is Bashar is actually much stronger than most Americans think he is. Ammar I think has probably shaped the debate in Washington more than anybody else over the Syrian regime by making the comparison when several years ago he asked, Is Bashar Michael Corleone or Fredo Corleone? And he answered, he is Fredo Corleone. I put to you that Fredo Corleone is probably much closer to the White House than he is to Damascus. Bashar turns out not to be Fredo Corleone. He is not a bumbler. He is not the blind eye doctor. People have called him incredibly weak, Robert Satloff [called him] the bumbling eye doctor, the guy who makes all these mistakes, but in fact he has not made all that many mistakes.

He has been with us for 6 years and he has consolidated his power. If you look on the major issues that he has fought over with Bush, he has ended up being more right than President Bush. On Iraq he said, don't do it. It is a mistake. You are going to be occupying, there is going to be resistance, and nobody can say it is illegal. He was right, and Bush was clearly wrong. On Hamas, he clung to Hamas, he gave them a home in Damascus, and he protected them at great cost to Syria. Bush said this is a terrorist gang, you have to throw them out. What happens? They win in elections and Bashar is right. They are responding to something in the Arab street and the Palestinian street that is legitimate in the eyes of the Arab world.

Look at Lebanon. This is obviously where Bashar has miscalculated the most, but

with Hizballah, Washington put a lot of pressure on him to abandon Hizballah and force Hizballah to disarm, and he said, no, I am clinging to Hizballah. Hizballah did very well in the last war. They looked very well positioned to help Syria in Lebanon, and they can certainly stall any progress in Lebanon.

So he has clung to his allies and America has been unable to dislodge him from any of these saying that he is unimportant and we can isolate him. Well, we cannot. He is there. He has gotten rid of the old guard, he has consolidated his hold, and most people said that he was weak because of his fumbling in Lebanon, they said. In fact, Lebanon was not a sign of his weakness. He sacrificed Lebanon in order to get rid and jettison himself of the patronage network that Hariri had built up around the old guard around people like

Khaddam, people like Kanan, Shabi, and the others who represented the threat to him who did not want him to come to power. And he tried to build power through Lahoud, the Lebanese President, and through his own family members who were connected to Lahoud and displace this old guard. That is why he extended Lahoud's presidency, and he gambled on this. He lost. Hariri outmaneuvered him, and then Hariri died. He lost Lebanon. Hariri was killed, and whether Syria was the author of the Hariri murder or not, it makes sense. We can see how it works in this struggle for Lebanon, and everybody thought he has mis-stepped, but he did not, really. He did not plan to lose Lebanon. He was hoping he could reestablish Syria's leadership in Lebanon through Lahoud and through his family members and push aside Kanan and Khaddam and his old Hariri network.

He could not. The Cedar Revolution decided that for him because the Lebanese backed up their leaders and they actually got off their butts for the first time in 20 years and did something.

He lost Lebanon, but he won Syria because he cut out the old guard, and when Kanan was murdered or committed suicide, there have been many people in the American administration who were hoping that Kanan would be the man who would be able to dislodge Bashar. One could read this in many ways, we do not know if Bashar had a hand in this or not, but if he did, it means that he was tougher than most people gave him credit for. He was willing to push people around. He was not the old softie who was just a bumbling eye doctor, and he consolidated his rule in Lebanon. So I think that it is wrong to see

Bashar as someone who is going to fall, who can be overturned by the United States, and the only reason not to talk to Syria is if the United States believes it can overthrow Bashar whether it is through covert means or through isolating him and surrounding him and bringing him down, and United States policy is signed to do that right now. The embargoes, the attempt to starve Syria by embargoing it, isolating it and making it change policy has not worked. For 6 years Bashar has succeeded in keeping the economy going.

The IMF just said that Syria is growing at 4.5 percent. That is not enough for Syria to get out of its problems, but it is enough for it to limp along and survive. It is doing more business with Turkey than it has and it is doing tons of business in Iraq. The gas pipeline from Egypt is being built through

Syria. There are a lot of reasons to think that diminishing oil supplies can be replaced through greater regional trade, and Syria will survive these difficult transitions. America is not going to be able to starve it to death and force a Qaddafi type flip which has been the hoped for thing in the last year. Bashar will muscle through.

What will the United States get out of this policy of isolation and surrounding Israel? They are going to get stalemate in the entire region. We already see that stalemate in Lebanon, and it has been extremely costly to Lebanon. This last spring when all the Lebanese leaders met in their national dialogue, I got into a little fisticuffs with Michael Young on our Internet site and I accused him of getting Lebanon into hot water by being so anti-Syrian that he is only going

to lead Lebanon down this primrose path to real stalemate. This came out when he said, I would prefer to have Lahoud as my president to Aoun. In other words, I do not want national dialogue, I do not want to change the president, and the major object of the national dialogue in March and April was to get rid of Lahoud and try to push the Syrian influence out. Here were the Christian center and right supporting Lahoud wanting him to stay as president because they did not want Aoun because Aoun was allied with Hizballah, was willing to make peace with Syria and was going to break up the March 14th alliance.

So what you had was Lebanon in two extreme camps, March 14 on one hand, and the Syrian allies and the Hizballah people on the other hand. You have paralysis, and that led to the Israeli invasion in the summer, it led

to Hizballah going off the reservation, and that is the way Lebanon will be. We have paralysis amongst the Palestinians, and Syria has displaced Egypt as the real interlocutor with the Palestinians, and now every time we want to do something with the Palestinians, we should be going to Damascus because that is where Hamas is going.

On Iraq, we know that James Baker is going to come around after the elections and ask us to talk to Syria. The Foreign Office is asking us to talk to Syria. Everybody with a brain is asking us to talk to Syria. We have Rumsfeld and a few other people who are keeping their feet against the door and saying don't do it. Why? I guess they think they are going to get lucky and have some kind of regime change in Syria. But it is not going to happen, and we are just going to play out our time here and

Bashar is going to win by playing out two more years and waiting to see who comes up next. That is the game he is going to play, and it is a very effective game. He is going to win because he is going to be there in 5 years when Bush is out, Olmert is out, Chirac is out, and a new team will come up and have to change the name.

Lastly, I would like to say that we have learned over the last 4 years that American attempts to remake the greater Middle East and to bring democracy to the Middle East have largely been a failure. America cannot nation build and it cannot rebuild Syria. What it can do though is to help establish international borders, and the one positive America can do I think to promote democracy in Syria and the entire region is to put to bed these borders that are unestablished between

Lebanon, between Syria, and between the
Palestinians. This is what America is good at.
America helped build the U.N. and supports the
idea of international law guiding foreign
policy, and it should continue with that.
America has inherited the burden of the Sykes-
Picot Treaty Britain put together and everybody
has criticized Britain for doing a bad job with
Sykes-Picot, and maybe it was a bad job, but it
was the job that was laid on the ground and it
is what should be supported by the United
States. The notion that America would get on
the side of not giving the Golan back I think
is very dangerous for the United States for not
helping get a proper Palestinian state.
Helping Israel take more Palestinian land or
keep a big hunk of the Golan is wrong. It will
get America into severe trouble. America
should go ahead and establish those boundaries.

Pushing internationally accepted boundaries on the Golan will do more to bring democracy to Syria than anything else the United States can do like overturning the regime, trying to strangle the economy, impoverishing Syrians. Why? Because it will undermine the basic ideology of the Baath Party, it will turn these conflicts over Lebanon, over borders between Lebanon and between Israel, it will stop them, and the real debate between Israelis and Syrians can begin, and that is, the debate over the real war of ideas can begin after that rather than a land war which has brought us into this cycle of violence. On that note, I turn the floor over to my good friend Ammar.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Thank you, Josh. Thank you for making your point of view very clear, and probably making my job a little easier than I thought.

(Laughter.)

MR. ABDULHAMID: Josh and I have been going at it for quite a while, so we are quite familiar with each other's arguments. We are not saying anything new to each other here, so we are not going to convert each other, but each one of us is going to try to convert some of you at least to our point of view. But I think more importantly, we are at least going to make this debate interesting by looking at things in a somewhat different perspective, because Josh did two things. First, he said that I frame the debate in terms of casting the Corleones one way or another, whether it is Michael or Fredo or some new kind of Corleone we don't know. But he is trying to cast this whole thing in terms of the Arab-Israeli struggle and he is actually proposing that the Golan is the center of the whole thing.

I am convinced that in fact this whole thing about the Assads is the attempt of one very corrupt domestic clique to retain power at any cost, and for that it has embarked on adopting a certain set of policies that have brought it into conflict with the United States and with the international community. The Golan is only one item, and it be traded, it can be had. They have only focused on it in this combative way because of their desire to gain back some much needed and lost legitimacy internally, and that is the only way they can do it at this stage. Always when you are in trouble internally, the best thing to do is to drum up the Israeli card and anti-American sentiments and you can move the street in the desired direction.

I am not against engagement with any regime out there as a way of trying to get out

of a difficult spot. Political engagement is definitely far better than military engagement. But political engagement, very much like military engagement, has certain rules and I do not really see clear rules being established for engaging the Assads or, for that matter, the Iranians because, frankly, you are not going to separate the two. You are talking about an alliance already, so you cannot engage Syria and forget about Iran and think Syria is the only thing we have to deal with right now.

One important rule of political engagement that we should bear in mind and that we should really emphasize here is that when you have a dictatorial clique, a corrupt clique on the other side and you are trying to engage it, you have to make sure that you are getting much more than you are giving, because if you are in fact giving up more than you are taking,

you are really empowering the wrong people and you are creating a problem that is bigger than the one you are trying to resolve, and I will get to that point in a minute.

The fact that Syria and Iran are important is undeniable, but does that mean that the Assads at this stage are engageable, and does that mean that the rules of political engagement that are being discussed are conducive to the desired end which is peace and stability in the Middle East and some tangible progress in the global war on terror? Because the entire context of this whole development right now, the entire concept of the intervention in the Middle East, is the global war on terror. It is not the peace process per se. The peace process is one aspect of it, but it is really the global war on terror. So is engagement with the Assads possible? Is it

conducive? Are the rules that are being proposed right now by Josh and among many, many, many others conducive to actually making headway in that war?

What you have is you have a regime that has supported terror for decades, and the fact that it is on the list of nations supporting terror is not surprising, and it will continue to do so because supporting terror, and I think what Josh has said, they need to support Hamas and they need to support Hizballah because terrorism is one way to make themselves relevant, it is achieving some kind of parity with Israel through terror and this is the only way you can do it. It makes some sense, but it also makes it very problematic because if you are going to end up after saying this country is a terrorist nation, they are supporting Hamas, they are supporting

Hizballah, these two groups are terrorist organizations, and then you end up sitting down with that very regime, it is going to really send a very strange message with regard to the fight against terrorism.

An argument has been made also that you really need a strong Syria, you need to give up the Golan, you need to have the Assads because they can guarantee some stability in Lebanon because, the argument that Josh has not made but it is being made in general, that also they can cooperate with Iraq, you need them, perhaps the Baker recommendations if the linkages that we had are any indication arguing that point that you really need to engage the Syrians, not to mention the Iranians, to get some kind of progress in Iraq. So you are actually going to end up having the Assads not only empowered internally vis-à-vis their

people as a result of this engagement, but you are going to have to kill the Hariri investigation of course because it would implicate them at any given moment, so that is also one aspect that you have to give them, you killed the Hariri investigation, you destroyed the March 14th alliance, you broke up the current government in Lebanon, you empowered Hizballah, you empowered the Assads in Lebanon again. So the engagement and the rules that are being suggested right now is going to give the Assads not only Syria back and is going to legitimate their position, but it is going to give them Lebanon back and it is going to indulge them more and more in Iraqi affairs, and it is going to indulge them more and more in trying to play some kind of a patronage over the Palestinians and involve them in the territories on their side as well. So you are

really empowering them to a great extent.

I remember reading the latest post on Joshua's blog where he said that by giving the Golan back in fact to Syria you will be also making sure that the one-party rule system in Syria is challenged internally, because the Assads will have to confront the eventuality or inevitability or the need for internal reforms. But the problem is you are not only going to be giving the Golan back to Syria, you are giving Syria also another crisis which is that they have to do something with Hizballah, they have to help in Iraq. So on the one hand you are giving them the Golan, on the other hand you are giving them another external crisis, another excuse to really not look at the whole concept of internal reform and to tell their people we cannot discuss these issues right now, we have to help in Iraq, this is part of

the commitment that we have with the international community.

So it is really dubious that in a sense that engagement with the Assads is going to be in any way conducive to democratization or to the end of one-party rule. The fact is, and no matter how much you try to sugarcoat it, what you are being asked here is that you are going to forget about this whole democracy thing, you are going to forget about this human rights thing, screw these people, screw the liberals, screw the democrats, sit down with the Assads and hammer a deal that is at least seemingly good from the point of view of security for the United States. I am all for realpolitik, but I think there is a problem in this picture. Take it from this perspective. One administration took out the Taliban, took out Saddam, two main rivals of the Iranian

regime. Now the new approach, the more reasonable approach of engagement is suggesting to empower the Assads and to give them not only Syria, but also throw in Lebanon for good measure and add in Iraq or at least some pieces of it, or at least give them a sphere of influence there, and in the West Bank and the occupied territories you also need the Assads' support in this regard. So you are really empowering an ally of the Iranian regime and you are empowering it in such a manner that they are growing even outside their borders, to be honest with you, in that their influence is once again reestablished outside their borders.

At the same time with the Assads you are going to have to forego, this is a necessity and everybody knows it, the Hariri investigation. So you are also really causing the implosion of the situation in Lebanon and

you are propping up Hizballah and you are making sure that their divine victory is translated into a political victory as well. So not only have you destroyed the rivals of Iran, but now you are propping up its allies, and I really have to ask, are you setting a task for yourselves to recreate the Persian empire or are you masochists? Because, frankly, one approach has taken Iran's rivals out, another approach has been propping up the Iranian supporters in the region, and you really have to wonder what is going on here.

I think this kind of haphazard approach to confrontation I agree was disastrous, but it cannot be substituted by a haphazard approach to engagement. Either you have clear, more sensible rules of engagement, or, frankly, the engagement that is being proposed right now is going to screw us up, all

of us.

The Assads also cannot be because of their sectarian character, they are not secular, they are sectarian, this is something you really have to understand very clearly, by virtue of that they cannot embark on any kind of secularization in the country. In fact, under the Assads, the secular character of Syria has been eroded constantly, and this is something Josh wrote about in fact. You get, therefore, to a situation where you realize that the Assads have already had a problem with the Islamists in the 1980s and the only way for them to get out of it was to crack down heavily and kill thousands and thousands of people in Hama, and that is a very existential crisis for them, but they got away with it.

Ever since that time, the tragedy vis-à-vis the Islamists that was adopted by the

Assads was to export their terror outside, either to spread the kind of traditional Sufi Islamism that is a very unenlightened version, that is politically quietest, or when they finally realize that there will always be some political radical Islamism involved in the Sunni community, export it outside. Let them go elsewhere. Let them go to Afghanistan. Let them go to Southeast Asia. Let them go elsewhere, and recently, let them go to Iraq. And I think this kind of policy, even if you give them the Golan back, if you give them whatever back, they are going to continue to pursue that policy. They are going to continue to look the other way while terrorist groups operate in the country because they cannot afford to risk a direct confrontation with the Islamists. So long as the Islamists are not going to initiate that confrontation with the

Assad regime, the Assad regime is not going to initiate a confrontation with the Islamists. They are not going to fight that war on anyone's behalf simply because they already have a lot of problems with legitimacy because of their minority and sectarian background. So if you expect that they are going to develop any kind of assistance in the war on terror, the closest they came to giving assistance is when they tortured a few Canadian citizens and got nothing out of them because there was nothing to be gotten out of them. That is the only cooperation they can give in this regard.

So, back to point one, you really have to wonder what is it that you are taking out of this engagement that is being proposed. They are not going to give you anything in Iraq. They cannot help in the war on terror. Even Bashar in the BBC interview, by the way,

he said that giving the Golan back is not going to mean that regional stability is established because he knows that there are other problems on the table and he cannot help in them, and in fact, he will have to make them worse because he needs an external crisis.

In a sense then, by sitting down with the Assad regime you are going to address all of their problems, you are going to resolve everything they want, but you are not going to get anything out of that, not cooperation in Iraq, not cooperation in Lebanon, not containment of Iran, no split between Iran and Syria, in fact, if anything, I think what you are going to find out is that as the talks drag on and on and the Iranians continue to have these official public visits to Syria and coordinate, the Iranians are going to emerge as peacemakers at least in the international

community. They are going to give off the impression of being very reasonable and they are not interfering in the talks and they are in fact sponsoring them from afar, and they might actually cause a split between America and its allies vis-à-vis Iran rather than the other way around.

I think at this stage, therefore, the engagement that is being talked about has not been thoroughly thought out, and if you want to have that engagement, you really need to rethink the current format that is being proposed for that, and people have to take under consideration that on the one hand when you talk to the Syrians it is not only the Syrians anymore, the Iranians are at the table directly or indirectly, and you have on one side you have the Syrian and Iranian regimes who are coordinating everything at this stage,

but on your side you have a coalition of the unwilling, you do not have Russia and China even in the picture, they are not there, the Europeans are of 25 to 30 minds about everything, the Americans are of two minds about everything and not necessarily always enlightened minds, as we have seen. It is either blind confrontation or blind engagement. I do not really see any more reasonable approach being put on the table.

So we really need to think very carefully about the kind of approach that we want to have to engaging the Assads. We really need to realize from the very beginning that this is an indirect engagement with the Iranians as well, so we might as well engage all sides, but we have to give or draw a better vision for what we want to achieve and we have to have the initial conditions for beginning

the engagement worked out more thoroughly. And we really have to realize at the same time that the timing is important. If you do it now, we kill the Hariri investigation. Do you want to do that? Some people will say, fine, now the Assads will be in a compromising mood because they want us to help them take this whole thing off the table. I am not really happy of the concept of interfering directly with an international legal process that is for the first time taking place in the region. I know people have been complaining about American double-standards for a long time and many people say why should the U.S. and the international community push on the application of the resolutions with regard to Syria, but they do not push equally hard on the implementation of resolutions related to the Arab-Israeli struggle and to Israel itself. If

we are going to address this imbalance, I would say push the Israelis, but do not do it by ignoring the resolutions pertaining to Syria, and therefore throw the entire concept of international legitimacy out of the window.

If you want to sit down and talk, I think really probably the better time is to actually wait it out and see what is going to happen with this international ongoing investigation. That would be a recommendation at least. If you are going to ignore that recommendation and people are going to be willing to say, sorry, he was a nice guy, but he died, he just keeled over and died, and it is okay, we need to talk to the Syrians, there is much more at stake here, then do not make it worse by saying democracy is out, and do not make it worse by engaging only the regimes. For the first time in your life you really have

to understand that this is almost a backing down on everything that has been done in the last 6 years in all the talks about democracy, and believe me, every time you back down, every time, Joshua went through an historical analysis and told you we did not talk to the Syrians ever and that is why they are anti-American, but I can tell you one incident that comes to mind is in 1978-1979 the CIA was trying to foment rebellion in the Qashqai tribesmen in Iran vis-à-vis the Islamic Republican Guard, and at one point they saw the wisdom that, no, we are not going to do it and they pulled back and they left the Qashqai leaders to the mercy of the Islamic Republican Guard. To this very day the Qashqai talk about this and they are definitely not friends of the United States anymore, many of them. The memory of that betrayal stays on.

So right now you turn your back on this entire democratization rhetoric and you have lost, frankly, the last group of people out there in the region as a whole who still think friendly to the United States, who still think that we can benefit from a good relationship with the United States. Every act of betrayal, every backing down on a group that you supported in the region is going to come back to haunt you in the near future or in the distant future.

You do not have any more friends in the region. You cannot just go ahead and say because we want to contain a situation in the next year or two, we do not care what is going to happen in 10 years, if we simply bet on the last vestiges of technocratic liberals out there, the end result is going to be a 30- to 40-year time when the regimes are going to get

more authoritarian, and the societies more extremist. So you really have to be very careful and weigh the advantages and disadvantages more reasonably and in the longer-run, not just think in terms of one year or two years.

If you want to approach, you have a regional process, and in that regional process, democracy and human rights should be on the table, and when you engage the Iranians and the Syrian regimes' representatives, all the opposition of civil society has to be present, or at least you engage both sides and you make sure that the issue of internal reforms are not forgotten because if they are forgotten, you are empowering regimes that are going to give you more of the same in the future. We have seen what happened when you dealt with an authoritarian regime all through the 1950s,

1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Many people want to approach this also as if the Assads had not been approached before. One thing about the engageability of the Assads is that we have already tried engagement in the 1990s, it is not that America has not tried it, and it did not go anywhere. There is enough blame to go around, but there is some of that blame on the Assads themselves, and you have to think, are they engageable, and especially now with Bashar coming to power? And I am not even going to elaborate on whether he is a moron or a genius, because I really think he is a moron, but the problem with that is we have several Assads, not one Assad, and right now the foreign policy of Syria is being charted in Tehran. So if he appears to be slightly intelligent it is because he is dealing with and listening to much more savvy

people when it comes down to the political game, but it is not because he is not moronic. In fact, if he had not been moronic, he would not be in this position right now, he would be one of America's best allies in the region.

So I will put therefore to you by way of concluding that in terms of engaging the Assads, you cannot deal separately with them and in isolation with them and take it out of context and forget about the implication for the region as a whole and for the global war on terror as a whole. There is something very serious going on in the region and the war on terror is a long war. You have to reconcile yourself to that as well, and if you do not adopt policies that are more carefully studied and approached, we are going to end up finding ourselves, one, screwed by policies of confrontation without a vision, and two,

screwed by policies of engagement without a vision.

I am tired of seeing this kind of seesaw happening in the Middle East. The Europeans tried to engage the Assads through the Barcelona Accord and Bashar had 4 years to make up his mind on that, and there was no WMD clause at that time in the accord and he could not make up his mind and sign onto this accord. The Europeans gave him a big, huge carrot and he did not take it. He has problems, and he did not address or resolve any of these problems yet.

That is where we are right now. We are with a regime that we clearly have a history of trying to engage and have failed, we are with a regime that clearly supports terror, we are talking about and considering a regime within the context of the global war on terror

and having already seen it entering into a long-standing alliance with Iran and we have already seen the danger of that alliance in the last few months especially in Iran raising its ugly head and we can see that they can actually do some harm, and you are actually proposing a kind of engagement that will only strengthen that alliance. And I don't know, but I find that, to be honest with you, to be very hard to take simply because people focus on one issue and take it out of context.

I think it is not just a regional approach in the Middle East. To be honest with you, I think we need a new Versailles and Malta Conference and a new arrangement for the entire global order because so far no one has even done it, but that is such a big dream, I am not even going to elaborate on that. But at least if we are not going to go after that big dream

of actually trying to get everyone on board between the superpowers, because I think this Cold War is not finished yet, it just got decentralized and we are still feeling the effects of that in the region. The least we can do is to come up with a regional vision that at least the Europeans and Americans or NATO can agree on so we can pursue whatever policies in the Middle East, be they confrontational or political engagement, with much more clarity and sobriety than we see right now. Thank you.

MR. INDYK: Thank you, Ammar. I think that we have been treated to two very clear and coherent arguments of what is a very complicated situation. I am going to hand over the chair to Tamara Wittes, the head of our Democracy and Development Project, because unfortunately I am going to have to run to a

meeting that has been rescheduled. But I wanted to start by perhaps asking Josh to respond in particular to Ammar's point that if we are going to engage, we should engage with a vision. The question is, what is the vision if you are arguing for engagement, because the challenge with the Syrians is that if you have them outside the tent as you argue, they are going to be the spoiler, but if you have them inside the tent, they want a role that would make them a spoiler as well, they want to be dominant in their own sphere of influence, certainly in Lebanon, and over the Palestinians. So how do you deal with that?

We faced the problem as Ammar said in the 1990s where the Clinton Administration was ready to concede that the Syrians would be dominant in Lebanon, would have the Golan Heights back, we have had four Israeli Prime

Ministers to make them that offer, but the price was they had to confront Hizballah and Palestinian rejectionist groups and shut them down, but in return they would have had essentially not just the Golan, but dominance in the Levant, and they did not accept that deal. We can argue about what the cause of it was, but fundamentally that price is something that I think Ammar is saying that we should not be interested in offering them now, and I am certain that many Lebanese would agree with that proposition.

So the question is, if you are going to engage them, what is a reasonable price for this engagement? What is the prospect that you would actually be able to find some common ground between our interests and values and Syrian interests?

MR. LANDIS: Before addressing that

directly, let me just respond to two things that Ammar brought up. One is the minority argument, and the other is the stab in the back to the democracy group argument. I have been hearing the Alawites cannot make peace argument for at least 20 years now, and I do not think there is much truth in that. They have asked to make peace over and over again. I think that the best thing to do would be to establish these borders. Radicalism is not being encouraged by the fact that there is a minority regime in Syria. It makes the situation difficult, there is no doubt about it, but radicalism is being maintained by the fact that the borders have not been solved and that America has sided with Israel in order to try to get more than the international borders, and this makes people angry throughout the region and it is why somebody like Bashar can be very

popular for being anti-American, and America can take that away from him so easily by settling these international borders. His father and he, both Alawites, have wanted this. They want, of course, a big price which is the 1967 borders, and that is a difficult thing for Israel to do.

The other question is the stab in the back. I think the only two secular democrats in Syria, Gadry and Ammar Abdulhamid, would have been stabbed in the back by the United States if they helped get the Golan back for Syria. There is no dialogue between America and Syrian democrats. I know that. In Damascus last year when Lewani (phonetic) got arrested who was a small-time Syrian secularist who people had not heard of, but he came over here, and David knows more about this than I do because he met with him at the Defense

Department and other people met with State and NSC and the White House, and they raised this guy up at a time when they were looking for some sort of regime change or options in Syria, and he got arrested promptly. This led Bush to mention his name and other Syrian opposition people for the first time that anybody can remember that a President mentioned Syrian opposition people, and said that Syria had to start importing democracy.

The next day, Rice came out and reiterated this and said that we are going to support the Syrians in their long struggle for greater pluralism or something a little bit vague. The next day after that speech by Rice which was the first time America had said anything about democracy in Syria and had laid down any track record of demanding democracy in Syria so that they had not make this

relationship where they were going to stab the Syrians in the back, I received a call from the embassy asking me if I could set up a conversation with Riad al-Turk with the embassy, do I know his phone number, could I call? This is Riad al-Turk who is the biggest guy in all of Syria and they did not know his phone number and they did not know how to get in touch with him. And not only that, they asked for names of other people who they should talk to like Yassin who they had never talked to, Harzallah who is the other great guy.

So I called these guys and asked would you meet with the embassy people. This is the first time that the embassy people were meeting with any of these people. They are not going to be stabbing anybody in the back because there was never any dialogue with the Syrian opposition.

So there is no stab in the back theory here -- and these other guys did not want to talk with America. They do not like America. They want the Golan back. The biggest thing you could do for the Syrian democrats and the Syrian opposition is to give the Golan back to Syria. Then these guys can get some credibility. When they try to be close to America and American ideas like secularism and democracy and all the things we know and love, they would not have to be embarrassed, because as it is now, Bashar turns around and he said all those people who are trying to run interference here are anti-Syrian, and the trouble is that the Syrians believe this. They loved Hizballah this summer. They loved it. They love Nasrallah. My mother-in-law called me in the middle of this thing and she said, what about that

Nasrallah. I want to join Hizballah, but I am frightened they will not accept me because I am too old and fat, and this was the reaction of every Syrian, or 90 percent of them. The Christians were more anxious by this, but even amongst the Christian population he was popular.

That is because they want to give it to the Israelis, and they want to give it to the Israelis because they are occupying land. The moment that changes, the Syrians want to do business. The Syrians want to get out. There will be tons of pressure on Bashar to give up the radicalism, to give up the one-party system, to give up Baathism, and he has already given it up. More than any president, Bashar has given up Baathism. He has gone to Turkey, he gave away the Hatay, he went to Jordan and he gave them a slip of land that he had taken

in 1970 from the Jordanians. He has built a big sand berm with Iraq. All the borders have been consolidated except for Lebanon and Israel, and he is keeping those. He will not consolidate the Lebanese border, although he says he will do it in theory, but only once the Israeli situation is solved. You are not selling Lebanon down the road. You do not have to give him Lebanon if you make peace.

In fact, I think it is the opposite. I think Lebanon will get independence if you make peace. The reason he can rationalize his interfering in Lebanon and that can sell with Hizballah and with a lot of other people is that they have to do this until the Golan comes back. Once you take away that Golan issue, he cannot supply Hizballah with arms in the same way. Hizballah cannot stand up in front of every Lebanese and say I am doing the national

duty of resistance by taking those Syrian arms and Iranian arms. It will steal the thunder out of Hizballah. And Hizballah right now is sitting I think at a crossroads trying to decide do we go and rebuild and go back to war with Israel somehow, or do we join the Lebanese state and try to take over the Lebanese state somehow and get as much influence as we possibly can? And I do not know if Hizballah has decided which way it is going to go, but this is the moment it seems to me to push Hizballah in the direction of integration in the Lebanese state and to get Syria on the side of the United States in confirming that and not pushing for Hizballah people to rearm by engaging Syria.

You have said that Syria wants to dominate the entire greater Syria, and it is true, since 1948, Syria's entire role in Israel

was to send troops in there to keep the Hashemine Husseini or to keep the Jordanians from controlling the Palestinian side of the thing. They want influence in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Iraq, wherever they can get it. They are not unlike America, Russia or any other country in the world that wants as much influence as it could possibly get.

By making peace in the region and settling this Golan issue, I think that Syria's influence will be diminished ultimately. It will be changed, diminished is perhaps the wrong word, because it will move away from the radicalism of the Arab issue which is now Bashar's issue and which democrats cannot fight him on. And it will change the whole dynamic of regional debate. The Lebanese are not going to win against Syria the way it is now, the March 14th crowd. They cannot win. They just

lost big time in this last summer war. They are weak and they are just going to sit there. There is going to be no economic reform. There is just going to be limping along into infinity. And the Palestinian issue is the same way. We have got to get those behind us, and the only way to do it is to engage Syria.

You say what are the rules of the game. You say we offered Syria a good deal, Syria says we believed you were going to give us back the whole Golan Heights and Israel did not want to do it. I cannot say to you which we should do. Should we give them back the extra 10 meters up to the water, and to a certain extent the issue is about water. The issue is about can Israel give up the entire Golan which is a very painful thing to do, but I think that ultimately if that is going to bring peace to the region, Israel is going to

have to do it, and America should get behind that issue and then it will do itself a favor because it will de-radicalize the entire region once that happens.

That will not be the quick fix. There will be the Palestinian issue, there will still be Syrian influence in Lebanon, but that is always going to be there, and America cannot get rid of it. But already Syrian troops are no longer there. Its influences because of Hizballah by -- that conflict, I think that Hizballah will be forced to join into the Lebanese political system and give up its military wing. That is the only hope for its giving up, because as long as Syria is at war with Israel, Hizballah will have an excuse to keep their military wing and not to fully engage.

MS. WITTES: Thanks, Josh. I have

three people in the queue so far, and those of you who would like to join in the discussion just make yourselves known. If you are on this side of the table, you may need to lean forward a little bit so I can see you just because of the angles.

MR. MACK: David Mack of the Middle East Institute. Ammar, you are so articulate. It almost reminds me of some of my pals in the Iraqi opposition who I started to see in 1991. But leaving that aside, it does seem to me that in your very articulate presentation you had this continuing leitmotif of Iran and Syria being these two twins, your own sort of axis of evil out there. It is calculated to appeal to a certain prejudice recalled too commonly in Washington. But I would --

(tape interruption)

MR. MACK: (In progress) -- really

ought to ask yourself if there is not a fallacious core to this, which is the idea that they are allied, therefore they have common interests. I would agree that both of them as very authoritarian regimes have a common interest in regime survival, but just look at that one common interest. Has Iran ever been threatened by developments in the Arab-Israeli peace process, has the Iranian regime been threatened by that? Whereas we all understand that the developments in the Arab-Israeli peace process that exclude a Golan settlement would be threatening to a Syrian regime.

Secondly, Lebanon. We could sit here all day listing the developments in Lebanon, ranging all the way from true democratic elections to the Tawhid and other Salafi jihadis promoting attacks across the border into Syria. You can think of all kinds of ways

in which developments in Lebanon can threaten the survival of the Syrian regime, and it is really hard for me think of ways in which developments in Lebanon can threaten the Iranian regime.

In Iraq, I think that the plausible outcomes, most of them, maybe all of them, contain some serious potential threats to the Syrian regime, whereas, unfortunately, I do not think that the plausible outcomes in Iraq are going to be threatening to the Iranian regime.

So with all of those divergences in interests, do you really believe that American diplomats are so incompetent that they could not split the Syrians and Iranians on some key interests to us? I am not saying key interests to Syrians democrats like yourself. I am saying key interests to the United States.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Very articulate as

well the question was put, but the problem is that the Iranians have beaten to you to being much smarter and savvy diplomats already with the Assads, and this is where we get into the argument of Bashar being in control. Well, he is not. There is a family that has been in control. There are problems within this family, and there are people baiting each other. I am not even sure where Asif begins and Bashar ends, and when Bashar begins and Asif ends or Maher comes into the picture. There is a family affair and we have a clique here, and that family has created different sorts of alliances with the Iranians. The Iranians at this stage really infiltrate the security apparatus in Syria, they manipulate the Assads against each other, and they have a way of bringing down the regime or making it stand, and this is something also that the

people do not realize or do not want to acknowledge.

So the reality is that the Assads, even if they want to, they cannot turn against the Iranians because the Iranians have beaten you. They have played their diplomatic game, they have infiltrated the Syrians in ways that you cannot do, so it does not matter how smart the diplomats are. The Syrians and the Iranians are not going to break. And this is a 25-year alliance, by the way. This is not something that was concocted yesterday. This is something that has been there for 25 years. It has been reaffirmed and reestablished and reinvigorated in the last year or so, but it has been there for a long time, and throughout this period the Iranians were playing a very important role in Syria and they have been intruding into different aspects of the Syrian

decision-making process. And in the last year in particular, ever since this alliance came clearly to the public during President Ahmadinejad's visit to Syria, I think the headway that the Iranians have made in infiltrating the various aspects of the decision-making process of the Assad family and the security apparatus have been amazing, and this is not something that you can just neglect. Syria felt so empowered by that alliance, they were willing to snub the Egyptians and the Saudis and everybody, the entire Arab connection. And their only regional ally right now is Iran, and you are asking them and you are thinking that somehow you are going to go and you are going to be able to pry them apart? What are you going to give them? What sort of exchanges? How can you protect them from even each other if the

Iranians begin sort of tinkering and playing the punishment game? Do you really think that they will be able also on their own and without Iranian support to disarm Hizballah, if that is also something that you want the Syrians to accomplish? I do not think they have that capability, to be honest with you.

So it is not therefore about how smart you are, it is about how late you are entering this game and trying to react to this emerging alliance that has been there and has been reinvigorated already. A fact has been created on the ground and you cannot undo it in this particular way. Therefore, if you really want to engage, and I would say I am not against engagement, but provide a vision and engage both, because in this way you are approaching a host of regional problems and if indeed what you are interested in is, as Joshua

said, stability in the region and peace and you really need to finalize the borders, then engage both because there is definitely a border issue still stuck between Iran and Iraq at this stage that has not been resolved and definitely Iran has a certain influence that extends beyond its territories and you really need to address that. Some of them are legitimate, every country seeks to have interests, but the problem is you have to look at the overall picture of what has already been accomplished in terms of the relationship with Iran and in terms of the relationship with Syria. You have empowered Iran over the last few years and now you are going to empower the Assads by this kind of engagement, and that assumes too much in my opinion and puts the burden on you or on some kind of a smart diplomacy working when there is no smart vision

to compensate and to compete it.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. I have right now six people in the queue and about 10 minutes. So I am going to ask you all to be extremely disciplined in putting forward your questions, and sadly, I am going to have to ask the two of you to be extremely disciplined in your responses, and we are going to take two at a time. So the next two will be Mark Ginsberg and Andrew Cochran.

MR. GINSBERG: Thank you. Joshua, it is intriguing to listen to you making your proposal because it harkens me back to Warren Christopher's book. Just for the sake of seeing Condoleezza Rice tortured, I would love to see her fly regularly back to Damascus and go through what Warren Christopher went through. It is well deserved, I think.

With that said, I am curious from

both of you, by the way, let me preface by saying I am indeed as much as I find this regime distasteful and I have written about it extensively how distasteful I consider it, that it is important to engage. But given the consequences of Nasrallah possibly becoming the leader of Lebanon and the consequences of a disintegration of Iraq, how do you surmise in the end that the regime in Syria views both events, and if you can elaborate a little bit further on David's point on Iraq and Nasrallah potentially becoming leader of Lebanon.

MR. COCHRAN: Andrew Cochran of the Counterterrorism Blog. My question is more local and more direct and builds on what happened last week. I just want to say it is very important for the world and especially the United States to have a growing cadre of young, intelligent, vibrant, moderate leaders from the

Arab community. We need them desperately. So last week when the Reform Party in Syria charged that you are a Muslim Brotherhood figure, I was intrigued by that. So David Schenker and I undertook some posts on the Counterterrorism Blog and did some research, and I came to the conclusion that that charge is at least premature and either should be supported or recanted, and I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt.

So my question to be direct is you are opening something called the Office of the Tharwa Project here in Washington. Can you commit to a level of transparency in the operations and the sources and the use of funds that will settle any remaining doubt in anybody's mind and also help add to your credibility here in the future, because I hope you succeed in that measure. That is my

question.

MR. LANDIS: David Mack, I think your point to both of these things is that Syria and Iran are going to differ on Iraq. They have had a unity of purpose there ever since Saddam came to power and has been a powerful force in the Middle East. Now that he has imploded, they have many differences. America still brings them together because America is the force they both want to get out of Iraq, and they are going to cooperate to do that.

Once America's power is gone and they are sitting in their bases twiddling their thumbs and Iraq is in flames, they are going to differ over what happens. Already the Sunni part of Iraq is becoming Syrian in a sense, in a sense that they are sending their kids to university in Syria, they are sending their wives and their children to get health care in

Syria, all the people from Anbar Province, they have no state and nobody to take care of them in Iraq, and they are going to Syria and whether they like it or not, Syrians are beginning to service them and the Iraqis are all over that country and the Syrians are upset about it, but Bashar has to go ahead with it for sentimental reasons, for tribal reasons in the Eastern situation, and for strategic reasons, and that is going to put them at loggerheads with the Shiites and with Iran.

He has supported Muqtada Sadr and others who have been for Iraqi nationalism, and he will continue that because that is what he wants more than anything else. He does not want the division of Iraq, and it looks like we are moving toward some kind of division of Iraq whether we like it or not, and that is going to put him at loggerheads eventually with the

Iranians once that happens because he is going to have to choose between Sunnis and Shiites which he does not want to do.

That is going to bring in Saudi Arabia. You said that he does not have any allies in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have kept -- with Syria because they know they are going to be marching to Damascus in the next year or two asking the Syrians to help them with the Sunnis there and to help them against the Shiites and the Iranians. And they are going to be with their hats out just like America is going to be asking for Syrian help to counter the Iranians and Syria is going to I bet be very tempted to giving it, and they are going to play it down the middle and they are going to benefit from being both Iran's ally and for mediating with the Saudis through the Sunnis there. And I think that is what we

are going to see, and I do not think it makes much difference whether America goes to Syria or not. Syria is going to be in the driver's seat within a year or two when Iraq implodes, and America can be sitting here thinking we want to talk, we don't want to talk, we do not want to stab the democrats in the back, it is not America's game anymore. Syria is doing fine, it is with Russia, it is with China, it is with Iran, it has tons of allies, and Turkey is now Syria's best friend, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt are going to come back because they are going to need Syria. And America can just sit and say we don't want them, I don't like them, they are bad guys and all this kind of stuff, but it is really immaterial. America is not going to be running the Middle East in the next few years. We might save Lebanon from the Syrians or something like that or keep them in

their -- but that is the way I see it.

I know we can turn our noses up about dealing with this hateful regime, but they are going to be there, they are going to be powerful, and the Syrians, Saudis and the Egyptians are going to be going to them, and the Turks already are, and that is the way I see it. So we do not like them. Big deal. We can stay in Washington. I think that is the way it is going to be.

MS. WITTES: Thanks, Josh.

MR. ABDULHAMID: Just a quick reply to that. First of all, I do not really see that the Iranians and the Syrians are going to necessarily compete because the Syrians support the Sunnis and the Iranians support the Shi'ah in Iraq. I think if anything they can in fact manage things to their countries' and their alliance's ends. I think they can coordinate

and in fact play the Sunnis and the local Shi'ah against each other because the Shi'ah in Iraq are really not pro-Iranian anyway, so they would need some measure of being challenged and the best people to challenge them would be the Sunnis in Iraq supported by the Syrians. So in a sense if Iran wants to have control over Shi'ah affairs in Iraq, they need to make them feel threatened and they need the Shia to be pushed around one way or another and the Syrians can coordinate and deliver that to them by a smart use of Sunni terrorism. So I do not really see therefore that this is going to be a competition.

And like it or not, Saudi Arabia might actually be just -- after all. They have not only met with Khaddam recently and Bayanouni, but they are about to meet or some people say they have already met with Rifaat

al-Assad, so the reality is they are beginning to consider options.

So this is something that we have to take under consideration, that there is regional competition going on, and I did not call it the Shi'ah Crescent because this is not necessarily so, but it is the usual competition, the Iranian-Saudi competition, the Arab-Persian competition being played out between two large countries with a lot of oil and a lot of ambition. And we have not even said the nuclear word about Iran which is very interesting, but this is one of those issues that is definitely out there and this whole stalling is one way or another related to Iranian nuclear ambitions in this regard.

With regard to your question on Tharwa, first of all, let me say that Farid's accusations were not premature. They were too

late. I was an Islamist. I was an active Islamist and right here in the United States in Los Angeles, and I was preaching fire and brimstone, but I was never actually affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. They were too mild for my taste, you see? I was a Talibanist, I was a mujahideen-type Islamist. Right now I am an atheistic, heretical, blasphemous, libertine, libertarian, liberal novelist. If anything, I think there are a lot of Islamists who would like to see me dead instead of spreading my venomous thoughts into the youthful minds of many people around the region. So in that sense, as I said, the accusations are too late.

With regard to Tharwa, actually, the funding is from MEPI, so it is MEPI funding, it is government funding, and we have to be whether we like it or not, believe me, the

requirements about being responsible for the funding are humongous. So transparency is ensured due to government bureaucracy, and of course, the inefficiency of the organization is all but ensured due to government bureaucracy.

(Laughter.)

MR. ABDULHAMID: The National Salvation Front's office is something that I am advising on, but I will not open it myself because of my commitment to Tharwa. I am a political activist really by default. I prefer the most the development aspect of the Tharwa Project, and I will give 90 percent of my time to it. I am trying to wiggle out slowly, slowly from this political quagmire that I find myself involved in. But I am an adviser to the National Salvation Front, and I am a founding member of the National Salvation Front. I have been responsible for the contacts of the

National Salvation Front with the administration and they have already had official contacts and we will continue to have official contacts. I am authorized to say that. The office will be opening soon. I do not know who will end up directing it. All I can tell you is I am not going to end up directing it, and the funding is going to be internal funding to the NSF and whatever organization that will end up finally being established here, a charity or whatever, will be registered here and will have to have the reporting requirements of the usual tax bureaucracy involved in this matter. So transparency is ensured by that as well.

The funding will not be coming from Muslim Brotherhood sources, that is for sure. They do not have really the kind of money and funding for that. It is going to be coming

from the more liberal types of independent businessmen who are members of the Front, they are the ones who are going to sponsor it, and most of them reside here in the United States and are U.S. citizens. So this is how this whole situation is going to be addressed.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. We are already at 2 o'clock by my watch, but there are a number of people who I would be loathe not to hear from before we depart. So what I am going to do is ask Paul Salem, Dave Pollack, Gary, and Dave Schenker to each briefly provide your comment or question and then two brief closing comments from you, and those of you who need to leave, please feel free to do so.

MR. SALEM: Paul Salem from the new Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. I would certainly agree that, yes, giving back the Golan Heights would certainly be a great thing

and engaging with the Syrians and engaging with all players whether they are friends or enemies is just basic foreign policy. But I do also think that in the big picture in general, Iran, as I think I might have mentioned, and Syria generally are probably going to benefit from a recalibration of the balance of power, and as you yourself said, Josh, the U.S. is not going to be running the region and there is a lot of stuff that is still going to come out in the wash in the next few years. And I do not think any major progress on the peace process or the Golan is very realistic. It would be great if it happened, and I would agree with all of that.

I want to comment about Lebanon itself. I think contrary to perhaps what is happening in Iraq and other places, certainly Syria has declined in Lebanon in general, and

there is something to consolidate there and there is something to pay attention to, and that is a very short-term immediate concern, that the overall panning out of the region is a much complicated and long-term process, and there are two or three key elements that one needs to be aware of, and you as people who write on Syria and so on and the United States need to put some focus on.

One is the Hariri investigation itself that Ammar so correctly pointed out. That is the thing that is coming down fastest down the highway, and that is something that is of an existential nature for the Syrian regime, and it is also a great threat to the stability of the Syrian-Lebanese relationship. Neither option is viable. Neither the option of saying we will stop the investigation, it will not be acceptable in Lebanon, it is even hard to do, a

very complex thing and certainly not a favorable thing to do. Nor is in a sense letting the investigation go without attendant politics of the after effects of such an investigation can that be left just to play out freely because that immediately translates into sort of a blind regime change in Syria which Syria will preempt by imploding or exploding Lebanon in the next few weeks or the next few months.

What I mean here is that this investigation and its political effects have to be put on the front burner perhaps behind the scenes, but that is the quickest thing that is coming down the highway, and that is what is causing most of the tension inside Lebanon and we might not survive until the end of December if something is not addressed there. I do think there is the possibility of the

investigation continuing and yet it being cushioned politically that it would not necessarily bring down the entire regime, but there would be at some point, I am not comparing it exactly to the Libyan example, but there was a similar legal political process, there needs to be some attention to that there. Syria has withdrawn from Lebanon, it has accepted that. The investigation is ongoing. Hizballah has committed to the investigation. We also have U.N. Resolution 1701 which is one of the most significant effects on the condition of Lebanon and its borders in the last 40 years. These are all major things that, if left unmanaged between the U.S. and the international community, Egypt and some others, and Syria, might all unravel by an explosion in Lebanon in the next 2 months.

The other things I think are a bit

long-term. The presidency as well in Lebanon, like the Hariri investigation and 1701, is something that needs to be addressed. What I am trying to get at here in a political approach is that the United States as the main backer of the March 14 group which as of last year was very much black or white, you support March 14, you support U.S. policy completely, you are anti-Syrian completely, that is it, you choose, you are with us or against us. This will destroy Lebanon. There needs to be an intelligent and engaged-with-rules middle ground found. The Lebanese cannot do it themselves. It requires U.S. leadership, international, with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, of course engaging Iran, and we might not survive the next few months if that is not done.

MS. WITTES: Paul?

QUESTION: Two very short questions

and without expressing views. We all are discussing here the issue of engagement. What if just the opposite happens and Assad is not as strong as you have portrayed him? What is there to happen in Syria after Assad?

The second one is you Joshua were trying to point out that if we just give the Golan Heights back to Syria, immediately they give up support for Palestinian terror groups and for Hizballah. What are you basing your assumptions on, because the Syrians are saying just the opposite.

MS. WITTES: Dave?

MR. POLLACK: Thanks. A lot of my question has already been asked in one way or another, but let me just add this little tiny bit. I suppose, although you did not say this explicitly, that one price for Syria giving back the Golan Heights would be to make peace

with Israel. Am I correct in that assumption?
So now I suppose that that would at least
create some kind of a rift between Syria and
Iran or not? And you think the Syrians would
accept that?

MR. LANDIS: Yes, I do.

MR. MITCHELL: Gary Mitchell from
"The Mitchell Report," and from time to time
with this group I need to remind you it is not
that Mitchell Report.

(Laughter.)

MR. MITCHELL: I have a six-part
question, Tamara.

MS. WITTES: I am going to let you
have one part, Gary.

MR. MITCHELL: It is a quick question
to Ammar, and it borders on the naïve, the
seesaw about non-negotiation without a vision
and negotiation without a vision. Am I correct

that your definition of vision is simply that the United States negotiate with Syria and Iran? And do you mean literally together at the same table at the same time?

MS. WITTES: Dave Schenker?

MR. SCHENKER: I have just a few quick questions for Josh primarily. Is the bottom line for you the priority of the regime the regime's survival in Syria?

MR. LANDIS: Yes.

MR. SCHENKER: But you do say also that return of the Golan would ultimately lead to a multiparty system there and reform?

MR. LANDIS: Not in the immediate future. I think the regime believes that it can manage this quite happily, and I think that probably they will manage it for quite some time. But I do not think any opposition is going to unseat this regime within 10 years,

whatever happens. I just do not think that democracy is on the board in Syria, and right now Syrians are clinging to their dictator like a little mast after the storm. After Iraq and what happened in Lebanon this summer, people love dictatorship in the Middle East today. The democracy movement is zero, unfortunately. It will rebuild I think fairly rapidly, but right now, people are really frightened.

MR. SCHENKER: Let me go to the second point then. What is the cost, if anything? You have spoken about the benefits of negotiation for the region. What is the cost? Do you recognize that the Mehlis process goes out the window and that is basically saying the end to the democracy agenda? Are you a -- guy that you do not think that democracy is a smart idea for the region anyway?

MR. LANDIS: I like democracy. I just do not think America is going about it in the right way, and I do not think it is doing anything for itself. I think it has made the situation a hell of a lot worse. I think that everything that people have been doing for the last 4 years has just been terrible for democracy in the Middle East and it has relegitimized dictatorship immensely in Syria.

MR. SCHENKER: Is there a consequence of negotiation? Does the Mehlis process --

MR. LANDIS: Sure. Like Paul said, you have to be careful and America needs to be on the other side balancing this so that Syria does not get greedy, but I think that bringing the Syrians in is possible. They are going to remain a dictatorship. They are not going to change. It would be like dealing with Egypt or anybody else, we made peace with them and we

still love their dictatorships, and we are going to love them for the next 10 or 15 years and we are not going to do anything to unseat them. I do not see why Bashar has to be that much more hateful, maybe a little bit more hateful, but not that much more hateful than any of the other dictators in the region. He has fewer political prisoners, he has a lot of things that are not that much worse than the other dictators in the region. We can deal with him.

I think that most of the consequences are good. I think there will be some costs, and that is that we will have a legitimized dictatorship, but it is legitimized. I do not think we are in control of whether a dictatorship is legitimate or not in the Middle East, unfortunately. We have mucked up the name of democracy for the next 4 or 5 years and

the situation is going to have to stabilize, and we are going to try to save Lebanon and a few other places that are not going to get rocked by this incredible tidal wave that is coming our way that is going to come out of Iraq and this terrible sectarian war. That is my sense.

MR. SCHENKER: This is the last question not even on the subject, but I have been reading for some time and hearing from many Syrians stories about conversions to the Shia Islam in Syria.

MR. LANDIS: Bullshit.

MR. SCHENKER: It's bullshit?

MR. LANDIS: Maybe one or two people converted. The major story that was carried on this through The Washington Post or The New York Times, I forget who the reporter was, went to a town way up in the Northeast that

converted 6 years ago before the fall of Iraq, before any of this stuff, so it had nothing to do with the rise of Shiites in Iraq.

MR. SCHENKER: Yes, I know. I had been hearing about this for some time, not necessarily even related to the Hizballah war and not necessarily that article that you referred to, but you just do not think it is true?

MR. LANDIS: I tried to track it down. I had the same question you had, which is Farid Gadry called me a few months ago, and another guy did who belongs to Farid's group and they told me about this, and he said there are 500 Shiite mosques in Damascus, and they were swearing to me. They said 400, but less than 400. There are not 400 Shiite mosques in Damascus. I'm sorry. There are just hardly any Shiites in Syria whatsoever. And most

Sunnis, yes, they will go to a Shiite mosque because Nasrallah won the bloody war and they go and they will kiss a few things in the Shiite mosque and they will walk out and they will never see it again.

But Syrians do not change their religion on the drop of a dime, and most Syrians would get stabbed in the back by their families if they went and became Shia, I can tell you. It is not a big popular thing to do. There may be a few Shi'ahs who will do this, but I know the Sunnis are very worried that the growing Iran connection is going to cause the massive conversion of Syrians to Shi'ahism. I just do not believe it. I think it is propaganda and I have not seen any real evidence of it on the ground.

MS. WITTES: Do you have any other closing comments that you want to make quickly?

MR. LANDIS: I think you are right, Paul, and I think what you said in the best thing America has done in the last 3 years is to get Syria out of Lebanon. That has been a significant achievement and it is one that needs to be consolidated. I agree with Paul that the stand of March 14th today is untenable. They are going to have to compromise somehow and they need America to help them do that, because otherwise there is not going to be economic reform and the debt rescheduling is going to kill them. And if they continue on this trajectory of opposing everything Syria does, Syria is going to win in the struggle against Lebanon. They have won time and again what we have seen in the last year, and people close to the leadership in Lebanon said to me Lebanon is not a nation, it is four different nations inside of a state,

and America thinks they are going to beat us by using Iraq and Lebanon. But wait and see, in a few years they are going to be stepping in quicksand and they are going to be up to their nostrils and we are in Syria, and if they think they can beat us by using Lebanon and Iraq, they are going to drown.

What we are seeing is that scenario coming true. I think Bashar and his lieutenants are not stupid. They understand that the Middle East is not ready for the kind of democracy America tried to push it into in the last year or few years, and America is going to get to sectarian nastiness which we have known has been underneath the Middle East. We are going to have to deal with Syria and I think Syria can be dealt with because Syria is frightened of the sectarian mess that the Middle East is in. They are truly frightened,

and I think they are worried that the Iraq mess is going to come out and it is going to stir things up in Syria itself, and they want to manage this and I think it is in America's interests to help them manage it. That means giving them some tryouts around the Middle East, but I do not see that they want to screw the Palestinians terribly. If the Palestinians can get a decent deal, I think the Syrians will be on board with that.

I really do believe that this regime wants to see growth. They said they want the China model. They want to stay in power. As you said, David, they want to stay in power, but they want to see economic growth as well. Bashar said I want to put a chick in every pot, that is what he told the Syrians, and I think he really does want to do it. Of course he wants to stay in power. He wants both, and

America does not want him to have both. But I think he is going to squeak along, and America will just resist. That is what I am worried America is going to do, and they are going to win nothing out of all of this.

MS. WITTES: Thank you, Josh. Ammar?

MR. ABDULHAMID: Building on the comments by Josh, the sectarian nightmare is indeed there, and I think that it is going to engulf the entire region. To be honest with you, whether you listen to me or you listen to Josh, the sectarian nightmare is going to come. Give the Golan back to Syria, and the sectarian nightmare is going to come. Why? Because the Assads are sectarians, and a minority cannot control a majority indefinitely. They are playing the sectarian card, the Assads themselves play on the fears of the Alawites in Syria all the time and by doing that they are

creating for themselves Sunni hatreds as well in the process. And like it or not, democracy may not spread by contagion, but a heightened feeling of sectarianism does.

So the reality or not is we are heading toward that quagmire which brings it to your question. I believe that the regional approach is needed, that you just do not sit down with Syria and Iran, it is Syria, Iran, Israel, Lebanon and representatives even of the Iraqis. You are trying to hammer some kind of a deal. It is something like the Madrid Conference at one point but with a combination of the Barcelona Process which is the European process which also promised economic aid to these countries and also included an article on the necessity of internal reforms, but I hope that this combination will have teeth. I hope that this combination will also include the

punitive and a timetable for the reforms to take place and will not allow the process to drag on and on and on for years on end and will allow the civil society inside each country to implode.

You see, what we are neglecting to say here, and this is where the democratization angle comes in for me, is the fact that as long as you are propping up authoritarian regimes just because you can work with them, you are forgetting about their unbridled corruption, you are forgetting about their destruction of the civil society, you are forgetting about the fact that these regimes prefer to have an Islamist opposition than a secular opposition because a secular opposition can compete for the attention of the international community and can threaten the regime's credibility. On the other hand, the Islamist opposition can

always be pointed at to the international community and say after us these people will be coming into power.

So these types of regimes and these types of arrangements are going to in fact work for instability in the longer run in the region. In fact, not even on the longer run. Just wait a few months and you are going to have more and more mayhem happening. We are not on a few years' timetable anymore, we are on a few months' timetable. Every few months there is going to be something that will serve to further erode the civil society and the fabric of our region.

So this is a problem with the Assads. They are not the right people to prevent that from happening. They will feed that tendency, and they will feed that tendency because they are corrupt, and they will feed that tendency

because they are thieves, and they will feed that tendency because they are not technocrats, they are morons. They have no training in anything. The only thing they know how to do is to steal and to kill and to torture. That is what our state has been reduced to. This is what Iraq was reduced to under Saddam, and this is what Syria is reduced to under the Assads, the other Baath Party.

So it is not something that we have not seen before. I am not describing a unique situation. We have seen this kind of development in Iraq and, therefore, we can draw the conclusions from that that Syria is definitely under the Assads heading down the road of disintegration.

So when I cry democratization and regime change, and I do, I want it because I want to save Syria from the Assads because it

is going to disintegrate, and when it disintegrates we are going have to have an disintegration in Iraq, next to a disintegration in Syria, next to a disintegration in Lebanon, because Hizballah can emerge as a leader, but it is not going to be accepted by everybody, so there are going to be challengers and we are going to have problems. These people can be good leaders of a cemetery. They can thrive in ghettos, but they can not be state makers and state builders. They are not that type of people.

So this is the reality with which we have to deal. You asked me about Syria after the Assads, if we can get the Assads out, and, yes, I am not sure if the NSF can do it without external support, but if we can get the Assads out, I believe the NSF represents a viable alternative at this stage exactly because it

includes people like Khaddam, exactly because it includes people like Bayanouni who I despise and loathe, and I tell them that to their faces. But the problem is there people are also well connected to the Islamist scene, they are well connected to the Baath scene, they are well connected to the army, they are well connected to the security apparatus, they can help keep the country together. So I am also not planning a democracy in a day in the Middle East, but I am telling you that the Assads are driving this country into oblivion and I would want to keep it because it is in all of our best interests to keep it because more chaos in the Middle East is not going to help any of us.

So the NSF can keep Syria together, and the mere change from an Assad to whoever, to whatever form of government, is going to shake the internal situation, and whatever new

system will emerge will need to seek some legitimacy by providing some reforms, by talking the talk and walking some of the walk in terms of democratization and modernization, and that will allow us, at least people like me, to work with the grassroots and try to build in 10 to 20 years from now some kind of a democracy to emerge. We are asking for that change. If you keep the Assads, you are depriving not only us of that chance, but you are actually setting the region for a fall in the not so distant future.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Thank you to Josh and to Ammar for your passion and your perspicacity, and thanks to all of you for your patience. It was a great discussion.

(Applause.)

(END OF RECORDED SEGMENT.)