



THE SABAN CENTER  
*for* MIDDLE EAST POLICY  
*at* THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ANALYSIS PAPER

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Number 19, March 2009

DAMASCUS, JERUSALEM, AND  
WASHINGTON: THE SYRIAN-  
ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP AS A  
U.S. POLICY ISSUE

ITAMAR RABINOVICH



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ITAMAR RABINOVICH

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The priority the United States placed on the Israeli-Syrian relationship declined dramatically under the administration of George W. Bush, compared to its cardinal position during the period of the Clinton Administration. In addition, during the Bush years, the relative importance of the Israeli component of Washington's relationship with Damascus declined whereas other components, particularly Iraq and Lebanon, came to the fore. The Bush Administration's overall policy toward Syria—neither to engage with Syria nor attack it, but to seek soft ways of penalizing it—failed to work.

On the Israel side, the Israeli government's policy transformed from Ariel Sharon's and Ehud Olmert's initial rejection of "the Syrian option" to Olmert's quest for a settlement with Syria. It will be up to the Obama Administration and Israel's new government to decide whether to pick up where Olmert left off. Of critical importance is the fact that the emphasis of Syrian-Israeli negotiations has shifted from the relatively simple formula of "territories for peace" to a more comprehensive formula that includes Syria's relationship with Iran, Hizballah, and the radical Palestinian organizations.

The Obama Administration and Israel's new government will most certainly take a fresh look at Middle Eastern diplomacy. The Israeli government will have to decide whether it wants to proceed with the Syrian negotiations, in what fashion, and to what end. It will have to integrate such decisions into a larger strategy that will address the other core issues of Israel's

national security policies: its relationship with the new U.S. administration, how to address the Palestinian issue, and what to do about Iran's quest for regional hegemony and a nuclear arsenal.

For the Obama Administration, Syria would be a small, yet a significant piece in a larger national security puzzle. Its policy towards Syria and the issue of an Israeli-Syrian peace process is likely to unfold along one of the following four scenarios:

**A Derivative of a Potential American-Iranian Dialogue.** One of the top priorities of the Obama Administration will be to develop an Iran strategy. It may continue (or push further) the Bush Administration's policy of isolation or, more likely, it may explore whether a "grand bargain" with Iran is feasible. Such a choice would be natural for a president who had advocated an open dialogue approach with Iran during his election campaign.

If a dialogue materializes and unfolds successfully, a new context would be created for Washington's relationship with Damascus. An American-Iranian understanding should cover Iraq, Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. If such an understanding is indeed reached, Syria would no longer be seen as the junior partner of an evil state and therefore U.S.-Syrian accommodation and a new American stewardship of an Israeli-Syrian peace process would be facilitated.

**A By-Product of Lingering Hostility with Iran.** Should the previous option not be pursued or should



it fail, the prospect of wooing Syria away from Iran would loom as a joint policy goal for both the United States and Israel. This idea is not new. In fact, the aim of breaking Syria away from Iran was used by the Olmert government in justifying its decision to enter into and publicize indirect negotiations with Syria. A similar rationale was articulated by France when Nicolas Sarkozy decided to engage with Asad. However, Syria has refused to discuss a change in its relationship with Iran as a precondition to progress in negotiations with Israel. Yet, in the past, various Syrian spokesmen have alluded to the position that Syria's alliance with Iran is not fixed and that it is mostly a result of Washington's rejection of Syria. Such claims can of course be tested, but testing them would not be an easy diplomatic exercise. The Ba'th regime has a long tradition of straddling the line and Syria's leadership is likely, if a dialogue with the United States is renewed, to try to proceed in that dialogue without actually severing its intimate relationship with Tehran.

Henry Kissinger's success in shifting Egypt in the early and mid-1970s from the Soviet orbit to a pro-American orientation has been cited as a model for pulling Syria away from Iran. It should be noted that a peace process and Egypt's regaining of the Sinai were important

dimensions of that successful strategic realignment. It should also be noted that while the Egypt case is an inspiring example, Anwar Sadat was a bold, visionary leader who was willing to jump from the Soviet orbit even before a safe position with the United States had been secured. Hafiz al-Asad showed no such inclination, and thus far, neither has Bashar.

**A Policy of Using Force.** As noted above, the Bush Administration decided to avoid both ends of the spectrum by refraining from either dialogue with or using force against Syria. If both varieties of dialogue mentioned above do not materialize, the Obama Administration could reconsider the option of using force against Syria. However, this is a highly unlikely prospect.

**A Policy of Maintenance.** Should the Obama Administration relegate the Syria issue to a relatively low place on its foreign policy agenda or should it decide to allocate priority to the Palestinian issue, it will have to find a way of keeping it and the question of the U.S. relationship with Syria on hold. If put on the back burner, the Syrian issue may deteriorate into direct or indirect conflict, similar to what occurred in earlier decades. Therefore, a strategy of conflict management will be necessary.

## THE AUTHOR

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**ITAMAR RABINOVICH** holds the Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair of Contemporary Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University. From September 2007 to July 2008 he was the Charles and Andrea Bronfman Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. He recently completed an eight year term as the President of Tel Aviv University. Rabinovich has been a member of the faculty of Tel Aviv University since 1971 and served as Chairman of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Director of the Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Dean of Humanities, and Rector. Between 1992 and 1996, Rabinovich served as Israel's Ambassador to the United States and as Chief Negotiator with Syria while on leave from Tel Aviv University. Rabinovich is currently Chairman of the Board of the Dan David Foundation, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Wexner-Israel Program, a

member of the Trilateral Commission, and a member of the International Advisory Board of the Brookings Institution. He has recently joined the International Advisory Council of APCO Worldwide. Rabinovich has held visiting appointments in several academic institutions and is currently a Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. Rabinovich is the author of numerous books and other academic works. His most recent book is *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria* (2008). Rabinovich is a member of the American Philosophical Society, has been awarded the Honorary Grand Golden Cross of the Austrian Republic, and was appointed by France as *Commandeur des Palmes Academiques*. He holds a B.A. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an M.A. from Tel Aviv University, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles.



## PREFACE

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This analysis paper brings together three interrelated issues:

- The Israeli-Syrian relationship (i.e., the two countries' conflict and the efforts to resolve it);
- Washington's bilateral relationship with Damascus;
- And the role played by these two issues within the larger context of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

These issues are addressed in three sections of the paper. The first section, the Israeli-Syrian relationship, presents historical background of the Arab-Israeli peace process begun in 1974, with particular emphasis paid to the 1990s, when Israel and Syria were engaged in peace negotiations with the active involvement of the United States. The second section, Washington's relationship with Damascus, reviews and analyzes developments during the present decade, when the George W. Bush Administration sought to isolate Syria while Israel and Syria took part in indirect negotiations following Israel's preventive military action against Syria's clandestine nuclear reactor. The third section analyzes policy options for the Obama Administration regarding U.S. relations with Syria.

The paper argues that the priority the United States placed on the Israeli-Syrian relationship declined dramatically under the Bush Administration, compared to its cardinal position during the period of the Clinton Administration. In addition, during the Bush years, the relative importance of the Israeli dimension to Washington's relationship with Damascus declined whereas other components, particularly Iraq and Lebanon, came to the fore. The paper is critical of the Bush Administration's overall policy toward Syria: the administration's decision neither to engage with Syria nor attack it, but to seek soft ways of penalizing it failed to work.

On the Israeli side, the government's policy transformed from Ariel Sharon's and Ehud Olmert's initial rejection of "the Syrian option" to Olmert's quest for a settlement with Syria. It will be up to the Obama Administration and Israel's new government to decide whether to pick up where Olmert left off. Of critical importance is to understand that the emphasis of Israeli-Syrian negotiations has shifted from the relatively simple formula of "territories for peace" to a more comprehensive formula that includes Syria's relationship with Iran, Hizballah, and radical Palestinian organizations.



# A TRILATERAL RELATIONSHIP: THE UNITED STATES, ISRAEL, AND SYRIA: 1974-2001

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The October War in 1973 was a turning point for Syria in the conduct of its conflict with Israel and in its relationship with the United States. The war's outcome forced Syria to join the diplomatic process orchestrated by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. For the Ba'th regime—Moscow's closest Arab ally and Israel's harshest adversary—this was a radical departure from its previous policies.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1974, Kissinger was looking to repeat the success he had had with Egypt in forging the ceasefire in the October War. Kissinger hoped to pull Syria away from the Soviet orbit by using the prospect of regaining the Golan Heights and building a relationship with Washington as the two chief inducements. Ultimately, he did not succeed in pulling Syria's ruler, Hafiz al-Asad, across the threshold. Asad remained an important—if not the most important—Soviet client in the Arab World.

Nevertheless, the diplomatic efforts of 1974 culminated in the Separation of Forces Agreement between Israel and Syria and with the establishment of an American-Syrian channel of communication. One by-product of this episode was the build-up given

to Asad in Kissinger's memoirs. Kissinger was fascinated by his long-winded duel with Asad and the Syrian president's style of leadership. Kissinger's writing helped to lay the foundation for an "Asad mythology" that was perpetuated and elaborated upon by President Jimmy Carter and President George H. W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, who both had extensive dealings with Asad.<sup>2</sup> That mythology depicted Asad as having a unique combination of political astuteness, mental recall, brutality mixed with wit, ideological rigidity mitigated by tactical skills, and a dry sense of humor.

The American-Syrian channel that was built in 1974 was used in 1976 when Washington encouraged Damascus to intervene militarily in the Lebanese civil war. Washington coordinated this intervention with Israel—the so-called "red-line agreement"—which allowed Syria to send its troops into Lebanon provided they did not deploy south of the Litani River. Kissinger (then Gerald Ford's secretary of state) and Yitzhak Rabin (in his first tenure as Israel's prime minister) saw Syria as a stabilizing actor likely to put an end to the anarchy in Lebanon and prevent the deteriorating situation there from causing yet another regional war.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), 175-340.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1982), 777-87; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Toronto, ON: Bantam Books, 1982), 285-86; Also see Jimmy Carter, *The Blood of Abraham* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 73 and James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 242-45.

While the United States tacitly cooperated with Syria in Lebanon, it excluded Damascus from the second round of the post-October 1973 peace process. Kissinger did not wish to go through the agonizing effort of matching an Israeli-Egyptian agreement with an Israeli-Syrian one. He therefore negotiated the September 1975 Interim Agreement between Israel and Egypt as a self-standing measure. As a result, Syria led a ferocious campaign against the new agreement that was motivated by two principal considerations: Asad understood that if Egypt was allowed to proceed on a separate track with Israel, Syria would be left behind; By this time, Asad viewed himself as an important regional actor and saw the Interim Agreement as major challenge to his new-found status. A paradigm was thus created whereby the United States and Syria collaborated on one regional issue in the Middle East but were at loggerheads over another.

Following Jimmy Carter's election to the presidency in 1976, two interrelated changes emerged in the Middle East, the first a result of U.S. policy and the second a result of regional developments:

- The reversal of Kissinger's step-by-step approach and its replacement by Carter's quest for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement.
- The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the replacement of the Shah's conservative pro-American regime with a radical anti-American regime seeking to export its revolution to other parts of the Middle East.

Both developments converged to endow Syria and Asad with new importance. President Carter needed Syria's endorsement of his comprehensive peace approach and therefore spent time and effort wooing Asad. Though enchanted by his persona, Carter

was let down by Asad in 1977 when Syria refused to participate in an international conference that Carter had wanted to convene in order to implement a comprehensive settlement and exert pressure on the PLO. Two years later, after Carter negotiated a separate peace deal between Egypt and Israel that removed the largest and most powerful Arab state from the conflict with Israel, Asad sought a counter-balance by building a close alliance with the Ayatollahs' regime in Iran.<sup>4</sup>

A crucial element of the new Syrian-Iranian partnership was the access Syria afforded Iran to Lebanon's Shi'i community. This was Iran's only success in exporting its Islamic Revolution and it gave it a base in the core area of the Middle East on Israel's northern border. Beginning in 1981, the Reagan Administration pursued a rather tortuous path in dealing with these issues. Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander Haig, gave Israel's defense minister, Ariel Sharon, an "amber light" when the latter briefed him on his far-reaching plan to invade Lebanon in cooperation with the Maronite militia, the Lebanese Forces. The plan was to install Bashir Gemayel as Lebanon's president and to use the anticipated change in Lebanon as the stepping stone for transforming the politics of the whole region. But an "amber light" by the secretary of state was not tantamount to an endorsement by the administration and during the summer of 1982 the United States had to cope with the consequences of an overly ambitious Israeli war plan gone wrong. Beyond the effort to bring the crisis under control, Washington sought to accomplish two policy goals:

- Revive the Arab-Israeli peace process by issuing the Reagan plan in September 1982.
- Put an end to the Lebanese civil war and consolidate the Lebanese political system under the presidency of Amin Gemayel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For the relationship between Syria and Iran, see Husayn Agha and Ahmad S. Khalidi, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation* (London: Pinter, 1995) and Ehteshami Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1983* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 172-73.

The Reagan plan failed to take off and Washington's quest to shape Lebanon's future—in part by introducing into Lebanon a battalion of U.S. Marines as peacekeepers—brought it into a direct collision with a novel triangle. This triangle—Iran, Syria, and the radicalized Lebanese Shi'ah—deployed suicide bombers and systematically used hostage-taking to advance its interests. After terrorist attacks against the American embassy, which killed seventeen Americans, and the Marines' headquarters in Beirut, which killed more than two hundred Marines, the Reagan Administration decided to withdraw from Lebanon. It managed to disengage from its Lebanese venture almost politically unscathed, but with a great distaste for Middle Eastern politics. It also had hostility toward Syria because of its alliance with the Soviet Union and Iran, and because of its sponsorship of terrorism (Syria had been put on the State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism list in 1979). As testament to this, when the Reagan Administration decided toward the end of its second term to return to Arab-Israeli diplomacy, largely in order to prepare the ground for its successor, it chose to do so by opening a dialogue with the PLO rather than with Syria.

The hostile nature of the United States-Syria relationship, and much else in the Middle East, was transformed by Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the George H. W. Bush Administration's decision to build an international coalition to evict Iraq's army. One of the more spectacular diplomatic achievements performed by Secretary of State Baker was persuading President Asad to have Syria join the coalition and take part in the war against Iraq.

To many, the notion of Syria joining a military coalition led by the United States against another Arab country seemed inconceivable. But it was made possible by two developments:

- The collapse of the Soviet Union, which meant that Syria had lost its traditional superpower

patron. As a result, Asad realized that he had to build a new relationship with the United States.

- Saddam's bold move which, given the hostility between Asad and Saddam, meant that an Iraqi success in Kuwait, if allowed to stand, would have dire repercussions on Syria's regional position.

From Washington's perspective, Syria's decision to join the coalition had great significance because it enhanced the coalition's legitimacy within the Arab world. Syria's pan-Arab and nationalist credentials helped to moderate Arab and Muslim reaction to an American-led attack against an Arab regime that had sought to don the mantle of revolutionary nationalism. On the ground, Syria's contribution to the military campaign was quite insignificant, but its membership in the coalition laid the foundation for a new relationship with Washington.<sup>6</sup>

## THE ROAD TO MADRID

The new, improved relationship between the United States and Syria was initially predicated on a common interest produced by the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. However, its scope was soon expanded by broader interests on both the Syrian and American sides. In Syria, Asad developed an interest in building a closer relationship with Washington, and in the United States, Baker was determined to exploit the accomplishments of the Gulf War and the options afforded by the end of the cold war to launch negotiations to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. A new configuration was thus created.

In order to implement its new peace plan, the George H. W. Bush Administration needed Syria's support and cooperation. As Jimmy Carter had discovered in 1977, no quest for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement could be pursued effectively without Syria's participation. Syria, of course, would also be a beneficiary of that process in two respects: it could regain the Golan Heights and, like Sadat's Egypt in the 1970s, a U.S.-

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<sup>6</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 36-39.



orchestrated resolution of the conflict could provide the pathway to a new, much closer, relationship with Washington.

The peace process envisaged by the Bush Administration was predicated on the notion of “territories for peace.” This would mean that Asad could conceivably achieve full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights through a diplomatic settlement but it would also mean that he would have to offer Israel “full peace.” In other words, fourteen years after he had denounced Sadat as an incompetent traitor and after he had continually tried to obstruct, penalize, and isolate Sadat in the Arab world, Asad would be following in his footsteps.

Aside from the difficulties associated with negotiating the interests of both sides, Baker faced the challenge of personalities. A deliberate, meticulous, cautious, and suspicious leader, preoccupied with his image and legacy, Asad presented a formidable challenge to Baker’s effort to put together an Arab-Israeli peace process. Asad’s Israeli counterpart, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, was an equally tough nut to crack. Shamir had opposed former Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s peace deal with Egypt and was against the very notion of “territories for peace,” and therefore negotiations with the Palestinians and the Syrians. Furthermore, Shamir had contributed to the war effort against Saddam by refraining from retaliating against Iraq’s Scud missile attacks on Israel. Because he felt Israel had already made compromises for the United States, Shamir did not believe that his compensation should be further concessions as part of an Arab-Israeli peace process that was a by-product of America’s victory in the Gulf War.

But strategic realities helped Baker. As Asad sought to build a new relationship with Washington, Shamir understood that he could not afford to strain Israel’s

precious relationship with the United States beyond a certain point. Furthermore, three years after the outbreak of the first *Intifada*, and in the shadow of Saddam’s recent threat, many Israeli policymakers and pundits understood that a mere perpetuation of the status quo was no longer a viable option for securing Israel’s well-being.

It took Baker and his team nine visits to the Middle East to put together the formula for the Madrid Conference and the negotiating process it would launch, and to bring Shamir and Asad’s foreign minister, Faruq al-Shara, to Madrid in October 1991. It was an impressive diplomatic achievement.

The Madrid Conference unfolded successfully and the dual tracks—separate sets of bilateral negotiations between Israel and Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians, and multilateral negotiations between Israel and several Arab countries—were put in place. There was only one crucial element missing—the political will by the relevant parties to take advantage of the new framework in order to reach a settlement. This changed on the Israeli side in the summer of 1992 when Yitzhak Rabin was elected as Israel’s new prime minister with a mandate to take risks for peace. Rabin viewed the Madrid framework and the Bush Administration’s determination to promote Arab-Israeli peace as an opportunity to implement his own policy agenda. The convergence of an American administration seeking to use its unprecedented prestige and influence in the Middle East to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, an Israeli prime minister amenable to at least part of the American agenda, and a change of mood and approach in the Arab world (indicated by Syria’s engagement in peace negotiations) launched the most ambitious effort to date to resolve the conflict. Within this context, a novel trilateral relationship was established between the United States, Israel, and Syria.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 36-40; Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 64-79. For Ross’s analysis of subsequent phases of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, see pp.137-208, 216-45, 495-590; Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

## CHOOSING A TRACK

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin did not believe that an Israeli-Syrian agreement comparable to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979 was feasible. And while he also did not think a full-fledged settlement with the Palestinians was possible, his original approach to the Madrid process focused on the Palestinian track. The reason for this was that Rabin believed that an Israeli-Palestinian interim agreement could jumpstart the Madrid process which, after a dramatic start, had lost its momentum. As a result, during the election campaign of 1992 Rabin promised that if elected, he would deliver an interim agreement with the Palestinians within nine months and spoke against the notion of a withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Rabin's perspective, though, was altered by discussions with Secretary of State Baker in July 1992, only days after Rabin had been sworn in as prime minister. During his last trip to the Middle East as secretary of state, Baker came to Israel after visiting Damascus and delivered a message to Rabin that was twofold: he believed Asad was ready for a peace agreement with Israel and the Bush Administration was ready to underwrite such an agreement.

Later that month Rabin appointed me as his chief negotiator with Syria. In our first working session he told me about his discussion with Baker and defined my mission as seeking to explore the reality of the new prospect. Typically for Rabin, he implied, but did not say explicitly, that he would be ready for a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights if a real peace with Syria could be achieved.<sup>8</sup>

In January 1993, Bill Clinton entered the White House with a two-pronged strategic approach to the peace process—dual containment of the two significant security threats in the region's eastern part (Iraq and Iran), and stabilization of the region's core area by promoting Arab-Israeli peace. This perspective tilted the

administration toward seeking the first breakthrough on the Syrian, rather than the Palestinian, track of the Madrid process. Syria was Iran's ally and, as noted, provided Tehran with access to Lebanon and to Lebanon's Shi'i community. A Syrian-Israeli peace settlement, paired with a new relationship between Washington and Damascus would deny Iran access to its Lebanese constituency and would go a long way toward marginalizing its influence in the region.

American preference for the "Syrian Option" was reinforced by additional considerations. The Israeli-Syrian conflict, bitter as it was, was simpler and easier to resolve than the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Assuming that Asad had gone through a change of heart and was ready for a Sadat-like peace with Israel, the Syrian conflict with Israel could be addressed as an essentially territorial dispute between two sovereign states. This stood in contrast to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, which was not just territorial, but a clash of nationalisms. Additionally, although Asad had the reputation of being a tough negotiator, his record of keeping agreements once they were made was solid. When contrasted with Yasir Arafat and the PLO, Asad and Syria seemed much more attractive as negotiating partners. An Israeli-Syrian deal would have the additional advantage of calming down the active conflict between Israel and Hizballah in southern Lebanon and along the Israeli-Lebanese border. Asad would be expected, as part of his new relationship with the United States, to distance himself from Iran and put an end to Syria's support of terrorist organizations, Palestinian and Lebanese alike. Implicit in this view was a willingness to accept Syria's continued hegemony in Lebanon, a willingness shared by the Rabin government.<sup>9</sup>

## THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN-AMERICAN TRACK

The term "Israeli-Syrian track" is misleading. Throughout the 1990s there were no real bilateral negotiations between Israel and Syria. The real negotiations, when

<sup>8</sup> See Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace*, 54-55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-56.

they finally happened, were trilateral: Israel, Syria, and the United States. Hafiz al-Asad made no secret of the fact that he was not interested in peace with Israel as such. Of course, he was anxious to regain the Golan Heights and expected to obtain the territory as part of the settlement package, but an agreement fitted into a larger scheme—a new relationship with the United States with direct benefits for Syria and an American recognition of Syria’s regional position. Peace with Israel, Asad felt, was a necessary component of a larger package.

Rabin’s calculus was quite similar to that of the Clinton Administration. Namely, Rabin felt that there was great promise in the quest for a settlement with Damascus. But throughout his first year in office, Rabin did not make a clear choice between the Palestinian and Syrian tracks and preferred to pursue both, looking for the first breakthrough and the better deal. In August 1993, matters came to a head. A secret Israeli-PLO channel in Oslo had produced a breakthrough and a draft agreement, while Asad’s insistence on an Israeli commitment to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights as a precondition to serious engagement precluded the prospect of swift progress on the Syrian track. But Rabin still tested whether he had a Syrian option prior to finalizing the Oslo Accords—he “deposited” with Secretary of State Warren Christopher a hypothetical, conditional willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights as part of an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement modeled after the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. Asad responded with a “yes in principle” but also with a long list of reservations and conditions (in his formulation, “requirements”). Rabin was disappointed by the substance and style of this diplomatic exercise and preferred to sign the Oslo Accords and predicate a regional peace process on the Palestinian, rather than on the Syrian, track.<sup>10</sup>

This pattern repeated itself through the rest of the decade. Rabin’s three successors, Shimon Peres, Benjamin

Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak, all tried to make a grand bargain with Asad and gave this bargain preference over the Palestinian track. For Peres and Barak this was their first preference; Netanyahu tried it in an apparent effort to find an alternative to the Palestinian track. The efforts of all three failed. Both Peres and Barak, as ambitious and determined as they were to reach deals with Asad, ended their short terms in office without any agreement with Syria. Similarly, Netanyahu failed to reach an agreement with Syria and in 1998 ended up signing the Wye River Memorandum that aimed to implement the 1995 Interim Agreement with the Palestinians.

With the Clinton Administration and four Israeli prime ministers assigning priority to the Syrian track, and with Asad apparently interested in a trilateral deal with the United States and Israel, the failure to reach an agreement is striking. While detailed scrutiny of this failure is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that both Syria and Israel were interested in making the deal, but not sufficiently determined or anxious. In addition, the Clinton Administration, while willing to invest considerable efforts in brokering the deal, was not sufficiently tough at the decisive moments.<sup>11</sup>

While ultimately unsuccessful, the negotiations between Israel, Syria, and the United States were not an idle exercise. During the Rabin years, the negotiations allowed for the basic outline of an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement to be sketched that was modeled on the Israeli-Egyptian peace settlement—full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for full peace, including normalization and security arrangements designed to compensate Israel for ceding strategic territory. As noted, Rabin did not commit to withdraw from the Golan Heights but gave the now-famous “deposit” to Christopher. The Syrian side made every effort to formalize and amplify the “deposit” by asking for an explicit, preferably written, Israeli commitment

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 103-110.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 235-255; Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad*; Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace*. For a harsher critique of the Clinton Administration’s conduct of the peace process, see Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), 282-89.

to full withdrawal and, absent that, to obtain a comparable U.S. guarantee of Israel's intentions. Both Hafiz al-Asad, during the last years of his life, and his son and successor, Bashar, argued that when the Israeli-Syrian negotiations resume they should "start at the point from which they left off." This has been Syria's way of trying to consolidate the "deposit" and turn it into a given in the negotiations.

Rabin's three immediate successors were not willing to cross the line he drew; they each indicated in their own way that they were willing to endorse the "deposit" but were not willing to make a formal commitment, except as the final act required to conclude the deal. This was frowned upon by the Clinton Administration which thought that if the Israeli leaders were truly interested in a deal with Syria, they should bite the bullet rather than stick to minor formalities. This was a difference of perspective characteristic of the relationship between a superpower and a small, insecure state. While Israel's caution caused some irritation on the part of the United States, it did not affect the fabric of the bilateral relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the ebb and flow of Israel's negotiations with Syria did create some friction and tension between the Clinton Administration and all four Israeli prime ministers who were in office during Clinton's presidency. In 1993, Christopher and his colleagues believed that they had received a positive Syrian response to the "deposit" and were surprised and disappointed by Rabin's decision to abandon the Syrian track in favor of the Oslo Accords. They also disagreed with his choice in 1994 to proceed with a breakthrough with Jordan rather than to return to the Syrian track. Similarly, Clinton officials were disappointed by Peres's decision to move up the 1996 elections and thereby suspend progress on the Israel-Syrian negotiations that had taken place at the Wye Plantation in December 1995. When talks did proceed, as with Benjamin

Netanyahu's secret negotiation with Asad through the American Jewish businessman Ronald Lauder behind the back of the Clinton Administration, officials in Washington were disturbed because they had not forgotten the embarrassment in discovering that Israel had made a deal with Arafat behind their backs. And as for Barak, Clinton's memoirs and those written by several of his aides are critical of the Israeli prime minister's failure to conclude a deal during the Shepherdstown negotiations in early 2000.<sup>13</sup> The Israeli parties to the negotiations retain their own versions and criticisms, but both sides have made a point of ensuring that these differences have not impacted the overall excellent relations between both countries.

One important by-product of the negotiations was the establishment of an effective working relationship between Washington and Damascus. While Syria remained on the State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism list, Clinton met with Asad twice in Geneva, in January 1994 and March 2000, and paid one visit to Damascus in October 1994. In addition, Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara was invited to the White House in December 1999 and Syria's ambassador to Washington (now foreign minister), Walid Mu'allim, worked closely with the United States' peace team. During this period, the United States, like Israel, was willing to overlook Asad's proverbial straddling of the fence—negotiating peace while hosting terrorist organizations that sought to undermine the peace process, and supporting Hizballah's war against Israel in south Lebanon. Both Washington and Jerusalem were willing to accept this contradictory behavior on the assumption that once the deal was made, Asad would transform his policies. This chapter came to a close in March 2000 with the failure of the second Clinton-Asad summit in Geneva. There was practically no follow up to the meeting and the American focus shifted to the Palestinian track, which unfolded toward its own collapse in December of the same year.

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<sup>12</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israel-Syrian Negotiations*.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred.A. Knopf, 2004), 903; Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace*; Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad*.

The impact of the Geneva summit's failure was amplified during the next few months by two other developments:

- The decision by Israel's prime minister, Ehud Barak, to withdraw the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon, where they had been stationed since 1982. In doing so, Barak signaled his decision to sever the linkage between Israeli-Syrian negotiations and Israel's security interests in southern Lebanon, to which Israel's policymakers had given high priority and had tied together in the 1990s. Barak's move also meant that the security of northern Israel would henceforth be predicated on a classic deterrence. In other words, Israel shifted its focus of seeking to have Syria responsible for threats stemming from southern Lebanon to communicating that whoever ruled in Beirut (and their patrons) would have to bear the cost of Israeli retaliation for any infringement on

Israel's sovereignty across a recognized international boundary.

- The outbreak of the second Intifada in October 2000, which focused regional and international interest on the Palestinian issue. For a brief moment that month, Israel's northern front was on the verge of a potential major crisis when Hizballah abducted three Israeli soldiers who were patrolling the Israeli side of the Israeli-Lebanese border. According to the principles of classic deterrence, Barak should have responded with large force against Hizballah, Lebanese, or Syrian targets (holding Syria responsible for the actions of its Lebanese client). But given the two fronts on which Israel was already actively engaged (the second Intifada had been matched by serious clashes between the Israeli police and Arab-Israeli demonstrators), Barak decided against responding to Hizballah's provocation. The northern front remained deceptively calm for the moment.

# THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION, SYRIA, AND ISRAEL: 2001-2008

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The nature and landscape of the trilateral relationship between the United States, Israel, and Syria were transformed during the final months of 2000 and the early months of 2001. Most notably, all three countries underwent significant domestic political changes that had major repercussions on the conduct of their foreign policies. In Syria, Hafiz al-Asad died in June 2000 and was succeeded by his son, Bashar. Hafiz's original heir apparent, Basil, was killed in a car accident in 1994 and Bashar, an ophthalmologist who had studied and worked in England, was then drafted into the role. During the six years between Basil's unexpected death and the end of Hafiz's life, Hafiz had to deal with two principal questions regarding succession:

- Could the dynastic principle be introduced in a regime that had previously been defined as republican, socialist, and revolutionary?
- How suitable was Bashar to the task of leading a difficult and complex country like Syria?

Because these questions were also asked by many within the ranks of Syrian elite, Hafiz had to invest considerable political capital to secure the succession. But his efforts were facilitated by the apparent decision of other potential contenders to avoid a power struggle and to hold onto their respective power bases instead.

Hafiz al-Asad's preparations were not in vain: Bashar's assumption of power was smooth. But the immediate aftermath was less so; it did not take long for the world to discover that Syria's new ruler would have difficulty consolidating his power and asserting his own authority vis-à-vis his father's associates. More ominously, despite six years of preparation, Bashar seemed ill-equipped to navigate the web of domestic and regional forces and issues confronting him as Syria's ruler.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the United States was undergoing a transformation of its own, from President Bill Clinton to President George W. Bush. Viewed from the Middle East, the presidential transition in 2000-2001 was dramatically different from the one that had occurred in 1992-93. The incoming Bush Administration was determined to distance itself from its predecessor's policies in the Middle East and to replace them with its own distinctive approach. The Clinton Administration, the new president believed, had spent too much time and effort on an Arab-Israeli peace process that had ultimately collapsed. As a result, one of the first measures taken by the new administration was to dismantle the State Department's peace team. The administration's move to abolish the Office of the Special Middle East Coordinator and restore the responsibility of Middle Eastern policy to the Bureau of Near Eastern

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<sup>14</sup> Several books have been written about Bashar al-Asad, see in particular: Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trail by Fire* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005); W. David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Affairs made clear that peacemaking would not be the priority it had been in the Clinton Administration. As Condoleezza Rice, the new National Security Advisor, put it: “We shouldn’t think of American involvement for the sake of American involvement.... [Washington should] not consider it a slap at the United States or a disengaged American policy if the parties can progress on their own.”<sup>15</sup>

Of greatest significance was the reversal of the underlying strategy of Middle East policy. The Clinton Administration’s policy had been based on the premise of pacifying and stabilizing the Arab-Israeli conflict not only to address this long-standing dispute but to provide a solid base for dealing with the severe security challenges presented by Iran and Iraq. The dominant strand in the Bush Administration’s Middle East policy reversed the Clinton approach and replaced it with a mixture of ideology and Realpolitik. The initial goal of the Bush Administration’s new policy was not peacemaking, but rather regime change: toppling the radical, dictatorial regimes of Iran and Iraq and replacing them with more democratic and more moderate regimes. Once implemented, this strategy was supposed to enhance dramatically the prospects for peace in the core area of the Middle East.

In immediate terms, the new strategy meant a loss of interest in both the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks of the peace process. While Secretary of State Colin Powell did travel to the region early in his tenure and did visit Damascus, the emphasis of the Syria visit was to pressure Damascus to cease pumping Iraqi oil through a pipeline that led through Syrian territory to the Mediterranean and was helping Iraq circumvent the sanctions regime.

In Israel, the power of Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s government and coalition, which had been waning

since the summer of 2000, was decimated by the failure of the Camp David summit, the outbreak of the second Intifada, and the failure to contain the violence either by force or through a revival peace talks. Barak’s defeat in the February 2001 elections was therefore hardly a surprise.<sup>16</sup> More surprising was the fact that the contender was not the Likud’s Benjamin Netanyahu but the Likud’s Ariel Sharon, who had insisted he would only run in a general election that would guarantee him a comfortable parliamentary majority. Consequently it was Sharon who steered Israel through the crisis of the early 2000s and imposed his particular worldview on Israel’s policies.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had clear priorities: defeat the second Intifada and then find a viable formula for dealing with the Palestinian issue that would preclude withdrawal to the 1967 borders in the West Bank or the repartitioning of Jerusalem. Sharon was not interested in the Syrian track and remained firmly opposed to the notion of withdrawal from the Golan Heights. However, during his tenure two attempts were made to start an informal (or initially informal) Israeli-Syrian process. The first attempt was an initiative by a Jordanian contact of Bashar al-Asad’s brother, Mahir, who conveyed to Israel through a former director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Eytan Bentzur, that Syria was willing to resume negotiations. The second attempt was conducted by another director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Alon Liel, and a Syrian-American named Ibrahim Sulayman who had a long record of trying to insert himself into Israeli-Syrian peacemaking. This was a longer effort—from September 2004 to July 2006—that was initially facilitated by the Turkish government and subsequently by the Swiss Foreign Ministry. In both cases, the top echelons of the Syrian regime were clearly supportive of the attempt, probably as part of a larger effort to mend relations with the United States and emerge from diplomatic

<sup>15</sup> Jane Perlez, “Bush Officials Pronounce Clinton Mideast Plan Dead,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> In 1996, Israel held its first direct elections for the post of prime minister. Following the 2001 elections, the reform was rescinded and the Israeli electorate returned to voting solely for political parties rather than for political parties and candidates for prime minister.

isolation. Syria's official line was that it wanted to resume the negotiations with Israel "at the point at which they had been interrupted" (this was the standard Syrian formula of seeking to preserve "the deposit").

But Syria also issued tough statements. In the absence of a diplomatic option, Syria communicated, it would resort to force to liberate its land. Also, with characteristic incongruity to the peace overtures, Syria's new president made some virulent anti-Israeli and even anti-Semitic remarks. Sharon, in any event, dismissed the initiatives to start an informal dialogue and was thus in line with the Bush Administration's policy of isolation.

In a similar vein, Sharon refused to become militarily reengaged in Lebanon even in the aftermath of serious provocations by Hizballah. While Sharon directed limited action against Hizballah and Syrian targets, he made sure the IDF avoided massive retaliation operations and he refused to deal with the ongoing build-up of Hizballah's arsenal of rockets. Whether as a product of his 1982 misadventure in Lebanon or because he wanted to focus on the Palestinian issue, Sharon would not be drawn into dealing with Hizballah or its patrons.<sup>17</sup>

While the American and Israeli governments were in line with each other, the initial configuration did not bode well for either the bilateral American-Syrian relationship or for the trilateral American-Syrian-Israeli relationship. The situation was compounded by a series of untoward developments in the region.

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES TO THE TRILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

A number of regional events coincided with the change in leadership in Israel, Syria, and the United States and contributed to challenging the trilateral relationship. These events included the war in Iraq, the events of

9/11, a breakdown on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the deepening Syrian-Iranian alliance, and events in Lebanon:

**The War in Iraq.** During Colin Powell and Bashar al-Asad's February 26, 2001 meeting in Damascus, Asad promised that Syria would comply with the U.N. sanctions imposed on Iraq. What followed, however, became a pattern. First, Syria did not keep the promise. Then, Asad tried to follow in his father's footsteps by straddling the fence and attempting to compartmentalize his relations with the United States. Specifically, he accommodated the United States after 9/11 by offering some intelligence sharing and cooperation against al-Qaeda. However, he also acted against the Bush Administration's policies in Iraq by actively opposing the American diplomatic effort meant to gain support for the war and by helping to procure military equipment for Saddam's army (allegations of other forms of collaboration with Saddam's regime have not been proven). But while Hafiz al-Asad had mastered the art of straddling the fence, Bashar was far less skillful and only succeeded in alienating the Bush Administration.

Initially, Asad's behavior regarding the Iraq issue could be described as an irritant to the United States, but as the war turned into a lingering and costly crisis, American anger at Syria's conduct grew dramatically. For Asad, the installation of a secure, pro-American government in Baghdad was not attractive. The Ba'th regime had a siege mentality and from its point of view, a prolonged American military presence and American political hegemony in Iraq were grave threats. In order to counter these threats, Syria allowed Damascus International Airport and the Syrian-Iraqi border to become the main gateway for the "Sunni insurrection" by allowing a large number of Islamist volunteers to enter Iraq. Until well into 2007, all American efforts to persuade Damascus to seal off its border with Iraq were met with outright rebuffs or evasive responses.

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Sharon senior aide, July 2008.



**9/11 and the War on Terror.** Syria had no role in 9/11 and, as noted, was willing to offer the United States at least a measure of cooperation against al-Qaeda. But 9/11 changed the prism through which Washington viewed Middle Eastern issues. In Bush's view, states were either "with us or against us" in the war on terror. As a result, Syria could not fare well unless it was willing to change fundamentally its policies, specifically regarding its relationship with terrorist groups. As Iran's ally, Hizballah's patron, and host of Hamas's and Palestine Islamic Jihad's leadership, Syria was bound to be seen by the Bush Administration as being on the wrong side of the essential divide. In time, Syria's support for the "Sunni insurrection" in Iraq, in which al-Qaeda played a leading role, and its continued support for Hizballah and the Palestinian terrorist groups, erased whatever goodwill had emanated from its initial intelligence sharing with Washington.

**U.S. Efforts to Revive the Arab-Israeli Peace Process.**

The Bush Administration's initial dismissive attitude and reluctance toward engagement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking were eventually modified because of increased Palestinian-Israeli clashes. In 2003, the administration felt compelled to help end the fighting and restart negotiations. These efforts were reinforced by the optimism that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the war in Iraq, when it was still considered a success. The United States, together with its Quartet partners (the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations), used its increased prestige to force Yasir Arafat to appoint Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) to the post of prime minister. This provided Israel, at least in theory, with a more attractive negotiating partner.

There were several reasons for the failure of this initiative, not least of them Syria's support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other radical groups that were determined to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Syria, nevertheless, was interested under certain conditions in resuming its own negotiations with Israel. Thus, in 2002 it voted for a watered-down version of the Saudi peace plan that proposed an Arab-Israeli comprehensive settlement. But as long as Washington and

Jerusalem were exclusively focused on the Palestinian track, Damascus could be relied upon to undermine their efforts. This behavior was less evident during the heyday of the Intifada, when the limelight was on Arafat's failure to stop the violence, but with its waning, and particularly after Arafat's death, Syria's role (alongside Iran) in stoking the fire of Palestinian-Israeli violence and in obstructing Abbas's policies became visible.

**Syria's Alliance with Iran.** The Syrian-Iranian alliance dates back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, but the transition in Syria from Hafiz to Bashar al-Asad marked a significant change in the nature of that relationship. Hafiz knew how to create a balance in Syria's relationship with Iran, ensuring that both were on an equal footing. Under his less dexterous son, however, the nature of the relationship shifted from one of equals to one of a patron and client. Part of the reason for the shift was that Iran's power and influence grew, largely as a result of the United States' war in Iraq. This new-found power served as the basis for Iran's manifest quest for regional hegemony. The war and the exacerbation of Sunni-Shi'i tensions in the region led the Bush Administration and its Arab allies increasingly to view Syria as an Iranian outpost in the core area of the Middle East. This was illustrated during Israel's war with Hizballah in the summer of 2006 which, in regional and international terms, was played out as a proxy war between the United States and its allies on one side and Iran and Syria on the other.

In this context it is important to note Israel's raid in northeastern Syria on September 6, 2007. The episode has yet to be fully clarified, but it seems fairly safe to accept press reports and expert analyses that indicate Israel destroyed a nuclear reactor that was supplied and being built by North Korea. Still, intriguing and significant questions remain unanswered: Was it a bilateral Syrian-North Korean venture, or was Iran involved as well? Did the project begin under Hafiz al-Asad or was it launched by Bashar? What was clear, however, was that the Bush Administration decided in September 2007 to join Israel and Syria in playing down the event. Washington probably sought to downplay the event in

order to minimize the repercussions it could have had on its own impending deal with North Korea to dismantle the latter's nuclear program. But Washington could not overlook the far-reaching implications of Syria's decision to acquire a nuclear option in league with at least one member of the president's original "axis of evil" (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea). (This episode is described in further detail below.)

The demonizing effect that Syria's close relationship with Iran had for the Bush Administration's view of Damascus was not shared by all. An alternative perspective saw a possibility in either seeking dialogue with both Iran and Syria or, failing that, using dialogue with Damascus to woo it away from Tehran. This was the perspective adopted by the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton Commission in its report published in December 2006.

**The Future of Lebanon.** Alongside the war in Iraq, developments in Lebanon since 2004 have had the greatest negative impact on the Syrian-U.S. relationship. For a long period of time, the United States had accepted Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. The first Bush Administration allowed a tightening of Syrian control over Lebanon in return for Syria's participation in the 1990 coalition force against Saddam. Subsequently, throughout the 1990s, the Clinton Administration accepted this status quo in Lebanon. The primary reason for the Clinton Administration's position was its drive to forge an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, which would be part of a package that would include a significant upgrading of Syrian-U.S. relations. The assumption in Washington was that Syria would then use its presence in Lebanon to rein in Hizballah. This approach faded alongside most of the Clinton Administration's policies toward the Middle East with the transition to the second Bush Administration in 2001. But it was not until 2004, when the United States began championing Lebanese independence and democracy, that a new American approach toward Syria's influence in Lebanon really emerged.

True to form, the inexperienced Bashar al-Asad overplayed his hand twice in an effort to preserve Syria's

supremacy in Lebanon. First, in 2004 he forced an extension of the term of the Syrian-backed Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, and then was likely involved, at a high level, in the February 2005 assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri. Hariri, a wealthy businessman and a close ally of Saudi Arabia, had been forced out of office by the Syrians. But with strong backing from the United States and France, he staged a comeback and was expected to win the seat of prime minister in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Damascus viewed Hariri as the most serious threat to Syrian sway in Lebanon and therefore looked to remove him. The assassination backfired, however, in that it energized and motivated the domestic and external foes of Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. As a result, large numbers of Lebanese rallied to demand a full withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese territory. The pressure was such that the following month, on March 5, 2005, Asad announced that Syria would withdraw all its forces.

Syria's withdrawal sparked a split in Lebanon. The Lebanese public and the political system polarized into two major camps, each conducting massive demonstrations. On March 8, 2005, Hizballah and supporters of Syria and Iran organized a mass demonstration calling on Syria to keep its troops in Lebanon. Less than a week later, on March 14, a much larger counter-demonstration was held by the Sunni, Druze, and most of the Maronite communities; this bloc came to be known as the March 14 coalition. In May-June 2005, fresh parliamentary elections were held in Lebanon and the March 14 coalition won a majority, which led to the formation of Fuad Seniora's government. At the same time, an international investigation into Hariri's assassination was launched and aggressively conducted by a German magistrate, Detlev Mehlis. For a time it seemed likely that members of the Syrian regime's inner circle would be summoned to appear before an international criminal tribunal as witnesses or suspects.

This chain of events sparked interest within the Bush Administration. Here was the possibility of presenting to the world a shining example of a successful

American effort at bringing democracy to a Middle Eastern country. More so, here was also an example of the United States helping people contend with radical forces who were looking to use violence and terror to bring down a fragile, democratically-elected government. Lebanon thus came to occupy a much more prominent place on the administration's Middle East agenda than its size and strategic weight would otherwise have warranted. An American-Syrian rapprochement or a trilateral American-Israeli-Syrian peace deal now became less likely if Syria were to insist on restoring its position in Lebanon as part of the package. At the same time, the issue of the international tribunal's investigation of the Hariri assassination became an instrument of leverage available to American policymakers; they could push the issue to precipitate a crisis in Syria, or they could tread gently to reward more pliant Syrian behavior.

#### THE UNITED STATES' SYRIA POLICY: EXERTING PRESSURE

Fashioning a Syria policy that would deal effectively with the complex web of issues was a challenging issue for the Bush Administration. The administration avoided choosing either of the two poles on the spectrum of options available: it held back from using force to punish Syria or try to topple the regime but also refused to engage in any effort to normalize relations with Damascus. Instead, it sought to threaten, cajole, and isolate Syria by obstructing its policies and imposing sanctions on it.

The two most notable instances of the Bush Administration exerting pressure occurred in 2003 and 2005, and both were ineffective in altering Syria's behavior. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam in Iraq, amid the backdrop of an American military success next door to Syria, several senior U.S. policymakers made thinly-veiled threats to use force against Syria if it did not change its behavior. Then,

in May 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Damascus and met with President Bashar al-Asad. Though less blunt than some of his colleagues, Powell went through the litany of U.S. grievances against Syria (Syria's conduct in Iraq and Lebanon, its support for Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups, and its possession of weapons of mass destruction) and demanded a change in Syria's policies.

In line with the familiar pattern, Asad promised to accommodate Washington's concerns, but genuine implementation did not follow. Thus, while Syrian authorities publicly instructed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to close their offices in Damascus, they told the groups, with a wink and a nod, that they could effectively work from their homes. In addition, Syria made no serious effort to police its eastern border, enabling Iraqi insurgents to ship supplies and personnel into Iraq. It seems that Asad had concluded that he had reason to fear American troops in Iraq and had decided to help ensure that they would become bogged down there. Washington must have realized shortly thereafter that the pressure it had exerted proved to be ineffective and, worse, that because of this, it was put in the awkward position of having made empty threats.<sup>18</sup>

A similar episode of the United States attempting to pressure Asad took place in 2005, but ultimately it had little success. In the aftermath of Hariri's assassination and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, Asad felt that the Bush Administration was seeking to topple him, using the investigation and the prospect of an international tribunal as the chief instruments of that policy. However, whatever such plans the Bush Administration (or part of it) did entertain were abandoned in short order. By that time, the United States was deep in the Iraqi quagmire and another active front in the Middle East did not fit into its agenda. Furthermore, the Bush Administration came to appreciate that the real alternatives to Asad were not the secular opposition leaders cultivated by the administration but leaders within

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<sup>18</sup> Author's interviews with two senior State Department officials, March 2008.

the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. It took some time for Asad and his associates to realize that the acute pressure was off, and once they did, a series of political assassinations targeting Syria's opponents in Lebanon soon followed.

One of the most critical shortcomings of the Bush Administration's Syria policy was that the administration did not always speak or act with one voice. As a rule, the White House and the National Security Council adopted a harsher line than did the State Department. The hawkish side of the administration usually prevailed, until the end of Bush's tenure when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was able to convince the president of the wisdom of reopening dialogue.

There was an interesting Israeli dimension to the U.S.-Syrian tensions, namely that the United States tried to use Israel to punish Asad. According to a former senior Israeli official, one of his counterparts in the White House encouraged Israel to take action against Syria by widening its military assaults during the 2006 war against Hizballah. According to the same official, at the height of the American-Syrian crisis of 2005, the Syrians were prepared to launch missiles against Israel and American targets in Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

## THE UNITED STATES' SYRIA POLICY: DIALOGUE

In December 2006, as noted above, the Baker-Hamilton Commission presented recommendations calling for an alternative approach to Syria that focused on engaging Damascus in dialogue. The Commission argued that Syria had some ability to influence events in Iraq and held an interest in avoiding chaos there. It recommended that incentives and disincentives should be used to persuade Syria to stem the flow of funding, insurgents, and terrorists across its border into Iraq. It also argued for a renewed and sustained American

commitment to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process that would include Israeli-Syrian negotiations.<sup>20</sup> However, although the Commission's recommendations were ultimately rejected by the Bush Administration, limited American-Syrian contact was established to address Iraq issues. This reflected a relative moderation of policies during the Bush Administration's final two years.

Another opposing American voice in 2007 was that of Nancy Pelosi, the new speaker of the House of Representatives, who gained the position after the Democrats' success in the November 2006 mid-term elections. As part of her April 2007 trip to the Middle East, Pelosi chose to visit Damascus and meet with Asad, despite opposition from the Bush Administration. Pelosi's main motivation may have been the desire to demonstrate that the administration did not have a monopoly over the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. In any event, if she wanted to find an issue to provoke the president, she chose well. Bush responded by criticizing what he saw as sending "mixed signals" that would "lead the Asad government to believe they're part of the mainstream of the international community, when, in fact, they're a state sponsor of terror; when, in fact, they're helping expedite—or at least not stopping the movement of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq; when, in fact, they have done little to nothing to rein in militant Hamas and Hizballah; and when, in fact, they destabilize the Lebanese democracy."<sup>21</sup>

The Pelosi episode caused a brief strain in the relationship between the Bush Administration and the Israeli government of Ehud Olmert. When Pelosi visited Israel prior to her trip to Damascus, she discussed her plans with her two principal hosts, Olmert and Speaker of the Knesset Dalia Itzik. Both seemed to endorse her trip and sent a message of sorts with her to convey to Asad. This clearly incensed the White House, whose

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, 348–49.

<sup>21</sup> President George W. Bush, "President Bush Makes Remarks on the Emergency Supplemental," April 3, 2007. Transcript available at <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070403.html>>; Also, see Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, 349.

anger must have been clear to Olmert because he backed away publicly from his original endorsement.

Syria and the United States conducted another limited dialogue in November 2007, on the eve of the Annapolis Conference. Secretary of State Rice wanted Syria's participation in the Conference primarily to ensure that Damascus would not sabotage her larger diplomatic initiative. She was encouraged in this course by the Israeli government which had its own interest in having Syria participate, primarily to keep things calm along Israel's northern front. Israel's interest made it possible for Rice to overcome the opposition of the White House.

The relative thaw in U.S.-Syrian relations was manifested by an American acknowledgement of a greater Syrian effort to seal its border with Iraq. In addition, the language used by the American conveners on the eve of and during the Conference suggested that while the initial thrust of peacemaking would be on the Palestinian track, Syria's turn would come. But, while Syria participated in the Conference, it chose to send a relatively junior official, indicating its unhappiness with the Bush Administration and its choices. In the end, the Annapolis initiative failed to take off. In the process, significant differences of opinion between the State Department and the White House emerged over U.S. policy toward Syria and the resumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Beyond inviting Syria to Annapolis, Rice wanted to develop a dialogue with Damascus (indeed, she met with Foreign Minister Mu'allim in Turkey on November 3, 2007, a few weeks before Annapolis, and again on the sidelines of United Nations General Assembly in September 2008). She also monitored the progress of the indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations and indicated her support for that give-and-take. During her second meeting with Mu'allim, Rice acknowledged that the Syrians were taking serious steps to seal their border

with Iraq. In contrast to Rice, Bush persisted with his anti-Syrian, anti-Asad view and conduct. Soon after the Annapolis Conference, on December 4, 2007, Bush hosted a group of Syrian dissidents in the Oval Office. Several weeks before this, in September, Bush addressed the United Nations General Assembly and spoke harshly about Syria, lumping it together with Iran.

While Bush refrained from publicly criticizing Olmert's decision to negotiate with Syria, privately the president and several of his aides missed no opportunity to express their unhappiness to Israel. In November 2008, Olmert came to pay Bush a farewell visit. In the visit's aftermath, it was leaked to a senior Israeli journalist that during the visit Bush asked Olmert, "Why do you want to give Asad the Golan for nothing?" Olmert, according to the same report, replied that "it's not for nothing. It's in exchange for a change in the region's strategic alignment." Bush remained dubious and asked Olmert, "Why should you believe him?"<sup>22</sup>

Most significant to the incoming Obama Administration, and telling of Asad's position, is the October 2008 U.S. raid on an al-Qaeda site in northeastern Syria, close to the Iraqi border. There must have been good operational considerations for landing a blow to America's foes across the Syrian border. But the operation should also be seen as part of a legacy left by Bush for his successor. It exposed Syria's complex double-game, triggered an angry Syrian response, and is bound to color any efforts at future American-Syrian dialogue.

## ISRAEL'S SYRIA POLICY: DIALOGUE

When Ehud Olmert succeeded Ariel Sharon as acting prime minister in the winter of 2006, and then as an elected prime minister in the spring of 2006, he initially adopted Sharon's negative attitude toward the renewal of Israeli-Syrian negotiations and the notion of a settlement to the conflict. Instead, he sought a

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<sup>22</sup> Aluf Benn, "Bush to Olmert: Why Are You Giving Syria the Golan for Nothing?" *Haaretz*, November 30, 2008.

mandate for resolving the Palestinian issue and kept the prospect of a deal with Syria—and its Golan Heights price tag—off the agenda. While Asad and senior-level Syrian spokesmen continued to speak of their will to renew the negotiations (coupled with a threat that the alternative to negotiation was war), Olmert rebuffed the overtures. Unofficially, Olmert intimated that this line was at least in part the product of the Bush Administration's opposition to a revival of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, which would obstruct the United States' own efforts at isolating and delegitimizing Asad's regime.

Olmert must have soon realized that an outright rejection of an Arab foe's apparent peace overture was not wise policy. Therefore, rather than reject the idea of negotiations with Syria out of hand, Olmert presented, whenever asked, a list of conditions that Syria would have to meet before negotiations could be restarted. In time, Bush changed his own line as well. He ceased to express opposition to the notion of Israeli-Syrian negotiations and said instead that this was the business of the parties themselves; but, he made clear, the United States would not be party to such a negotiation. Given the fact that Syria viewed peace with Israel as part of a larger settlement with the United States, Bush's new position remained a major obstacle to the conclusion of a new Israeli-Syrian negotiation. But the president's position did provide Olmert with additional diplomatic space to begin that negotiation.

In February 2007, Olmert inaugurated a new phase in Israeli-Syrian negotiations by authorizing the prime minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to mediate secret talks between Israel and Syria. The Turkish mediation, or indirect talks, did not remain secret for very long. This is hardly surprising given the fact that both parties had an interest in publicizing them. Syria was interested in gaining international diplomatic dividends after it had been ostracized by the Bush

Administration, and Olmert wanted to send a message of hope to an Israeli public that had been demoralized by series of negative developments in the region: the specter of Iranian nuclear weapons, hostility in Gaza that held no attractive options for Israel, the replenishment and then further build-up of Hizballah's arsenal in Lebanon, and the danger of an Israeli-Syrian military conflict in the absence of a diplomatic horizon. In a series of press interviews he gave in mid-April 2008, on the eve of the Passover holiday, Olmert emphasized that the Israeli-Syrian talks were a serious dialogue and that he realized the full repercussions of a potential agreement: "I will only say one thing, and I am serious and mean what I say: There is room for a process which will lead to an agreement between Israel and Syria. The Syrians know I want this. They know what my expectations are, and I think I know what their expectations are."<sup>23</sup> Olmert's interviewers identified an important element in the prime minister's revelations and explained to their readers that "his main message is Syria."<sup>24</sup>

There was more to Olmert's actions than a quest for some good news—Olmert had the full support and encouragement of the Israeli national security establishment to seek an opening with Syria. Even if the negotiations did not lead to an agreement, it would open a channel of communication with a significant adversary and would reinforce Israel's hand in its direct negotiations with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and in its indirect give-and-take with Hamas.

The simultaneous announcement by Israel and Syria on May 21, 2008 that they were holding indirect talks that could develop into a full-fledged direct negotiation was a startling development. Although the reasons for the talks reflected significant geo-strategic considerations, its timing (as distinct from the decision to open the dialogue) may well have been a product of Olmert's political and personal problems (Olmert at

<sup>23</sup> Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer, "Olmert: Israel not Under Syrian Nuclear Threat" (Olmert's Passover interview), *Yedioth Ahronoth*, April 20, 2008. Available at <<http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3533720,00.html>>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

that point was under investigation for several corruption charges and was gradually losing political ground which would eventually force him to announce that he would step down).

There was another important dimension to Olmert's decision to establish the Syrian track and to publicize it—Israel's discovery of the North Korean-built nuclear reactor in northeastern Syria, and its successful destruction of the site in September 2007. Subsequently, Israel and Syria became engaged in what can be described as a complex minuet. After Israel made a bold decision and implemented it impeccably, it did not want to humiliate Syria to the point at which Asad would feel compelled to retaliate militarily. As a result, negotiating with Syria, and most importantly publicizing the fact, was a way to provide Asad with an explanation to his own people of why he was not responding with force. In this context it is interesting to note that when the White House belatedly revealed in the spring of 2008 the details concerning the Syrian reactor and the Israeli raid, in order to embarrass the Syrians and their North Korean nuclear suppliers, a prominent spokesman for the Asad regime, Buthayna Sha'ban, claimed that Olmert had agreed to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Olmert's office declined to comment.

The Israeli-Syrian announcement about talks generated a wave of speculation about what may have been accomplished in the indirect talks under Turkish mediation and about Olmert's ability to achieve a significant breakthrough prior to the February 2009 Israeli elections. Despite the intense curiosity and contrary to Israeli political tradition, little has leaked concerning the content and progress of the negotiations. But diplomatic reports from parties with good connections in Ankara suggest that after four rounds of indirect talks in which understandings on security and other issues were reaffirmed, the Turkish mediators asked the parties to come to the fifth round with answers to two questions:

- In the context of peace and security arrangements, what is the line to which Israel would be prepared to withdraw?
- What would be the nature of Syria's relations with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas in the wake of a peace agreement with Israel?

As former ambassador Martin Indyk noted, "The trade has shifted from territories for peace and normalization" to "territories for strategic realignment."<sup>25</sup>

If these accounts are accurate, it would mean that the indirect negotiations have made some significant progress, but the prospect of building on this became impossible due to several factors:

- As a lame duck prime minister, it was questionable whether Olmert had the authority and power to make significant Israeli commitments vis-à-vis Syria, an issue raised by right wing opposition groups. This issue was further exacerbated by the November 26, 2008 announcement that Attorney General Meni Mazuz would indict Olmert.
- It proved impossible to make progress on the negotiations in the middle of an Israeli election campaign in which right wing parties were vociferous in their opposition to withdrawal from the Golan Heights and pro-negotiation politicians like Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak—both of whom were leading their respective parties' campaigns—were silent because they did not wish to walk into political mine fields.
- Syria itself was not pushing for a conclusion to the negotiations before President Obama took office and the Israeli elections determined the identity of the next Israeli prime minister and the composition of the governing coalition. Asad and his diplomats were instead seeking to achieve three things: an explicit Israeli

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Indyk, Book Launch for *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President*, Brookings Institution, December 2, 2008. Transcript available at <[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2008/1202\\_middle\\_east/1202\\_middle\\_east.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2008/1202_middle_east/1202_middle_east.pdf)>.

commitment to withdrawal to the lines of June 1967 (a commitment that eluded them during the past seventeen years); an improved definition of the meaning of that line; and the formalization of a direct negotiation track prior to the January 20 U.S. presidential inauguration, which they hoped would enhance the prospect that the new administration would give preference to the Syrian track.

## REACTIONS TO ISRAELI-SYRIAN DIALOGUE

The indirect talks between Israel and Syria were a source of embarrassment to Bush and his administration. Clearly, Bush was briefed by Olmert before the public May 21 announcement and at least gave a reluctant amber light, but he was quite openly unhappy that Israel and Turkey, two of the United States' closest allies in the region, gave his *bête noire*, Syria, a seal of approval. When he spoke at the Knesset on May 15, 2008, during his visit to Israel to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary, Bush denigrated the idea of negotiations with “terrorists and radicals” as comparable to appeasement of Germany on the eve of World War II.<sup>26</sup> In an interview given to four Israeli journalists the week before Israel and Syria's public announcement, Bush practically let the cat out of the bag by coming close to revealing the impending announcement. He denied that he ever pressured Olmert not to talk to Syria but was fiercely critical of Asad and his regime.<sup>27</sup>

Bush's statement in the Knesset came back to haunt him once the Israeli-Syrian talks were announced. The *New York Times* quoted a Bush Administration official who described Olmert's actions as “a slap in the face.”<sup>28</sup> On the domestic front, Bush's statement in the Knesset was interpreted by Barack Obama's campaign as an attempt to criticize Obama's position of being willing

to have his administration talk to Iran and Syria. The fact that Bush made these comments before an Israeli audience—which would resonate among American Jewish voters—meant the words would be employed politically by both Democrats and Republicans. The speech became part of the American election campaign, enabling Democrats to question Bush's consistency because a week after he denounced Syria in his Knesset speech, he endorsed a Qatari-brokered agreement for Lebanon that agreed to many of Hizballah's demands.<sup>29</sup>

The Bush Administration's anxiety that the very inauguration of Israeli-Syrian negotiations would yield diplomatic dividends to Damascus was soon justified. France, Washington's former partner in protecting Lebanon and the March 14 coalition from Syrian ambitions, wasted little time in reaching out to Asad and his regime. Under the stewardship of President Nicolas Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, France embraced Asad and invited him to appear, together with Olmert and other foreign dignitaries, as an honored guest at France's Bastille Day celebrations in July 2008. This was followed in short order by Sarkozy's attendance with the emir of Qatar and Turkey's prime minister at a four-way summit in Damascus in September 2008, which was modeled as an alternative to the United States-led Middle East Quartet.

When Bush visited Paris in June 2008, prior to France's overtures toward Syria, the difference in opinion regarding Syria came up in the talks between him and Sarkozy. The pattern that had first appeared between Bush and Olmert repeated itself. Bush was critical and skeptical regarding France's contacts with Syria and the legitimization it would afford to the Asad regime, but he agreed not to turn the disagreement into a subject of open debate.

<sup>26</sup> President George W. Bush, “President Bush Addresses Members of the Knesset,” May 15, 2008. Available at <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080515-1.html>>.

<sup>27</sup> David Horowitz, “Bush to Post: Abbas Is a Viable Partner for Peace,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 13, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Helene Cooper, “Advice Given, but Not Always Followed, by White House,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



Criticism of Israel's decision to open negotiations with Syria and of the fashion in which the negotiations were held came from an unexpected source. A senior United Nations official who handled Lebanon on behalf of the United Nations, the Norwegian diplomat Terje Roed-Larsen, criticized Israel's policy in a meeting with Israeli diplomats. Larsen said that "Israel has given Syria a huge

gift, without thus far receiving anything in exchange."<sup>30</sup> According to Larsen, Israel opened the door to European countries who were eager to renew their contacts with Syria but withheld because of international pressures. Larsen's criticism was reported to the Foreign Office in Jerusalem and like so many other Israeli diplomatic dispatches, it found its way to the Israeli media.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Barak Ravid, "UN Envoy: Israel Has Given Syria a 'Huge Gift' for Free," *Haaretz*, June 17, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

## LESSONS FOR THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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It may be safe to assume that the parameters of the trilateral American-Israeli-Syrian relationship that have been described above are not likely to change substantially prior to March 2009. At that time, the Obama Administration's national security team should be in place and the Israeli elections of February 10, 2009 will have produced a new government and a new coalition. The Obama Administration and Israel's new government will most certainly take a fresh look at Middle East diplomacy. The Israeli government will have to decide whether it wants to proceed with the Syrian negotiations, in what fashion, and to what end. It will have to integrate such decisions into a larger strategy that will address the other core issues of Israel's national security policies: its relationship with the new U.S. administration, how to address the Palestinian issue, and what to do about Iran's quest for regional hegemony and a nuclear arsenal.

For the Obama Administration, Syria would be a small, yet significant piece in a larger national security puzzle. Its policy towards Syria and the issue of an Israeli-Syrian peace process is likely to unfold along one of the following four scenarios:

**A Derivative of a Potential American-Iranian Dialogue.** One of the top priorities of the Obama Administration will be to develop an Iran strategy. It may continue (or push further) the Bush Administration's policy of isolation or, more likely, it may explore whether a "grand bargain" with Iran is feasible. Such a

choice would be natural for a president who had advocated an open dialogue approach with Iran during his election campaign.

If a dialogue materializes and unfolds successfully, a new context would be created for Washington's relationship with Damascus. An American-Iranian understanding should cover Iraq, Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. If such an understanding is indeed reached, Syria would no longer be seen as the junior partner of an evil state and therefore U.S.-Syrian accommodation and a new American stewardship of an Israeli-Syrian peace process would be facilitated.

**A By-Product of Lingering Hostility with Iran.** Should the previous option not be pursued or should it fail, the prospect of wooing Syria away from Iran would loom as a joint policy goal for both the United States and Israel. This idea is not new. In fact, the aim of breaking Syria away from Iran was used by the Olmert government in justifying its decision to enter into and publicize indirect negotiations with Syria. A similar rationale was articulated by France when Sarkozy decided to engage with Assad. However, Syria has refused to discuss a change in its relationship with Iran as a precondition to progress in negotiations with Israel. Yet, in the past, various Syrian spokesmen have alluded to the position that Syria's alliance with Iran is not fixed and that it is mostly a result of Washington's rejection of Syria. Such claims can of course be tested, but testing them would not be an easy diplomatic exercise. The Ba'th

regime has a long tradition of straddling the line and Syria's leadership is likely, if a dialogue with the United States is renewed, to try to proceed with that dialogue without actually severing its intimate relationship with Tehran.

Kissinger's success in shifting Egypt in the early and mid-1970s from the Soviet orbit to a pro-American orientation has been cited as a model for pulling Syria away from Iran. It should be noted that a peace process and Egypt's regaining of the Sinai were important dimensions of that successful strategic realignment. It should also be noted that while the Egypt case is an inspiring example, Anwar Sadat was a bold, visionary leader who was willing to jump from the Soviet orbit even before a safe position with the United States had been secured. Hafiz al-Asad showed no such inclination, and thus far, neither has Bashar.

**A Policy of Using Force.** As noted above, the Bush Administration decided to avoid both ends of the spectrum by refraining from either dialogue with or using force against Syria. If the varieties of dialogue mentioned above do not materialize, the Obama Administration could reconsider the option of using force against Syria. However, this is a highly unlikely prospect.

**A Policy of Maintenance.** Should the Obama Administration relegate the Syria issue to a relatively low place on its foreign policy agenda or should it decide to allocate priority to the Palestinian issue, it will have to find a way of keeping it and the question of the U.S. relationship with Syria on hold. If put on the back burner, the Syrian issue may deteriorate into direct or indirect conflict, similar to what occurred in earlier decades. Therefore, a strategy of conflict management will be necessary.

## POSTSCRIPT

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Since the completion of this manuscript, two major developments have taken place:

**The Inauguration of Barack Obama.** The new administration has yet to put together and articulate an integrated policy toward the Middle East, but some of the elements of a policy that had been put forth during the campaign have been emphatically reiterated. Most notably, the administration has made clear its determination to open a dialogue with the Islamic world and more specifically with Iran, and to assign priority to dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

**The War in the Gaza Strip.** Israel's war in the Gaza Strip with Hamas that occurred on the eve of the January 20 inauguration played an important role in pushing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the head of the line of what the Obama Administration will address. But the war also has had important repercussions for Syria's role in the region and its relationship with the United States and Israel:

- Israel's military operation provided Syria with an excellent opportunity to end its indirect negotiations with Israel's outgoing prime minister. From Syria's perspective, the indirect negotiations had run their course and by terminating them, Damascus could display support for its

client, Hamas, and the people of Gaza without giving up any valuable assets.

- The outbursts against Israel by Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, including at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 29, has greatly diminished his capacity to act as a mediator between Israel and Syria. This may facilitate a decision by Washington to become the sponsor of a renewed Israeli-Syrian dialogue.
- The fighting in the Gaza Strip brought to a head the conflict between the radical axis in the Middle East that hoists the slogan of *muqawama* (resistance) and its two rivals—Israel and conservative Arab states. The latter, with all the countervailing restraints, were actually supportive of Israel's actions and critical of Hamas and its two principal patrons—Iran and Syria. Israel drew several lessons from the unsuccessful war in Lebanon in 2006 and applied them successfully in the Gaza Strip, but at the end of the day concluded that it could not pursue its campaign to the end and eliminate Hamas and its government. The implication of this is that Iran and Syria will continue to have a base in the Gaza Strip. In the coming years, as Washington and Jerusalem go through the calculus of reviewing their respective relationships with Damascus, this reality will have to be taken into account.

## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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