

The Obama Administration Reaches Out to Syria: Implications for Israel

David Schenker

- In early March, two senior U.S. officials traveled to Damascus for the highest-level bilateral meeting in years, part of the new administration's policy of "engagement." Washington seeks to test Damascus' intentions to distance itself from Iran. While a "strategic realignment" of Damascus is unlikely, in the short term, the diplomatic opening is sure to alleviate international pressure on Damascus.
- The Assad regime made no secret of its preference for Barack Obama last November. At the same time, Syrian regime spokesmen appear to be setting preconditions for an effective dialogue, saying Washington would first have to drop the Syria Accountability Act sanctions and remove Syria from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.
- U.S. diplomatic engagement with Syria comes at a particularly sensitive time, just a few months before the Lebanese elections, where the "March 14" ruling coalition faces a stiff challenge from the Hizbullah-led "March 8" opposition, and Washington has taken steps to shore up support for its allies.
- Should the U.S. dialogue with Damascus progress, Washington might consent to take on an enhanced role in resumed Israeli-Syrian negotiations. However, U.S. participation on the Syria track could conceivably result in additional pressure for Israeli concessions in advance of any discernible modifications in Syria's posture toward Hizbullah and Hamas.
- Based on Syria's track record, there is little reason to be optimistic that the Obama administration will succeed where others have failed. Washington should not necessarily be faulted for trying, as long as the administration remains cognizant of the nature of the regime. Damascus today remains a brutal dictatorship, which derives its regional influence almost exclusively through its support for terrorism in neighboring states and, by extension, through its 30-year strategic alliance with Tehran.

In early March, two senior U.S. officials traveled to Damascus for meetings with their Syrian counterparts. The visit – which followed a series of conciliatory steps toward Syria by the Obama administration – constituted the highest-level bilateral meeting in years. Following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, the Bush administration withdrew its ambassador in Damascus and limited its contacts with Syria. Taken in tandem, these developments comprise the initial stages of the new administration's policy of "engagement."

Diplomatic engagement with Syria remains in its preliminary stages, but the outlines of the policy are starting to emerge. Washington is looking to test Damascus' intentions on peace with

Israel and improved U.S.-Syria bilateral relations, two goals largely dependent on Syria's willingness to distance itself from Iran. To this end, the administration is making diplomatic overtures and talking to Damascus while publicly lowering expectations of what might be achieved.

Yet a "strategic realignment" of Damascus is unlikely; even modest changes in Syrian policy could take months or years to discern. Meanwhile, there are attendant risks: among them, the end of Syria's international isolation, and a potentially negative impact – i.e., a Hizbullah victory – in the June 2009 Lebanese elections.

Regardless of whether the engagement results in improved U.S.-Syrian ties, in the short term, the diplomatic opening is sure to alleviate international pressure on Damascus.

First U.S. Overtures toward Syria

In early February, in a reversal of a long-standing U.S. policy, the U.S. Department of Commerce approved a license to sell Boeing 747 parts to Syria. The jets had been grounded for years due to lack of parts. The Bush administration had denied the sales due to concerns that these civilian aircraft were utilized to transport military materiel from states like Iran and North Korea to Syria and Hizbullah.¹

A few weeks later, the U.S. Treasury Department authorized the transfer of \$500,000 to the Children with Cancer Support Association, a Syrian charity associated with President Bashar Assad's wife, Asma.² Both decisions were seen as a softening of U.S. sanctions, and an important U.S. diplomatic overture.

On February 26, a meeting was held at the State Department between Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman. A few days later, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton shook hands and exchanged a few words with her Syrian counterpart, Walid Mouallem, at a fundraising summit for Gaza in Sharm el Sheikh, in what was seen as a largely symbolic move.³ Then Clinton announced that Ambassador Feltman and NSC Middle East Director Daniel Shapiro would be traveling to Damascus.

Lowering Expectations

However, the White House and State Department have taken steps to lower expectations in Damascus.

The appointment of Feltman as chief interlocutor for the talks was a grave disappointment for Damascus. Feltman, the former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon who served in Beirut in 2004-2007, embodies Washington's support for the Cedar Revolution. Indeed, at one point during his tenure in Lebanon, Walid Mouallem allegedly told UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that

Feltman “should leave [Lebanon],” and offered to send the ambassador on a paid vacation to Hawaii.⁴

The Obama administration has also issued a number of statements highlighting the barriers to improved bilateral ties with Syria. For example, State Department Spokesman Gordon Duguid issued a statement that focused on ongoing U.S. concerns with Damascus, including “Syria’s support to terrorist groups and networks, Syria’s pursuit of nuclear and nonconventional weaponry, interference in Lebanon and a worsening human rights situation.”⁵ The nuclear reference came just after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors released a damning report about Syria’s alleged nuclear facility in Kibar.⁶

The administration also sought to downplay expectations of immediate progress on the Syria track. Despite repeated calls by the Assad regime to return the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus,⁷ Duguid told VOA on March 3: “It would in a normal relationship be unusual to not have an ambassador in place.... We have not had a normal relationship for some time. We are working with the other foreign policy agencies in the U.S. government to develop a better relationship or the means for a better relationship with Syria, but this cannot be unreciprocated.”⁸

Duguid’s comments closely echoed those of Secretary Clinton, who also emphasized the administration’s requirement for tangible responses to U.S. overtures. As Secretary Clinton said during her announcement of the Feltman-Shapiro trip to Damascus, the U.S. doesn’t “engage in discussions for the sake of having a conversation...there has to be a purpose to them, there has to be some perceived benefit accruing to the United States and our allies.”⁹

The official U.S. feedback from the Feltman-Shapiro trip to Damascus was positive, but not overly so. Feltman described the meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Muallem as “constructive,” but during a subsequent press conference he qualified this, saying, “we have areas where our interests overlap, we have areas where our interests differ.... This is part of a process and we will see how this develops.”¹⁰

Syria Braces for Engagement

The Assad regime made no secret of its preference for Barack Obama last November.¹¹ Since Obama’s election, Syrian President Bashar Assad has been making conciliatory statements toward Washington.¹² At the same time, however, Syrian regime spokesmen appear to be setting preconditions for an effective dialogue. Indeed, several Syrian journalists with close ties to the regime have written that if bilateral talks are going to be productive, Washington would first have to drop the Syria Accountability Act sanctions and remove Syria from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.¹³

Syria’s response to the administration’s preliminary overtures has proved mixed at best. After the 747 licenses were announced, for example, Damascus looked to parlay the unilateral U.S. concession into diplomatic gains with Europe. Following the license announcement, Syrian Minister of Transportation Yarub Badr told *SANA* that he hoped this step would “be positively reflected on the ongoing negotiations with Airbus,” suggesting that in light of the shift in

Washington, Europe – which has until now declined to sell airplanes to Syria – might now proceed with Airbus sales.¹⁴

Likewise, although Damascus appeared pleased that a stream of high-ranking U.S. legislators traveled to Syria in February for meetings with President Assad, the government-controlled press was extremely critical of some of the visits. On February 19 – shortly after Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) visited Syria and just before the scheduled visit of Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs Chairmen John Kerry and Howard Berman – the Syrian government press attacked Cardin.

The Syrian daily *Al Watan* criticized Cardin for “fail[ing] to distinguish between terrorism and resistance,” asking, “Are these groups [Hamas and Hizbullah] terrorists? We think not.” The government press also took Cardin to task for attempting to “drive a wedge between Iran and Syria.” If the bilateral relationship is to improve, the article stated, “changes in Washington, and not Damascus, must occur.” If Senator Kerry and Congressmen Berman “harbor[ed] similar views,” *Al Watan* suggested, they “should not bother traveling to Damascus.”¹⁵

Syria has also expressed its displeasure with the selection of Ambassador Feltman as the point-man for administration engagement. Several well-known regime surrogates have recently written quite critically of Feltman. On February 25, the head of the regime-affiliated Data and Strategic Studies Center in Damascus, Imad Fawzi Shueibi, wrote in the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat* that “Feltman wants the preservation of the ‘neo-conservative’ wing in the new administration, but the former ambassador doesn’t understand the new political language...he is simply playing outside of the current American diplomatic field.”¹⁶

Another regime proxy, Chatham House associate Rime Allaf, complained that “with messengers like [NSC Middle East Director] Daniel Shapiro and Jeffrey Feltman, President Obama seems to be warning the Syrians that he is more willing to play by George W. Bush’s rules than to turn over a new page.”¹⁷

U.S. Policy Considerations

U.S. engagement with Damascus is largely focused on exploring the possibility of splitting Damascus from Tehran. In the unlikely event this succeeds, several strategic benefits would accrue to Washington. Presumably, the strategic reorientation of Damascus would entail an end to Syrian support for Hamas (and other Palestinian terrorist organizations), Hizbullah, and the movement of insurgents into Iraq, dramatically improving the situation for Washington’s friends in Baghdad, Beirut, and Jerusalem – including both Fatah and the government of Israel.

Such a development would also have a profound impact on the Arab system, tilting the regional balance away from the Syria-Iran-Qatar axis in favor of the more moderate, pro-West policies advocated by U.S. allies in Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh, all of whom are concerned about Tehran’s progress on the nuclear front. In short, should Damascus shift away from Tehran’s orbit, the region would be a more hospitable environment for Washington.

Thus far, the administration is trying to engineer this split without undercutting its allies in Beirut. In this regard, U.S. diplomatic engagement with Syria comes at a particularly sensitive time, just a few months before the Lebanese elections, where the “March 14” ruling coalition faces a stiff challenge from the Hizbullah-led “March 8” opposition. To insulate March 14 from the potentially negative consequences at the polls of a perception of U.S. abandonment, Washington has taken steps to shore up support for its allies.

For example, before and after traveling to Damascus on March 5, 2009, Feltman and Shapiro stopped off in Beirut for meetings with March 14 leaders. During February, the administration also issued a series of statements and made several phone calls to its Lebanese allies. To mark the fourth anniversary of the Hariri assassination, both the U.S. president and secretary of state issued statements in support of Lebanese sovereignty – a codeword for March 14 – and the administration pledged an additional \$6 million in funding for the international tribunal prosecuting the killers of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri. (Syria is the leading suspect in the murder.) On February 14, Secretary of State Clinton and CENTCOM Commander Gen. David Petraeus phoned March 14 leader Saad Hariri, the son of the slain former prime minister. In Beirut in March, Feltman described the establishment of the court as an “important step towards ending impunity for political assassinations in Lebanon and as a concrete sign that Lebanon’s sovereignty is non-negotiable.”¹⁸

In late February/early March, the U.S. Department of Defense hosted Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Chief of Staff General Jean Khawaji, where he met with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus, and toured U.S. defense facilities. He also received assurances – sure to rile Hizbullah and Syria, if not Israel – that Washington would provide the LAF with U.S.-made Raven unmanned aerial vehicles. A statement issued following a dinner for Khawaji by Mullen stated that U.S. assistance to the LAF “remain[ed] a cornerstone of U.S. policy on Lebanon.”¹⁹

Administration measures to reassure Beirut will become increasingly important should any momentum develop on the bilateral U.S.-Syria track. Washington will be looking closely for changes in Syrian behavior – and likely setting benchmarks, calibrated to reciprocal U.S. measures to either alleviate pressure and/or enhance relations. In this context, one area where Syria can generate a lot of goodwill with the Obama administration will be negotiations with Israel.

Where Israel Fits In

In addition to a hoped-for strategic realignment, Washington’s engagement with Damascus is also driven by the desire to advance Syrian-Israeli peace.²⁰ At present, given the Hamas-Fatah split in the Palestinian Authority, in both Israel and Washington some see the Syrian track to be more realistic and appealing.

For Israel, Washington’s newfound interest in potentially brokering negotiations is a novel, if not necessarily welcome, development. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was said to have wanted Bush Administration mediation on the Syria track, but the administration – which had already

concluded that the Assad regime was essentially irredeemable – was not amenable. In the absence of Washington, Olmert settled for Ankara. However, should the U.S. dialogue with Damascus progress, Washington might consent to take on an enhanced role in resumed Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

U.S. participation on the Syria track could conceivably result in additional pressure for Israeli concessions in advance of any discernible modifications in Syria's posture toward Hizbullah and Hamas. However, Obama administration statements to date have been focused on the need for changes in Syrian policy. In the absence of confidence-building measures, it seems unlikely that Washington will press for unilateral Israeli moves, especially if the government of Israel continues to insist on the strategic reorientation of Damascus away from Tehran. In any event, given the chasm dividing Syria and Israel – particularly regarding the status of Damascus' bilateral relations with Iran – U.S. participation is far from a guarantee of success.

The attitude of Israeli prime minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu toward a robust U.S. role in this process is less clearly defined. In 1998, during his previous tenure as prime minister, Netanyahu did pursue secret negotiations with Syria – and allegedly agreed to cede the Golan Heights back to Syria.²¹ During his election campaign in 2009, however, Netanyahu pledged not to return the territory to Syria for a peace treaty. Nevertheless, Netanyahu has said that he would be willing to talk to Syria to try and convince Damascus to end support for Hamas and Hizbullah.²²

In Israel, the notion of “returning” the Golan to Syria is quite unpopular and would have difficulty receiving Knesset approval. A leading Israeli diplomatic analyst pointed out that achievement of an agreement would not only entail the strategic realignment of Damascus, but “would depend on the willingness of the United States to offer Syria sweeteners, in the form of recognition of its status in Lebanon, seeing to the closing of the international investigation of Syrian involvement in the murder of the former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and provision of economic aid.”²³

However, there is no indication that the Obama administration would ultimately be willing to “cede” Lebanon to Syria in order to seal a deal. Furthermore, the Hariri Tribunal is not subject to a unilateral U.S. decision to absolve Syria if Damascus participates in peace negotiations; nor does there appear to be any U.S. sympathy for such a move at this time.²⁴ Differences between the U.S. and Israel could eventually emerge on these matters, but likely not in the near future.

Conclusion

The Obama administration has taken the first steps to engage Damascus. These steps have been cautious, careful to balance outreach efforts with precarious U.S. interests in Lebanon. In Damascus, the new U.S. initiative is being viewed with both smugness – that the Assad regime has outlasted yet another U.S. president and his policies – and disappointment that the Obama administration has proven, at least thus far, more tenacious in its defense of Lebanese allies and in demands for changes in Syrian policies than had been expected.

In the coming months, Washington will continue to talk with Syria and test the regime's intentions. Given the high bar set by Secretary of State Clinton, if Washington remains committed to its principles, it will be difficult to envision significant short-term progress. At the same time, the more invested the U.S. becomes in engagement – even in the absence of tangible progress – it will become increasingly more difficult to extricate from the process. Over time, this could lead to an erosion of the high standards currently articulated by the administration, and to unwarranted diplomatic gains for Damascus.

For the U.S. and Israel, as the process of engagement continues, the key will be to keep expectations low. Based on Syria's track record, there is little reason to be optimistic that the Obama administration will succeed where others have failed. Washington should not necessarily be faulted for trying – and Israel should not retreat from its quest for peace with its neighbors – as long as the administration remains cognizant of the nature of the regime.

Damascus today remains a brutal dictatorship, which derives its regional influence almost exclusively through its support for terrorism in neighboring states and, by extension, through its 30-year strategic alliance with Tehran. Changes in Syria's unhelpful policies will not result from Washington convincing the Assad regime of where its interests lie, but rather through a transformation in Damascus.

Regrettably, given the regime's demonstrated will to remain in power, this kind of dramatic transformation is unlikely. Instead, changes in Syria will come incrementally, if at all. Based on this dynamic, the question for Washington is no longer whether to talk to Damascus, but – in the absence of real progress – for how long.

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Notes

1. Under the terms of the 1944 International Civil Aviation Conference convened in Chicago, states are obligated to sell airplane parts for indigenously-produced equipment to ensure "safety of flight." But the Syrian airplanes technically didn't fit into this category, because they were grounded. The U.S. has offered to sell Tehran parts for its own Boeing 747s. Because Iran has a 747 in military service, however, Washington has indicated that to ensure that the parts are not being utilized for non-civilian purposes, the Iranian repairs should be made in Germany.
2. "Syria Says U.S. Permits Money Transfer to Charity," *AP*, February 15, 2009.
<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gIGiMHBqDAAjSPWUmyVncR7wvnHAD96C8CMO0>
3. At a subsequent press conference, when asked about the handshake, Mouallem relayed that the meeting was "short but very pleasant," and that he was "happy it happened." See Alex Spillius, "Hillary Clinton and Syrian Counterpart Shake Hands as Relations Look to Improve," *Telegraph*, March 3, 2009.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/4930142/Hillary-Clinton-and-Syrian-counterpart-shake-hands-as-relations-look-to-improve.html>
4. See Michael Young, "Some Common Sense from Javier Solana," *Beirut Daily Star*, July 5, 2007.
http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=dfxt6s27_136f56q36&hl=en. For a longer treatment of the topic, see Tony Badran, "When Syria Threatened Feltman," *Across the Bay*, January 17, 2009.
<http://beirut2bayside.blogspot.com/2008/01/when-syria-threatened-amb-feltman.html>
5. Robert Burns, "U.S. to Prod Syrian Envoy on Terrorism, Nukes," *AP*, February 20, 2009.
http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5g-DU03_7uREXjwO1-MXrVvOYv9VQD96FJ4BO1
6. "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Syrian Arab Republic," *IAEA Board of Governors*, February 19, 2009. http://www.isis-online.org/publications/syria/IAEA_Report_Syria_19Nov2008.pdf

7. See, for example, Bashar Assad's comments in his February 17, 2009, interview with the *Telegraph*. Ian Black, "Assad Urges U.S. to Rebuild Diplomatic Road to Damascus," *Telegraph*, February 17, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/17/assad-interview-syria-obama>. Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha echoed this line during an interview with the Lebanese *Ad Diyar* on March 4, 2009, saying, "If Washington sends a new ambassador to Syria, this would enhance its dialogue position. If it does not take such a step, then it is its problem." "Syrian Ambassador Says U.S. Wants to Build Strong Relations with Syria," *NowLebanon*, March 4, 2009. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=82638>
8. Meredith Buel, "U.S. Sends Envoys to Syria," *VOA News*, March 3, 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-03-03-voa58.cfm>
9. Sue Fleming, "U.S. to Send Two Envoys to Damascus as Ties Warm," *Boston Globe*, March 3, 2009. http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2009/03/03/us_to_send_two_envoys_to_syria_as_ties_warm/?rss_id=Boston.com+++World+news
10. Natasha Mozgovaya and Barak Ravid, "Clinton: U.S. to Push for Israel-Syria Reconciliation," *Ha'aretz*, March 9, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1069315.html>
11. See discussion of the Syrian position in Schenker, "Decoupling Syria from Iran: Constraints on U.S.-Syrian Rapprochement," *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, December 3, 2008. <http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=442&PID=0&IID=2719>
12. See, for example, a February 17, 2009, interview with the British *Guardian*.
13. See for example, Sami Moubayed, "Abu Hussein's Invitation to Damascus," *Asia Times*, November 7, 2008. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JK07Ak02.html
14. "U.S. Trade Department Agrees to Provide Spare Parts for Rehabilitating Syrian Airlines," *SANA*, February 9, 2009. <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2009/02/09/212112.htm>
15. Wadah Abdel Rabo, "Al Matlub min Suriyya," *Al Watan*, February 19, 2009. <http://alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=51738>
16. Imad Fawzi Shueibi, "Bidaya Sakhina Lihwar Mubashir...," *Al Hayat*, February 25, 2009. <http://www.daralhayat.net/actions/print.php>
17. Rime Allaf, "Sending Mixed Signals," *NYT Blog*, "Talking to Syria," March 4, 2009. <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/talking-to-syria>
18. "Feltman's Message to Syria: Lebanon is for the Lebanese," *Naharnet*, March 6, 2009. [http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/\\$First?OpenDocument](http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/$First?OpenDocument). See also, "Muthakira al tafahum fi 'ahda lagna thathiya yukhrig al tawafiq 'ala al ta'adilat," *An Nahar*, March 6, 2009. <http://www.annahar.com/content.php?priority=1&table=main&type=main&day=Fri>
19. "Washington to Provide Army with Unmanned Aerial Planes," *Naharnet*, February 27, 2009. <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/story/6603AD6C57329657C225756A005ECD3A?OpenDocument>
20. During her trip to the region in March 2009, Secretary of State Clinton said, "The importance of this track, the peace effort, cannot be overstated." See "Clinton Encourages Israel, Syria Contacts," *YNet News*, March 7, 2009. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3682501,00.html>
21. Aluf Benn, "Can Israel Make Peace with Syria without Leaving Golan?" *Ha'aretz*, February 28, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1067291.html>
22. Lally Weymouth, "Netanyahu's Middle East Outlook," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2009. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/27/AR2009022702278.html?nav=rss_opinion/columns
23. Aluf Benn, "Can Israel Make Peace."
24. This school of thought – which appears to be prevalent in some influential corners of the Israeli military establishment – raises the question of whether Israel would also advocate cutting a deal on Syria's alleged violation of its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments.

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