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ENGAGING SYRIA?

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The question whether the U.S. and Israel should re-engage Syria is at the center of policy debate in both Washington and Jerusalem, fuelled by President Bashar al-Assad's repeated calls for resumed negotiations, suggestions that the U.S. administration has pressed Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to reject them, the Baker-Hamilton report's recommendations for a more inclusive regional diplomacy, and, more recently, news of private, non-official Syrian-Israeli discussions on a possible peace deal. This policy brief assesses the arguments in favor and against renewed engagement.

I. Arguments Against Engagement

At its core, the case against responding to Bashar's overtures is based on the conviction that the Syrian regime merely is seeking a respite from international pressure. The U.S. administration sees them as disingenuous attempts to break out of increased isolation, cover up greater intrusion in Lebanese affairs, and shift focus away from the investigation into former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. Instead, pressure should be maintained to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty and maximize the chances that the regime will modify its behavior there as well as in Iraq and Palestine.

As a result, engagement with Syria is seen as futile and even counterproductive, an escape hatch for a regime that

will only respond – if at all – to pressure. Absent such pressure, Syria is highly unlikely to act on issues of interest to the U.S. and Israel (cutting ties to Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran; fully respecting Lebanese sovereignty; and taking steps to curb the Iraqi insurgency). U.S. engagement with Damascus before it had moved positively on these fronts would only validate the regime's view it can play these cards in order to extract valuable concessions. As evidence, U.S. officials claim that the parade of foreign (essentially European) visitors to Damascus had produced little other than greater Syrian self-confidence that their strategy was working. Secretary Condoleezza Rice characterized as extortion the notion that the U.S. should be forced to deal with Syria out of fear of what Syria otherwise will continue to do.

Washington also dismisses the argument that Syria would moderate its policies if return of the Golan was on the table. As U.S. officials put it, Damascus may like to recover the Golan, but it desperately wants to recover Lebanon; since that is not something Washington is prepared to concede, there is little to be gained by discussions. Going further, some maintain that occupation of the Golan has become the lifeline of a regime that has lost legitimacy; the occupation allows it to maintain the state of emergency, postpone domestic reforms and silence opposition. Others add that Syria is committed to its ideological alliance with Iran, questioning whether a twenty five year old relationship can be easily reversed.

Under the circumstances, the mere initiation of a high-level dialogue would send a signal to worried U.S. allies in Lebanon (the March 14 forces) that a deal is being prepared behind their backs – Syrian cooperation on Iraq in exchange for a Syrian free hand in Lebanon and an end to the tribunal. In like manner, engagement would threaten the unprecedented consensus that currently exists between the U.S., major European and especially Arab (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan) countries on Lebanon and the tribunal. Significantly, U.S. officials point to strong Arab pressure on Washington *not* to soften its position toward Damascus as a key argument for maintaining its current policy.

Finally, U.S. officials strongly question how important a role Syria can play in assisting efforts in Iraq: the conflict has become self-sustaining, and Damascus is said to enjoy only very limited leverage on the parties. To the extent Iraq's breakdown is of concern to the regime, they will do what little they can to prevent it out of self-interest, not to please the U.S.

II. Arguments in Favor of Engagement

The exceptional convergence of interconnected Middle East crises – implicating Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine – coupled with growing sectarian polarization threatens to unleash a far wider regional conflagration. All stand to lose, not least of all the U.S. Syria too is at risk: it faces the prospect of further international isolation and sanctions as well as being caught between sectarian civil wars in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon with dangerous implications for a regime centered around a religious minority. While Syria may not be the central actor in all these crises, it can have a significant impact on each, whether by playing a spoiling or stabilizing role.

- In **Palestine**, Hamas' electoral victory and now the Mecca agreement mean the Islamists' attitude will help determine whether an Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire can hold and whether a diplomatic process can proceed. The notion that Hamas blindly follows Syria's lead is simplistic and highly misleading; nonetheless, there is little doubt that Damascus exercises an important

influence given how few allies the Islamists enjoy. Syria is unlikely to cut Hamas off, let alone expel its exiled leadership, in exchange for renewed engagement or a revived peace process. But it can seek to moderate Hamas' behavior; moreover, the Islamists are adept at reading the regional map and will have to adapt their policies in response to signs of changing regional and international dynamics.

- In **Lebanon**, similar dynamics will apply to Hezbollah which depends on Syria for arms transfers and territorial depth. In the event of renewed Syrian-Israeli or Syrian-U.S. talks, Damascus will be loathe to jeopardize either and therefore is likely to seek to restrain Hezbollah activity at Lebanon's southern border.
- In **Iraq**, Syria could – if given proper incentives – play a helpful role by enhancing border control; using its extensive intelligence on and lines of communication with insurgent groups to facilitate negotiations; and drawing on its wide-ranging tribal networks to reach out to Sunni Arabs in the context of such negotiations.

Conversely, should Syria feel isolated and subject to further pressure, it could adversely affect the situation in all three arenas. *The negative outcome may not spare Damascus, but should it feel threatened the regime likely will resort to a scorched earth policy.*

Resumption of an Israeli-Syrian peace process would create several other significant advantages and opportunities:

- Even assuming Syria is more interested in the process than the outcome – itself a debatable proposition – the mere fact of having Syrians negotiate with Israelis will have ripple effects in a region where a rejectionist ideology rejecting Israel's right to exist has steadily been gaining ground and where Syria is allied with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas – all of whom oppose a negotiated settlement. In other words, whatever Bashar's intent may be, his offer of direct talks with Israel should be seized, whether or not they will succeed.
- Should a deal in fact be reached, it would have profound implications for the region as a whole. But while there is no guarantee of success, there are some

reasons for hope. President Bashar contemplates an uncertain future, particularly on the economic front. Regaining the Golan and reviving prospects for an equitable economic agreement with the EU – not to mention better relations with the U.S. – remain critically important to a regime that, both politically and economically, needs breathing space. The president recently confided to various interlocutors that recovery of the Golan – thereby achieving what his father could not -- would make him a hero in his citizens' eyes. Moreover, the outlines of a solution are, by now, well known. They were put forward in an 2002 International Crisis Group report (see appendix), and recently confirmed in unofficial negotiations between a private Israeli and Syrian citizen.

In this context, and even if the U.S. is leery of engaging directly, for it to oppose an Arab call for direct, unconditional talks with Israel is both unprecedented and costly.

III. What Kind of Engagement?

Merely sitting down with Syrian officials will not suffice to persuade them to alter their policies. A plethora of European emissaries have gone to Damascus, inquiring whether their interlocutors would be willing to change their approach to Lebanon, Iraq, Iran or Palestine in exchange for renewed dialogue – to no avail. Belief that engagement is the ultimate reward the U.S. (or others) can offer its foes is the flip side of that other costly myth – that isolation is the decisive penalty that the U.S. can inflict on them.

Syria will not cut its links to Hamas or Hezbollah – two of its few remaining forms of leverage – before resolution of its conflict with Israel is in sight. It will not soon sever ties to Iran, for the past quarter century its most loyal, most dependable and, at some points, only ally. It will not stop interfering in Lebanon's affairs, at least as long as it believes the only alternative to a subordinate, pro-Syrian government is an assertive, anti-Syrian one. And it will not help the U.S. in Iraq under circumstances where it is convinced the U.S. is seeking to destabilize it; better to have its forces tied down, incapable

of decisively striking elsewhere, let alone bringing down another regime.

The question, in other words, is not simply whether to engage, but *how* and to what end. Another attempt to reopen a dialogue devoid of real substance carries the risk of putting off the Syrian regime and convincing it that the context is not yet ripe for real negotiations. Conversely, Western advocates of engagement are likely to be discouraged by Syria's response, which will only validate the view that Syria is not serious in its calls for peace.

An alternative to a policy of merely offering talks in exchange for meaningful Syrian concessions would be a genuine U.S.-Syrian discussion of mutual interests and potential reciprocal steps focused on a possible regional end-state acceptable to both sides. Rough elements of a possible compromise end-state might include:

- Redefining "success" in Iraq in a manner that is not threatening to Syria, to wit, a united, federal Iraq that respects the rights of all its constituents, enjoys normal relations with its neighbors, and is not home to U.S. troops or bases.
- A genuinely sovereign, independent Lebanon whose government is non-aligned, neither dominated by nor hostile to Syria;
- Continuation of the Hariri investigation to ascertain responsibility and achieve accountability but with an understanding that the ultimate objective is not to destabilize the current regime but rather to deter it from future malfeasance in Lebanon;
- Encouragement of and support for renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations under U.S. or Quartet auspices;
- Syrian pressure on Hamas and Hezbollah to maintain calm, avoid provocations and, in Hamas's case, allow President Mahmoud Abbas to conduct negotiations with Israel, submit any accord to a referendum, and abide by its results, consistent with the Mecca agreement.

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A P P E N D I X**INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP PROPOSAL FOR AN ISRAELI-SYRIAN PEACE DEAL
(JUNE 2002)**

- ❖ Syria will enjoy sovereignty over the land and regulated access to Israeli water adjoining it, while Israel will enjoy sovereignty over the water and regulated access to Syrian land adjoining it.
- ❖ The boundary between Israel and Syria will be the line of June 4, 1967. A commission headed by the Chief Cartographer of the UN would demarcate the precise line. The final boundary would correspond to the Chief Cartographer's determination of the extent of Syrian control as of June 4, 1967.
- ❖ Israel would have sovereignty over the Kinneret/Lake Tiberias.
- ❖ The parties will establish a "Jordan Valley Nature Preserve" under Syrian administration. The Preserve would extend eastward from the boundary. Syrian border and customs posts would be east of the Preserve so that visitors from Israel would be free to enter. In other words, visitors from Israel would continue to have 360 degree access to Kinneret/Lake Tiberias.
- ❖ The parties will establish a Joint Water Consultative Committee that will safeguard the water resources of the Jordan River watershed.
- ❖ There will be provisions to fully accommodate Israel's concerns about the quality and quantity of water flowing to it after its withdrawal. In return, Israel will make available to Syria water from the Jordan River and the lake sufficient to the needs of the Jordan Valley Nature Preserve.
- ❖ Both parties will agree to the establishment of demilitarized zones. "Areas of Limitation in Armament and Forces" in Syria and Israel would further insulate the demilitarized zones.
- ❖ Within the demilitarized zone and the Areas of Limitation in Armament and Forces, a U.S.-led multinational "monitoring, inspection and verification mechanism" will verify implementation of the security arrangements.
- ❖ There will be a U.S.-operated early warning station on Mount Hermon.
- ❖ The parties will rapidly establish diplomatic ties once the treaty has come into effect and will systematically implement steps that characterize peaceful, normal relations between neighbors.

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