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Speaker Pelosi's Unauthorized Diplomacy in Syria

James Phillips

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi undermined the Bush Administration's Middle East policy during her trip to Syria this week. Her unauthorized diplomatic interfering not only undercut U.S. national interests and set back international efforts to isolate and pressure the Syrian dictatorship, but also undercut the interests of America's allies in Israel, Iraq, and Lebanon who continue to be murdered by Syria's surrogates. The Syrian regime, which ranks second only to Iran in supporting terrorist groups, trumpeted Pelosi's visit as a major victory. For Syria, it was.

The Speaker's trip to Damascus as a supplicant was perceived by many to be a sign of weakening American resolve to hold the tyrannical Assad regime accountable for its bloody efforts to intimidate and subvert Syria's neighbors, as well as a slackening of America's determination to fight and win the broader war against terrorism.

Speaker Pelosi acts as if the problem with Syria is an American failure to communicate with, or to "engage," the Syrian regime. But the Bush Administration repeatedly has attempted to approach Syrian President Bashar Assad and induce him to halt Syria's hostile policies. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus in May 2003 and asked the Syrians to halt the flow of men, arms, and money across their border to support the insurgents in Iraq. Assad's Baathist regime made promises to cooperate but never delivered. It still harbors high-ranking Iraqi Baathists who finance and direct insurgent activity inside Iraq and still turns a blind eye to the activities of the Islamic extremists who use Syria as

a conduit to funnel terrorists, supplies, and money into Iraq. The Syrians also have rejected America's diplomatic efforts to persuade them to reduce their support of Palestinian terrorist groups and to stop meddling in Lebanon.

The problem is not a lack of "engagement." The Clinton Administration made every effort to pull Syria into peace negotiations with Israel but failed despite more than 20 trips to Damascus by Secretary of State Warren Christopher. This exceeded the number of trips that Christopher made to Moscow and Beijing combined. But Syria was unyielding in its opposition to the 1993 Oslo peace accords and worked closely with Iran to increase support for Palestinian terrorist groups and the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah in an effort to escalate terrorism against Israel and subvert Lebanon.

Only last month, American and Syrian diplomats gathered around the same table at an international conference in Baghdad to discuss the future of Iraq. The Syrians continue to deny that they are aiding the insurgents and put the blame for all of Iraq's problems on the United States.

What is missing is not American willingness to talk to Syria but Syria's willingness to halt its hostile actions. A photo opportunity with the Speaker of the

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House will not change that. But it will encourage the Assad regime to dig in its heels, continue its spoiler strategy, and hope that it will be rewarded for its intransigence by a future administration. Why should Damascus bother negotiating with the Bush Administration when Pelosi has signaled that it could get a much better deal in just several years' time?

Pelosi's visit also deflated international pressure on Damascus over its suspected involvement in the 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who resisted Syrian domination over Lebanon. By going out of her way to break with international efforts to isolate and pressure Syria's rogue regime, the Speaker has set back Lebanese efforts to break free from Syrian domination. One of Lebanon's leading columnists bitterly denounced her diplomatic efforts, concluding, "Unfortunately, foreign bigwigs come to town, their domestic calculations in hand; and then they leave, and we're left picking up the pieces."¹

Speaker Pelosi also undercut Israel when she blithely announced a seeming breakthrough in prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. After meeting with President Assad, she proclaimed that "We were very pleased with the reassurances we received from the president that he was ready to resume the peace process." She claimed that "[Our] meeting with the president enabled us to communicate a message from Prime Minister Olmert that Israel was ready to engage in peace talks as well."

The Israeli government quickly clarified that this was not the message that Olmert had asked Pelosi to convey to Assad and that Israel had not changed its policy of refusing to enter into talks with Syria until it halts its support for Palestinian terrorists. Not only did Speaker Pelosi mangle Olmert's message, but she also undermined Israel's diplomatic position in doing so. This will only encourage Syria to persist in its strategy of conducting and facilitating terrorism while paying lip service to the "peace process."

Under the U.S. Constitution, the executive branch has responsibility for formulating U.S. foreign policy, not Congress. Speaker Pelosi does not have the authority, the expertise, or the support staff to forge an alternative foreign policy for the United States, particularly in the volatile Middle East. Her independent diplomatic efforts in Syria have undermined U.S. foreign policy, hurt the interests of American allies, and set back international efforts to combat terrorism, stabilize Iraq, and strengthen Lebanese independence from Syria. Speaker Pelosi's trip is the sort of diplomatic meddling by the legislative branch that the Constitution's Framers sought to prevent.

—James Phillips is Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

1. See Michael Young, "When a Dilettante Takes on Hezbollah," *The Daily Star*, April 5, 2007, at www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=5&article_id=81211.