
The Syria Temptation— and Why Obama Must Resist It

Bret Stephens

“START WITH Syria.” Thus did Aaron David Miller advise the incoming Obama administration on where its Mideast peacemaking priorities should lie. Miller, a former State Department official who first made a name for himself as a leading American negotiator in the Arab-Israeli peace processes of the 1990’s, had lost his faith that a deal between Israel and the Palestinians was possible, at least in the near term. But he was more sanguine about the prospects of an Israeli-Syrian deal, and confident about the good that could come of it. As he put it in a *Washington Post* op-ed in November 2008:

Here there are two states at the table, rather than one state and a dysfunctional national movement. A quiet border, courtesy of Henry Kissinger’s 1974 disengagement diplomacy, prevails. And there are fewer settlers on the Golan Heights and no megaton issues such as the status of Jerusalem to blow up the talks. Indeed the issues are straightforward—withdrawal [by Israel from the Golan Heights], peace, security and water—and the gaps are clear and ready to be bridged.

For a President looking for a way to buck up America’s credibility, an Israeli-Syrian agreement offers a potential bonus. Such a deal would begin to realign the region’s architec-

ture in a way that serves broader U.S. interests. The White House would have to be patient. Syria won’t walk away from a 30-year relationship with Iran; weaning the Syrians from Iran would have to occur gradually, requiring a major international effort to marshal economic and political support for Damascus. Still, an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty would confront Hamas, Hizballah and Iran with tough choices and reduced options.

In making his case, Miller was putting some distance between himself and erstwhile Clinton administration colleagues, most of whom seem eager to re-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace process where it left off eight years ago. But in his enthusiasm for an aggressive new effort by the new administration to engage Syria diplomatically—both directly and as an intermediary with Israel—Miller’s views mesh perfectly with the segment of the U.S. foreign policy establishment that has the ear of the Obama administration.

And not just that segment. The “Syria track” has long been advocated by Republicans like former Secretary of State James Baker, who pushed the concept as part of the 2006 report of the Iraq Study Group. It was embraced, too, by Condoleezza Rice during her tenure at Foggy Bottom; she reversed the Bush administration’s efforts to isolate Bashar al-Assad’s regime by inviting it to participate in the November 2007 Annapolis Peace Conference. Even important voices in Israel agree. In May

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2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert acknowledged that his government had been pursuing secret negotiations with Syria under Turkish auspices. “The renewal of negotiations with Syria after eight years of freeze is certainly exciting, but beyond that, it is a national duty that must be exploited,” he told a Tel Aviv audience. “The years that passed since the [Israeli-Syrian] negotiations were frozen did no good to our security situation on our northern border, which is the main source of our concern for regional deterioration.”

SAY WHAT you will about the advisability—either for Israel or the United States—of engaging the Syrians, the growing consensus on the notion constitutes one of the great surprises of recent Middle East diplomacy. For when it comes to the Syria track, the U.S. and Israel have walked down this road before, again and again, almost always with disappointing results.¹ Then, too, it was just a few years ago that the Assad regime was almost universally in bad odor, not just in Israel, but on both sides of the political aisle in the U.S., and in much of the Arab world.

Cast your mind back to Ehud Barak’s landslide victory over Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel’s 1999 elections. At the time, Israel had been engaged in a diplomatic process with Syria for most of that decade, beginning with the 1991 Madrid peace conference, which Syria attended only reluctantly and which it did its utmost to spoil.

Two years later, just weeks before the signing of the September 1993 Oslo Accords, then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin made a secret overture to then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, offering to withdraw Israel fully from the Golan Heights, on terms and in ways roughly similar to those that had formed the basis of Israel’s phased withdrawal from the Sinai and its peace with Egypt in the 1970’s.²

Assad replied by insisting that he would accept nothing less than Israel’s rapid withdrawal to the boundary that existed between the two nations on June 4, 1967, before the start of the Six-Day war. Those lines had never actually been drawn on any map. But were Israel to have implemented such a plan, Syrian sovereignty would have expanded by some 66 square kilometers *beyond* the now-recognized international border. In return, Assad offered Israel only minimal assurances on security.

Rabin’s answer was to agree to the June 4 line, albeit with various conditions and assurances. This wasn’t quite enough for Assad. As efforts at negotiation wore on and became increasingly tortured,

Rabin, who had begun his peacemaking efforts with a relatively high opinion of Assad and a correspondingly low one of Arafat, changed his mind. “At least Arafat is prepared to do things that are difficult for him,” Rabin told Dennis Ross, the Clinton administration’s Middle East point man, in the summer of 1995. “Assad wants everything handed to him and he wants to do nothing for it.”

After Rabin’s assassination that November, Assad pointedly refused to offer condolences to his widow, Leah, despite U.S. pressure to do so. Still, Rabin’s successor, Shimon Peres, remained eager for a deal, and even proposed flying to Damascus as a dramatic demonstration of the seriousness of his intent. Again, the Syrians demurred. Israeli and Syrian negotiators did meet extensively, if inconclusively, at the Wye River Plantation in Maryland in early 1996. But the negotiations were cut short by a string of devastating suicide bombings in Israel, carried out by Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad, both of which are sponsored by Damascus.

A “Summit of Peacemakers” was held shortly thereafter to help shore up regional support for the peace process. Assad declined the invitation to attend. Later in the year, Netanyahu became prime minister and put the Syria track on ice for three years, though he did pursue contacts with Assad through private channels.

This, then, is where matters stood when Ehud Barak came to power in 1999, eager to pick up where the talks at Wye River had left off. Here is Ross, in his book *The Missing Peace* (2004), describing Barak’s thinking on the subject, which closely resembles the case Aaron Miller would make almost a decade later:

¹ The notable exception to these disappointments, cited by Miller, was the “shuttle diplomacy” between Jerusalem and Damascus of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger following the 1973 Yom Kippur war. In his book, *The Much Too Promised Land* (2008), Miller describes the diplomacy as follows: “In the spring of 1974 Assad, who had been badly beaten by the Israelis on the battlefield, wanted an agreement to push Israeli forces back, but as Rodman [the late Peter Rodman, at the time an assistant to Kissinger] recalls, he wanted to make Kissinger ‘sweat for it,’ and he did. Assad refused to dispatch his foreign minister to Kissinger’s Geneva conference in December 1973, and he opened negotiations by insisting upon the return of the entire Golan Heights, then magnanimously reducing his territorial claims for a disengagement agreement by half. . . . The Israeli political and military leadership never seemed to get over the fact that a man who had lost the war now preened and made demands as if he were the victor.”

² Parts of the Golan Heights were seized by Israel during the Six-Day war in 1967 and were the site of the most blistering fighting during the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Israel formally placed the areas under its control in 1981 under Israeli law, a de-facto annexation. In the decades since, approximately 17,000 Israelis have made their homes there, and the region has become a profitable source of agricultural export, particularly in the making of wine.

Barak was also far more attracted to dealing with Hafez al-Assad than to dealing with Yasir Arafat. In his eyes, Assad was everything Arafat wasn't. He commanded a real state, with a real army, with thousands of tanks and hundreds of missiles; he was a tough enemy, but one who kept his word and was respected and feared by other leaders in the region.

Finally, Barak, like Yitzhak Rabin, saw a peace agreement with Syria as the best hedge against the threats coming down the road from Iran and Iraq. Insulating Israel from these countries, building a common regional coalition against them in the area, all depended on finding common cause with Syria.

Yet for all of Barak's eagerness to reach out to Syria, the Syrians were considerably less eager to reciprocate. Indeed, their first "overtures" to Barak consisted of a series of calculated snubs, beginning with the demand not only that Israel withdraw to the June 4 "line," but that it relinquish sovereignty over a portion of Lake Kinneret, the body of water also known as the Sea of Galilee. The lake, a critical component of Israel's fresh-water supply, has always been legally recognized as sovereign Israeli territory, and the demand is one no Israeli government could possibly concede.³

Next, Syria insisted that any negotiations at the "political level" be conducted with Barak himself, not his foreign minister David Levy. Assad, however, would not represent Syria in person, but sent his foreign minister, Farouq al-Shara, instead. Incredibly, Barak agreed, despite the implicit insult and despite the disadvantage to which it put him in the negotiations. In Washington, at the first joint public appearance of Barak and Shara, Barak spoke briefly and to the point about the "devotion that will be needed in order to begin this march, together with our Syrian partners, to make a different Middle East where nations are living side by side in peaceful relations and in mutual respect and good neighborliness."

With President Bill Clinton looking on, Shara responded to Barak's politesse with a lengthy broadside against Israelis, whose concerns about security he depicted as a kind of psychological disorder stemming from "the existence of occupation," and with a lament that the international media had "totally ignored" Arab suffering. To cap it off, Shara refused publicly to shake Barak's hand. Clinton was aghast.

Predictably, things went downhill from there, when the negotiations moved a few weeks later

from Washington to Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Though much ink has been spilled (including by Ross) explaining the ways in which Barak's diplomatic tactics aggrieved or offended his Syrian counterparts at those talks, such criticisms seemed to reside in a universe in which only Syria's national pride and domestic political considerations needed to be taken into account. It is true that Barak was less than completely magnanimous in those negotiations, as Damascus bitterly complained. But Barak's hesitation was due largely to his political need not to appear to be giving away the store to a regime that had so conspicuously spurned him only two weeks before.

The Syrians could not have been unaware of the effect that its statements and behavior had on Israeli public opinion, and how that in turn would constrain Barak's room for political maneuver. Indeed, just weeks after the Shepherdstown failure, Shara delivered a speech to the Arab Writers Union in which he explained that Syria's interest in a negotiated settlement with Israel had nothing to do with actually coming to terms with Israel's right to exist, but rather that the recovery of the Golan Heights was merely a stage on the road to the destruction of Israel. Assad's government "believes that regaining the whole of Palestine is a long-term strategic goal that could not be implemented in one phase," said Shara. "[Our] doctrine draws a distinction between the different phases of the struggle for the liberation of Palestine."

Still, Barak pressed ahead. Despite growing Israeli skepticism about the wisdom of returning the Golan, Barak agreed to an offer in which Israel would relinquish the heights entirely, with only a narrow territorial buffer of about 500 meters to separate the Syrian border from the Sea of Galilee along its northeastern shore. Against the advice of

³ The international border was demarcated in the early 1920's, separating what was then French mandate-Syria and British mandate-Palestine. Lake Kinneret fell entirely within the British mandate, albeit with a 10-meter-wide shoreline along the lake's northeastern shore. The 1949 armistice between Israel and Syria maintained that razor-thin buffer, which Israel could not realistically defend and which the Syrians occasionally violated by stationing troops on the shore. The precise disposition of forces on June 4, 1967 is a matter of dispute between Israel and Syria, and there is no map to settle the question, making it ripe for a compromise. Barak's proposal would have extended the northeast territorial buffer beyond the international line, while compensating the Syrians with an equivalent amount of Israeli territory (as defined by the international border) on the southeastern side of the lake.

None of this should distract from the fact that even under the most "maximalist" of Barak's proposals, Syria would have recovered the Golan Heights in their entirety, with their commanding view of Israel thousands of feet below.

his own generals, he decreed that Syrian military forces would not have to remain behind certain lines within Syria, as previous Israeli negotiating formulas demanded (and as Egypt had agreed to do by keeping its army out of the Sinai). What Barak asked for was a tiny, temporary presence of an Israeli monitoring team on Mount Hermon, along with some good-will gestures from Syria. It was enough to persuade President Clinton that he could sell the deal personally to Assad.

This time, Assad decided not only to reject Barak's proposal outright, but also to humiliate an American President for good measure. According to Ross, Clinton was prepared to spend a week in Geneva to mediate an Israeli-Syrian deal. Assad, however, would only give him a day. When informed that Barak was willing to settle on a "commonly agreed" border based on the June 4 line, Assad called that concession "a problem." As for the width of the proposed Israeli buffer, a question that had consumed countless hours of debate, deliberation, and creative thinking in previous rounds of negotiation, Assad disposed of the matter at once. "The lake," he told Clinton, "has always been our lake; it was never theirs."

The assertion of Syrian sovereignty over the Sea of Galilee was intended to derail the negotiations, and derail them it did. Assad died a few months later, in June 2000.

IN REVIEWING this sorry history, one must ask: Why, exactly, did it fail so badly? Was the Syria track cursed by bad luck? Did its failure owe to problems of process and tactics? Or were the very premises of the negotiation—that Assad had made or would make a strategic choice for peace, that there was a deal to be reached on terms acceptable to him and to Israel, and that he and successors would abide by the deal—fundamentally mistaken? Was the peace "missed," as the title of Dennis Ross's memoir implies, or was there never any hope of one to begin with?

With Ross, one gets the impression he believes it was some kind of combination of bad luck and poor decision-making. If only Shimon Peres had won rather than narrowly lost the 1996 election, for example, Ross is sure a deal with Syria could have been reached. Similarly, if only an Israeli hadn't leaked certain details of the Shepherdstown meeting to the press, or if Barak hadn't kept a potential concession or two in his pocket, it might not have caused the mood in Damascus to sour. And so on.

If anything, though, the Clinton administration had nothing but good luck on its side. It inherited a

uniquely auspicious set of historical circumstances when it came to office: Syria's loss of its Soviet patron; the precedent of the Madrid conference and the meeting there between Israelis and rejectionist Arabs for the first time in an international forum; the creation of the "peace process" as a mechanism of conciliation; and America's unrivaled prestige in the region in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf war. In Rabin, Peres, and Barak, the administration had three Israeli prime ministers prepared to give up the Golan very nearly in its entirety, and who demanded far less of Assad than Israel got from Anwar Sadat in the 1979 Sinai deal. And, in men like Ross, the administration had dedicated and talented mediators who conducted skillful negotiations and won the trust of both sides.

No, the real problem lay in Syria, though exactly what that problem was, and is, remains much in dispute. According to Warren Christopher—another famous victim of a gratuitous insult by Assad, who in 1996 refused to grant the visiting U.S. Secretary of State an audience—the Syrian leader was not opposed to a deal per se, but was undone by "his mistrust and suspicion of what was being offered." As Christopher told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 1997, Assad "examined [the Israeli offers] so extensively and exhaustively that he missed an opportunity. If he had been responsive and done the public things that we urged and also responded substantively, I think much more progress would have been done."

Assuming that had been true, one might have expected the Syrians would have reconsidered their methods, particularly during the three years when Netanyahu was in power, in order to seize on the opportunity presented to them by the 1999 election of Barak. Instead, Syria became even more inflexible—indicating that what Christopher saw as an excess of caution could as easily be interpreted as yet another instance in which Assad overplayed his hand.

A more plausible explanation comes from Patrick Seale, Assad's sympathetic biographer and a fierce critic of Israel. In a 1996 article in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, he argued that no deal between Israel and Syria was ever likely to emerge, because each side had a different notion of what "peace" should achieve. For Israel, Seale believed, peace meant extending its influence throughout the region through non-military means. For Assad, by contrast, it meant the opposite:

Comprehensive peace is not about normalization...but about holding the line against Israel...to shrink its influence to more modest

and less aggressive proportions, which the Arab players in the Middle East could accept and live with.

Yet even this is too charitable to the Syrians. As Shara later indicated with his speech to the Arab Writers Union, Syria's long-term goals were not restricted simply to cutting the Jewish state down to size. Assad understood that Syria was unlikely to defeat Israel militarily. But that was no reason not to help set the stage for it, if not in his lifetime, then perhaps in his successor's.

Assad also understood that his interests did not lie in joining the ranks of international pariahs such as Libya's Muammar Qaddafi or Iraq's Saddam Hussein. But that meant only that he was prepared to make token gestures of cooperation with the West, such as attending the Madrid conference or bringing Israel and the U.S. along for his version of a "peace process."

On substance, though, his behavior was not so different from Qaddafi's or Saddam's. Like them, he sought to dominate his smaller neighbors militarily, as he did in Lebanon from the mid-1970's onward. Like them, he championed a secular version of Arab radicalism. Like them, too, he turned Damascus into a sponsor and host of various terrorist organizations, each of them at war with one of Syria's neighbors. *Vis-à-vis* Turkey, it was the Kurdish PKK of Abdullah Ocalan. *Vis-à-vis* Israel, it was groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (General Command), Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. *Vis-à-vis* Lebanon, it was a rotating list of militias, terrorist groups, and assorted guns-for-hire, likely including Elie Hobeika, perpetrator of the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacres of 1982.

Syria is a dictatorship, and dictatorships typically need external enemies to furnish a gloss of domestic legitimacy to their rule. As a result, modern Syria has been a scourge of all of its neighbors, not just Israel but also Turkey, with which it nearly went to war in 1998; Jordan, which it invaded in 1970; Iraq, against which it supplied troops in the 1991 Gulf war; and Lebanon, which it has sought to dominate, either directly or indirectly, for many decades.

Assad's sense of himself as the anti-Sadat, the natural leader of the "rejectionist" front that would never come to terms with the legitimacy of Israel's existence, cannot be understood without reference to the peculiarities of Syria's domestic politics. His secular, Arabist Baath Party was naturally in competition with, and threatened by, Syria's powerful Muslim Brotherhood. Even if Assad had been so

inclined, he could hardly allow himself to make concessions to Israel that the Brotherhood could credibly trumpet as a sellout of both Islamic and Syrian interests. That consideration was powerfully reinforced by Assad's religious identity as an Alawite, a group that makes up about 12 percent of Syria's population, is theologically closer to Shiism than to the country's predominant Sunnism, and is often considered heretical by orthodox Sunni clerics. Peace with Israel, in this calculus, risked the security not only of Assad's regime, but also, conceivably, of his own sect.

No wonder, then, that when Bashar, Assad's son and successor, was asked in March 2003 by a Lebanese newspaper whether Israel would ever be granted any kind of genuine recognition by Syria, his answer was categorical. "It is inconceivable," he said, "that Israel will become a legitimate state even if the peace process is implemented."

And then he offered this:

It should be known that Israel is based on treachery. This is a point to be considered thoroughly. We are dealing with treachery and threats, which accompanied the establishment of Israel.... It is the Israeli nature, and for that Israel was established.⁴

BASHAR ASSAD ascended to power almost immediately upon his father's death in June 2000. He was then not quite 35 years old, a doctor, trained as an ophthalmologist in Britain, with an attractive British-born wife who had previously worked as an international banker. Surely, it was said, the younger Assad would seek to modernize his country, liberalize its politics, and reach out to his neighbors. There were also predictions that he would not last long in office, that he lacked the toughness and the nerve of his father, and that the ruling establishment was merely biding its time until it could settle on a more suitable officeholder.

Neither prediction was borne out. In his first year in office, Assad allowed what came to be known as the "Damascus Spring." Courageous Syrian intellectuals emerged from obscure corners to call for political reform and democracy, and Assad himself pushed for the creation of a private banking system. By the end of 2001, however, many of those intellectuals were in jail, and today, the economy remains mainly in state hands.

Following these abortive moves toward liberalization, Assad tacked sharply in the opposite direc-

⁴ The translation of the quotation was provided by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI).

tion, staking out positions and making remarks that even his father might have considered excessively radical and needlessly provocative. At an appearance with the late Pope John Paul II in 2001, he accused Jews of trying “to kill the principle of religions with the same mentality they betrayed Jesus Christ.” He told Colin Powell that Iraq was not exporting oil through a Syrian pipeline in violation of then-extant UN sanctions—a bald-faced lie to an American Secretary of State. He alienated Egypt by authorizing demonstrations against its embassy in Damascus and calling on it to go to war with Israel. He also upgraded his relationship with Hizballah in Lebanon by meeting frequently with its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, something Assad’s father had never done.⁵

Then there was the matter of Assad’s relationships with the members of the “Axis of Evil,” from which Syria was charitably excluded by President George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address. With Iraq, Assad abandoned his father’s longstanding adversarial policy toward Saddam to call for an “Arab Defense Agreement” in which Arab countries would fight for their brethren in the event of an invasion. He supplied Saddam’s retreating army with military equipment, including night-vision goggles and anti-tank weapons. Following Baghdad’s liberation, he called openly for Iraqi “resistance” to the U.S. occupation, and facilitated it by allowing Syria to become the de-facto headquarters of the Iraqi insurgency, as well as the way station for foreign jihadists crossing into Iraq.

As for Syria’s fellow dynastic dictatorship, North Korea, its ties to Damascus are of long standing: Suspicions that Pyongyang was shipping Scud missiles to Syria date back at least to the early 1990’s. What was striking about Bashar Assad’s approach is that he publicly upgraded his military ties to Kim Jong-Il *after* the Bush administration had put the world on notice that it would punish regimes trafficking in weapons of mass destruction. In July 2002, the BBC reported that North Korea and Syria had signed “an agreement on scientific and technological cooperation.” A second agreement, on “marine transport,” was inked in May 2005. The real nature of these agreements did not go unnoticed: In September 2007, Israeli warplanes destroyed what is now almost universally acknowledged to have been a nuclear reactor, built on the North Korean model with North Korean help, in the deserts of eastern Syria.⁶

Finally, there is Iran. Among the more common misperceptions feeding the hope of persuading Bashar Assad to make peace with Israel is the no-

tion that Damascus’s alliance with Tehran is primarily one of convenience and inherently unnatural, since one regime is Arab, secular, and primarily Sunni, while the other is Persian, theocratic, and Shiite. In this reading, Iran and Syria were first brought together mainly by a mutual loathing of Saddam Hussein, and a joint need to contain him. Following Iraq’s liberation, the two countries were again brought together by the perceived threat from the United States. But, so this line of thinking goes, with America soon to exit Iraq, the alliance is bound to fray. “As soon as the United States leaves and all the powers are trying to figure out who’s going to rule Iraq, and how, Syria is going to want Sunnis to have more power, Iran is going to want Shiites to have more power, and they’re going to fall out over this,” Josh Landis, a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma, told National Public Radio in 2007.

The analysis here is incorrect in almost every respect. Yes, Syria and Iran shared an enemy in Saddam’s Iraq and later in U.S.-occupied Iraq. But relations between Syria and Iran were frosty throughout most of the 1970’s, despite Syria’s equally frosty relations with Iraq. The elder Assad only really warmed to Iran after the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, ended the Shah’s policy of close ties to the West (including Israel), and put Iran squarely in the anti-American and anti-Israel rejectionist camp.

Beyond Iraq, Syria and Iran also found common cause in Lebanon, where in the 1980’s they joined forces against the U.S. and Israel and later sought to promote the fortunes of Hizballah. Nor were the ostensible sectarian differences between Iran and Syria any bar to better relations, either, since the Assad regime is hardly less suspicious of Sunnis than is Tehran.

Indeed, the degree to which the younger Assad has cultivated his ties to Iran goes well beyond anything his father would likely have countenanced, if only out of innate Arab pride and an unwillingness completely to subordinate his interests to Tehran’s. The two countries have signed dozens of commer-

⁵ For this chronicle of Assad’s early missteps, I am indebted to a perceptive essay by Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University. “Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2003.

⁶ The file on Syria’s development and possession of weapons of mass destruction is a thick one, if admittedly somewhat speculative, and goes well beyond its abortive attempts to develop nuclear capabilities. According to the website globalsecurity.org, “the Syrian arsenal is said to be comprised mostly of large amounts of Sarin in addition to tabun [and] mustard gas and is reportedly producing and weaponizing VX. Exact volumes of weapons in the Syrian stockpile are difficult to know. The CIA has estimated Syria to possess several hundred liters of chemical weapons with hundreds of tons of agents produced annually.”

cial agreements, and Iran provides an estimated \$1.5 billion in scarce foreign direct investment in Syria. Military ties have also deepened; the nuclear reactor destroyed by Israel is suspected to have been built with some form of Iranian participation. In 2007, Assad inaugurated an Iranian car factory in Syria with the remark that “I affirm, on this occasion, that the relations [between Syria and Iran] would not be shaken for any reason or under any circumstance.”

The relationship between Syria and Iran, in other words, is in no danger of fraying. Rather, it has been deepening, and there is no reason to expect it will not continue to deepen.

THE YOUNGER Assad has also deepened his relationship with Lebanon, a country he received as a de-facto satrapy from his father, and which was crucial to Syria’s economic well-being, its position against Israel, and its utility for Iran. The story of the relationship comes in two parts: First, of how Assad’s brutality nearly lost him control over Lebanon; and second, of how his brutality served him to claw control back.

In the summer of 2004, Assad baldly decided to seek an extension of the term of Emile Lahoud, the nominal president of Lebanon and a Syrian puppet. He then demanded that Rafik Hariri, Lebanon’s charismatic and independence-minded prime minister, go along with the decision. “This extension is to happen or else I will break Lebanon over your head,” Assad reportedly told Hariri. “So you either do as you are told or we will get you and your family wherever they are.”

Hariri’s answer was to resign as prime minister, even as he vowed to deputy Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Moallem that Lebanon would “no longer” be ruled by Syria. Moallem, in turn, warned Hariri that he was “in a corner,” and that he should “not take things lightly.” On February 14, 2005, Hariri and 21 others were killed by a truck bomb carrying 2,200 pounds of explosives.⁷

The assassination of Hariri provoked universal revulsion and was instantly blamed on Syria—a verdict amply confirmed by the preliminary reports of a UN investigation that is still ongoing. Mass demonstrations in Beirut, along with strong American, Saudi, and French pressure (Hariri had been a personal friend of then-French President Jacques Chirac), forced the exit of the 15,000 Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon. For a few brief months, Lebanon allowed itself to believe it was finally free.

Assad, however, wasn’t done with Lebanon. Beginning that June, prominent Lebanese critics of

Syria were killed and maimed, usually in their cars, by sophisticated methods. Syria’s hand in these murders is also widely suspected. The clear goal of the killings was to paralyze the pro-Western government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, and it was achieved. By the following year, 2006, most of Siniora’s political allies had either fled Lebanon or were living, in fear for their lives, in a heavily guarded Beirut hotel.

That same year, Damascus vied with Tehran for the honor of serving as Hizballah’s main cheerleader in the 2006 summer war with Israel. After the war, Syria distinguished itself by openly flouting the provisions of the cease-fire agreement (UN Security Council Resolution 1701) that called on governments to prevent the flow of arms to Hizballah. In May 2007, a Sunni terrorist group called Fatah al-Islam opened fire on the Lebanese army and took refuge in a Palestinian refugee camp, forcing a months-long military confrontation that ended with a government victory. Once again, widespread Lebanese belief, backed by a persuasive body of evidence, points to Syrian sponsorship of the group.⁸

Ultimately—and, in hindsight, amazingly—Syria salvaged its position in Lebanon after Hariri’s assassination. The 2006 war in Lebanon served to enhance Hizballah’s prestige throughout much of the Arab world, and therefore the prestige of its state patrons. Last May, after the Lebanese government attempted to dismantle a Hizballah telecommunications network at the Beirut airport, the group sent armed men into the streets to reverse the decision. It succeeded, at a price of more than 60 lives. Hizballah also gained the right to a veto power over all government decisions, while helping to install a presidential successor to Emile Lahoud who was acceptable to Syria. The successor, former Lebanese army commander Michel Suleiman, explicitly called for closer ties to Syria in his inaugural address, and welcomed visits from Moallem, now Syria’s foreign minister, and Manoucher Mottaki, Moallem’s Iranian counterpart.

⁷ It bears notice that the Moallem who threatened Hariri is the same man Dennis Ross describes in *The Missing Peace* as a “man of intellect and humor” who was “genuinely committed to achieving peace.” Ross’s book was published before Hariri’s assassination, but his description of his Syrian counterpart testifies to Ross’s naiveté as a judge of human character, as well as the true character of even the most likable members of the Assad regime.

⁸ In one of Seymour Hersh’s more discreditable pieces of journalism, the *New Yorker* reporter suggested in a March 5, 2007 article (“The Redirection”) that Fatah al-Islam was being armed by the Siniora government. It was an odd claim, given that the government would go to war with the group only two months later.

Thus it is that Syria, so promising to Aaron David Miller and others as an interlocutor for peace, has effectively installed one of the groups functioning as part of the existential threat to Israel as the dominating political force inside Israel's neighbor, Lebanon.

FUTURE HISTORIANS of the Middle East will no doubt ponder how it was that Assad, inexperienced and brazen, managed to provoke the U.S., outrage world opinion, lose his stranglehold on Lebanon, risk war with Israel, have his nuclear ambitions exposed—and then emerge from it all in a comparatively strong position, with both Israel and the U.S. knocking on his door and seeking rapprochement. Was it luck or was it skill?

One factor that plainly played a part was the incoherence of U.S. policy. The Bush administration had the reputation of being tough on Syria, and in some instances it was. In 2004, it imposed sanctions and engineered the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. After Hariri's assassination, the U.S. withdrew its ambassador from Damascus and later pushed for the creation of an independent UN tribunal to try the case. And in October 2008, it ordered a brief cross-border raid into eastern Syria to kill a leader of al Qaeda in Iraq who had taken refuge just across the border.

Yet the administration's bark was always worse than its bite. The sanctions President Bush imposed were the weakest among the menu of options mandated to him by the Syria Accountability Act, passed by Congress in the wake of the Iraq war and the discovery of Syria's active harboring of the anti-American insurgency. Indeed, the raid into Syria only happened after more than five years of collusion. After a strong start, the UN investigation into Hariri's murder has been left to drift; it is an open question whether the case will ever be brought to court. The U.S. never demanded serious enforcement of Resolution 1701, even when it was clear that Syria had violated it by helping to replenish Hizballah's arsenal to levels exceeding its pre-war strength. President Bush himself hailed the agreement that consolidated Hizballah's grip on the Lebanese political process.

Underlying these moves was a profound ambivalence in Washington about the desirability of regime change in Syria, which, it was feared, a more direct confrontation with Damascus might produce. It didn't help that the most high-profile political challenge to the regime—the so-called

National Salvation Front—was organized by a former top lieutenant of the elder Assad and included the participation of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood.

Prominent voices within the administration, particularly Colin Powell's, favored diplomatic démarches over military strikes as a way of altering Syrian behavior. The Central Intelligence Agency, grateful for whatever morsels of intelligence Syria might be willing to provide, was only too eager to preserve its relationship with the Assad regime. In 2007, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi paid a visit to Damascus, for which she was sternly criticized by the White House. Nevertheless, Condoleezza Rice sought to engage Moallem in diplomatic parleys that led up to the Annapolis conference in 2007.

As for Israel, the notion that Assad can be steered toward a more conciliatory path remains an article of faith among ranking members of its intelligence community. They, in turn, exert a powerful influence not only on Israeli policymakers but also their American counterparts. After all, if Jerusalem feels comfortable making overtures to Damascus, why should Washington object?

Almost inevitably, then, the rejection of regime change as a policy option has pushed the U.S. back toward a bias for engagement—the notions of containment or ostracism apparently having been cast aside by a foreign-policy bureaucracy always hankering for the elusive breakthrough. Perhaps its most sophisticated proponent is Martin Indyk, a Clinton-era ambassador to Israel, who last year made the case in testimony to Congress.

To his credit, Indyk was quick to acknowledge that his experience in dealing with Syria "made [him] supremely conscious of the likelihood that the Syrian regime seeks a peace 'process' rather than an end to its conflict with Israel." Nevertheless, he believed that even a process that did *not* lead to an agreement could have its advantages. It could, he said, "spook" Iran and "generate tensions and frictions between Damascus and Tehran." It could put Hamas under greater pressure to moderate its activities, for fear of being abandoned by its Syrian patron. It could give the U.S. additional leverage over Syria, by which it could help shore up Lebanon's interests. And it could give Palestinians the "political cover" they need in the Arab world at large to resume their own negotiations with Israel.

Yet even as avid a peace processor as Indyk was forced to concede that the main reason Syria seemed prepared for negotiations was that "the Bush administration has managed through its poli-

cy of isolation to get Assad's attention." But if isolation were the key to bringing Assad to the table, how could the U.S. induce him to remain there once he no longer felt isolated? Then, too, as Indyk acknowledged, Assad's record as a negotiator was not a good one:

Just about every leader that has attempted to deal with President Bashar al-Assad has come away frustrated. The list includes Colin Powell, Tony Blair, Nicolas Sarkozy, Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah. The cause of their frustration is the disconnect between Assad's reasonableness in personal meetings and his regime's inability or unwillingness to follow through on understandings reached there. It is unclear whether this is because of a lack of will or a lack of ability to control the levers of power. Either way, it raises questions about the utility of a policy of engagement.

Despite these wise words of caution, Indyk concluded that engagement was "an idea worth testing by the next President." Testing it is precisely what the Obama administration now looks set to do. But implicit in Indyk's sober recommendation is the assumption that while success would have many up-sides, failure would have no downside.

This is a dubious assumption at best.

THOUGH THE Clinton administration's Mideast forays are now remembered as a hallowed period of robust and engaged American diplomacy, their achievements were relatively meager: The only lasting peace to emerge from the various processes was the one between Israel and Jordan. And that particular agreement demanded hardly any process at all, but rather was the result of a strategic decision by King Hussein to which the Rabin government all but instantly acquiesced. Fundamentally, it was a gentlemen's agreement, and its success rested on the personal character of its leading decision makers.

Elsewhere, diplomacy proved to be an exercise in frustration and diminishing returns, purchased at a considerable cost to U.S. diplomatic capital and Israeli self-respect. By the time the elder Assad was through, he had succeeded in showing the back of his hand to an American President, his secretary of state, and an Israeli prime minister, among others. He did this while pocketing the Israeli concession of the mythical June 4 line and accustoming Israeli leaders to the idea that a "peace" with him would involve no real grant of legitimacy to the Jewish state, no hard guarantees of security, and no dramatic regional realignments of the kind that

would make his frigid peace worth having. And he did all this while maintaining active and not-so-clandestine relations with terrorist groups, from Hizballah to Hamas, which he did little to rein in and occasionally unleashed as part of a self-serving Jekyll-and-Hyde routine. Even Yasir Arafat, who did occasionally jail members of Hamas, looks somewhat better in comparison.

Put simply, while the peace process *expanded* Hafez Assad's options, the same process reduced Israel's. That goes double for his son, who would enter into a peace process with his father's achievements as a baseline from which to seek further concessions. Indyk may believe that the mere resumption of a process without a serious expectation of a peace deal is some sort of achievement, but he fails to consider how it puts Assad in the enviable position of never having to engage that process with even minimal good faith. Which, in turn, amounts to an inducement for bad faith. How either the United States or Israel might benefit from this is a mystery.

Some of Indyk's other assumptions are also open to question. On Lebanon, it is noteworthy that he delivered his congressional testimony a few weeks before Hizballah's de-facto coup in Beirut. Any hope, therefore, that the U.S. could extract meaningful concessions regarding Lebanon from an Israeli-Syrian process has now been rendered moot.

As for Iran, it is by no means clear that Syrian engagement in a process would have any effect on the Tehran-Damascus alliance. Indeed, if the past five years of international negotiations over Iran's nuclear program are an indication, Tehran has learned that a sham interest in diplomacy is an excellent way to play for time and reap unreciprocated concessions without actually conceding on fundamentals. Why shouldn't it draw the same conclusion regarding the prospect of Syrian diplomacy with Israel? Tehran has no dearth of incentives to maintain close ties with Damascus. Syria is its bridge to the Arab world, particularly its clients in Gaza and Lebanon. Syria is also its ally against a nascent democracy in Iraq that seems increasingly unlikely to succumb to the threats of its neighbors.

Of course, there is always the chance that Assad might actually say yes to a deal with Israel that allows him to recover the Golan Heights. In that case, Israelis might thrill to pictures of a handful of their diplomats staffing a bunker-like embassy in Damascus, as they do in Cairo and Amman, and the Obama administration would also surely see it as a diplomatic triumph.

At the same time, however, it is easy to imagine a

scenario in which an ostensibly “demilitarized” Golan, under Syrian sovereignty, is infiltrated by Hizballah while Syria uses demilitarization either as an alibi to do nothing or as a pretext for the re-militarization of the area. If this seems far-fetched, note that Israel is now prepared to acquiesce to a large Egyptian troop presence in the Sinai in order to stop Hamas’s weapons-smuggling into Gaza. By such or similar means, Syria really could transform a deal with Israel into yet another phase in its proclaimed “liberation of Palestine.”

Such considerations all lead to a single conclusion: No “process” between Syria and Israel under

U.S. auspices is currently worth having. The regime in Damascus has offered no indication that it is prepared to accept Israel’s right to exist, or respect Lebanon’s sovereignty, or abandon its links to terrorism or to Iran. Instead, for nearly two decades, Syria has offered only indications to the contrary, indications that have multiplied since Bashar Assad came to power almost nine years ago. For Israel to engage in such a process risks its status as a sovereign, self-respecting nation, one that is nobody’s fool. And for the United States to do so risks the diminishment of its status as a serious power and a reliable ally.