

WHEN WE MEET WITH SYRIA, WHAT SHOULD WE SAY? WHAT SHOULD WE HOPE TO HEAR?

Theodore Kattouf, Martha Neff Kessler, Hisham Melhem, Murhaf Jouejati

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WILLIAM A. RUGH: Board Member, Middle East Policy Council

U.S. policy towards Syria has been an interesting topic of discussion in this town and around the world. This policy might be described as isolation and monologue, whereas other people are suggesting engagement and dialogue. President Bush signed the Syria Accountability Act. He withdrew Margaret Scobey, our ambassador in '05. The last high-level visit to Damascus by an administration official was, I think, in January '05 by Under Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

But today, as you know from reading the newspapers, that approach has been challenged. The Baker-Hamilton report called for direct diplomacy with Syria on Iraq. Nancy Pelosi took a delegation from this building to Damascus last week. It included one Republican and other Republicans went before and after that.

So there is a good deal of attention focused on the question that is today's topic. There are lots of topics that the United States has put on the table: terrorism, infiltration across Syria's border with Iraq, the degree of Syria's support for Hamas and Hezbollah, its hostility to Israel and cooperation with Iran, and even Syrian elections. The spokesman of the U.S. Department of State said recently that there should be free and fair elections in Syria observed by international monitors. So we are even talking about Syrian internal politics, not to mention the Hariri assassination and its aftermath. Mrs. Pelosi raised most of these issues and she even engaged in private shuttle diplomacy by bringing a message from Israeli Prime Minister Olmert.

THEODORE KATTOUF: President and CEO, AMIDEAST

I think we all recognize that Syria's policies and, indeed, the principal issues in that part of the world are all interconnected, but I will do my best not to intrude on the areas that my colleagues are going to subsequently cover.

When one talks about regimes like Syria's, it's always a good idea to state the obvious: it's all about regime survival, and strategic decisions with regimes such as the one in Damascus are taken with that foremost in mind.

There are times perhaps when the Syrian regime adopts policies and we ask ourselves why they did that, because from our frame of reference, it does not seem to be advantageous. But I think you can trust that, based on how they see the region and the world, they do see these policies as serving the sustainability of the regime.

There are, of course, times when they grossly miscalculate. It was never lost on me, during the three times I served in Syria over a span of about 25 years, that the Syrians never established a U.S. studies center, or even a think tank worthy of the name. Had they done so, they might not have made some of the miscalculations we have seen them make. But information among senior regime members tends to be word of mouth, one person's prejudices reinforcing another's.

As for the relationship with Iran, I think any objective assessment would have to state that it has worked very well for both countries, and certainly for Syria over the last 25 years or more. In my opinion, the Bush administration has no hope whatsoever of winning Syria away from Iran during its remaining time in office. There is just too much distrust on both sides for that to happen. Indeed, all during the Clinton years, when we had negotiations going on concerning Syrian-Israeli peace, Syria managed to balance its relations with Iran with its new relationships with the United States.

When I say the gap is too wide, I mean that you have to keep in mind that this is an administration that, after going into Iraq, did not hesitate to let people know, through leaks and the like that perhaps Syria was next. These are not the kinds of statements that tend to get you a lot of cooperation. Moreover, after Baghdad fell, Secretary of State Colin Powell went out to Syria and virtually presented it with a long list of demands for regime behavioral change with, frankly, almost nothing being offered in return. It was really an ultimatum, not negotiation, not dialogue.

As is well known, President Bashar al-Asad has said on a number of occasions, "I run a state, not a charity." So I think we can assume that if Syria, with some trepidation, turned down U.S. demands when American power was at its zenith in May 2003, it is much less likely to give in to any U.S. pressure now, when things are not going well in Iraq for the United States.

On the other hand, of course, the United States holds Syria responsible for the assassination of Rafik Hariri, for aiding insurgents in Iraq who are fighting against U.S. and coalition forces, and for basically being a bad actor: supporting Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and various groups that cause Israel problems and hinder U.S. policies in the region.

My belief is that Syria will not make a break with Iran unless it gets almost iron-clad guarantees of what it can expect for severing that relationship, and severing its relations with Hezbollah would be huge indeed. And there would be a price that this administration, and maybe even subsequent administrations, will not be willing to pay.

But I would say this about Syria: It's a regime with which you can deal. I'm in favor of engaging the Syrians in dialogue, not because they're easy, not because they look you in the eye and tell you the truth, but because they can cause you a lot of problems if you ignore them. And they can help make those problems go away if you engage with them and put something serious on the table in front of them.

I would much prefer a regime like Syria, corrupt though it may be, to a hard-line Islamist ideological regime. I don't want to get too far afield from Iran, but I believe that the Israelis may have come to the same conclusion; otherwise, why did they not touch Syria this summer when they went after Hezbollah? After all, Syria's been supporting Hezbollah; Syria's been supplying Hezbollah with arms; Syria is the conduit that allows Iran to maintain close relations with Hezbollah.

But I think the prospect of an Islamist regime in Syria, or a failed state with al-Qaeda and similar groups being able to operate there with impunity, is a deterrent to Israel, at least when it comes to regime change.

Now, what would you say to Syria if you were talking to them about their relations with Iran and these other organizations? First, you've got to give them a certain degree of respect. That doesn't mean that you offer them Lebanon; it doesn't mean that you offer to let them off the hook about the U.N. investigation of the Hariri assassination. But you allow them to raise whatever they want to raise with you, and in turn, you insist that they deal with whatever you put on the table. It's called diplomacy, engagement. I think that is necessary right now, particularly because the United States finds itself in very difficult circumstances.

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There are some vulnerabilities that could be exploited down the road if we are engaged with Syria. The Syrian regime has almost always been dependent on external financial benefactors. In the '70s, they got the so-called confrontation-state payments from Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing states. In the '80s, Iran provided them with free oil until Syria found some modest oil supplies of its own.

When Hafez al-Asad made the strategic decision to back the U.S. campaign to drive Saddam Hussein's forces out of Kuwait, the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Kuwaitis richly rewarded him for that decision with billions of dollars.

In the late '90s, when the Syrian economy was once again going south, the Syrians swallowed hard and made a rapprochement with Saddam Hussein that allowed him to evade the oil embargoes of the UN Security Council, and allowed Syria to get \$28-a-barrel oil at \$7, and then to put that \$7 into Syrian banks. Saddam Hussein used that money to buy Syrian goods that almost nobody else would have bought.

Syria needs that kind of support; and right now, its oil reserves are lessening and its production is going down. At some point, it's going to find itself again in a financial crunch if it cannot locate new external sources of aid. Iran is not in a position, in my opinion, to be that major benefactor.

Secondly, Syria and Iran, while wanting the United States to fail strategically in Iraq, don't want us to fail abysmally in Iraq. If we walk away — and we are going to have to withdraw — then Syria and Iran and the other neighbors — Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan — will be left with the aftermath. Syria and Iran have their own ethnic cleavages, their own religious groups in the country — they're multi-ethnic, multi-confessional — and if Iraq goes into full-blown civil war, Syria and Iran will not escape unscathed. You have a minority group essentially controlling the main levers of power in Syria, and at least 70 percent of the country is Sunni Arab. Syria has to take that into account.

My belief is that Iran and Syria would like a situation analogous to what Lebanon was before Syrian troops were forced to withdraw: a weak state with many factions, where they can be the balancing wheel and play off one faction against another, control the violence, and keep the state from breaking up, because you don't want Kurdish separatism. They'll have a lot of support from Turkey as well. And they can both probably do very well financially, particularly Syria, if they have that kind of relationship with the various Iraqi factions.

So I think there is reason to engage with Syria, particularly if we want to get out of Iraq with some dignity and with a semblance of order in the country. The Baker-Hamilton Commission is right; we're going to need to engage with Syria, we're going to need to engage with Iran, and there are issues upon which we can engage without offering Syria things that are unacceptable to virtually all of us in this room.

MARTHA NEFF KESSLER: Consultant, CIA (ret.)

I would endorse Ted's very nice set-up to this issue. His description of Syria's role in the region, its relationship with Iran, and the role it's played with regard to the United States in Iraq are all issues that I share his views on. I will try not to repeat them.

The Syrians have endorsed the Baker-Hamilton Commission and the recommendation that the United States and Iraq engage in a regional discussion with Syria and Iran in an effort to bring stability to Iraq. And although this has been greeted with considerable skepticism by many here in Washington, I don't think we need to debate them.

It's important to underscore, however, the assertion in the commission's study that Syria is simply a fact you cannot ignore in the region; it is a reality that Syria has considerable influence with regard to Iraq and the region generally. To ignore it is simply to put yourself at a considerable disadvantage.

The policy of isolation simply has been proven not to work. I also believe it didn't work in the late 1970s or throughout the '80s, when we also tried it; and it has been the source of considerable problems that have affected our interests. So I certainly would applaud any efforts in the direction of engaging Syria.

I think that it's useful also to point out that Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Moallem, and its ambassador, Imad Moustapha, have both said that Syria favors engaging in these negotiations, that it is willing to do so without preconditions and that it supports stability, a point I think Ted made very clearly in terms of what is in Syria's ultimate interest with regard to Iraq.

Lebanon, Iran and the peace process are really the issues that are paramount when it comes to Syria. I'm going to go through a few points that I think are important with regard to Iraq, but I would say having Syria at the table is primarily important in terms of these other issues.

What do we expect to get from talking to Syria about Iraq, and what would they expect to get in exchange for cooperation? The issue that's first and foremost, at least on Washington's agenda, is the need to stop the flow of foreign fighters across the border. These are Arabs and Muslims who come from all over the world and constitute an important component within the fighting forces inside Iraq.

There are really no reliable figures on just how many and what proportion of the forces the foreign fighters constitute. And it certainly isn't clear how many of them are coming over the Syrian border. This is an issue on which Washington and Damascus

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certainly do not agree. Syria almost certainly could do more, however, to staunch the flow, however large that flow may be, but could almost certainly not stop it entirely. That is an unrealistic expectation.

Moreover, as the number of Iraqi refugees pouring into Syria climbs — the estimates now are that it's over a million, and I heard Ambassador Moustapha put it at 1.3 million — managing the border

becomes increasingly difficult. So I would expect in exchange for some greater effort on Syria's part, they will need greater help from us in managing that refugee flow and guarantees on resettlement. I think they might also realistically ask for help in terms of technical assistance and maybe even trilateral or joint border patrols.

Another potentially productive goal, as I see it, would be to enlist Syria's help in negotiating with elements of all stripes in an effort to deflate the struggle. In addition to the longstanding familial and social ties that Syria has with groups inside Iraq, Damascus has a shared history with the Iraqi Baath party. While the relationship has been deeply troubled at the leadership level, there have always been connections and linkages at lower levels.

Syria also developed close economic ties, which Ted referred to, with the Saddam Hussein regime and has more recently developed relationships with the new Iraqi government. It has forged economic ties that could also yield assets that could be used in any kind of effort to reach out to components that are arrayed against us there.

Finally, I would guess that, within the Iraqi-based community now living in Syria, there certainly would be those who could, with appropriate Syrian suasion, provide intelligence and negotiating help. That whole realm of utilizing Syria to help establish linkages that we're going to need to have with these people will be important.

Another potential asset that Syria brings to the table is its relationship with Iran. While Syria is certainly the junior partner in that alliance, Damascus is closer to the Iranian leadership than any other government. Damascus and Tehran are likely to have loosely coordinated their approach to Washington, and it is conceivable that Syria could be helpful in bringing Iran along. Certainly, of the two, Syria has far greater motivation to establish a decent working relationship with Washington, and it could offer help on key issues that could conceivably be amenable to Syrian negotiations with Iran directly.

Finally, I'd like to make a few points about Syria's view of the United States. Syria came to believe some time ago that Washington was not just trying to isolate it, but was intent on reshaping it, just as it was intent upon reshaping Iraq. The regime believed that it was on a White House hit list, along with the Iranian regime.

This conviction was a driving force behind a number of Syrian actions that constituted its defense against U.S. intentions. The list is long and complicated, and I'm not going to try to explain it now, but I believe it involved the Syrian withdrawal of troops from Lebanon, Asad's response to the investigation of the Hariri assassination, the protests against the current Lebanese government, repeated efforts to open talks with the United States, and a softening of Syria's approach with regard to negotiating with Israel. This is to name a few, but not all, of the efforts to accommodate, assuage, and warn Washington.

But the most important factor in fending off a U.S. onslaught against Syria has been the quagmire in Iraq. To have any hope of gaining Syria's honest cooperation in an effort to stabilize the situation in Iraq, I think it will be necessary to seek some assurances that this administration has abandoned any efforts to challenge the Syrian regime or to remove its leadership à la Iraq.

Without confidence on this score, Syria might proceed with regional talks but could not be counted on to take any risks or expend any capital to relieve U.S. forces from their burden in Iraq. They would see such action as endangering themselves, which may have been the reason they have been so unwilling to cooperate on the border up until now.

HISHAM MELHEM: Washington Bureau Chief, *Al Arabiya*

Many of us here in Washington keep talking about Syria as if the events or the changes that have occurred in the last seven years did not occur. People still talk about Syria as if the old man, Hafez al-Asad, were still in charge in Damascus. People still talk about Syria as if it still maintained its major alliances in the Arab world, i.e., with Egypt and with Saudi Arabia. People still talk about Syria as if the old Soviet Union were still intact. That's not the case. Syria today is radically different from Syria in 1995 or 1973 or 1980 or 1982.

And while I do believe that engagement is important in principle, the context in which you engage, the timing of the engagement, the balance of power in the engagement are as important as the principle of engagement. I am for engaging Iran and Syria, as long as you tell them exactly what you expect from them, as long as you recognize their legitimate interests and don't exaggerate their illegitimate demands.

The only problem I have with the Baker-Hamilton recommendations is essentially the context. There is a view in Washington that if we would only engage Iran and Syria, our

problems in the region could be resolved, mainly in Iraq. Engagement has become chic, a panacea, as if we had not tried to engage Iran or Syria before.

In the past, those of us who watch Syria closely know that engagement did bear fruit when it was done with Hafez al-Asad in a clear way without any kinds of illusions or naïve assumptions. So I think the Americans should stop acting like innocents abroad and try to engage Iran and Syria in a meaningful way without any illusions.

Let me give you at the outset my conclusion: Syria wants two things from the United States that the United States cannot and should not accept or give Syria. One is to render null the international tribunal that is being formed to try those involved in the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his companions, in addition to those who were assassinated subsequently, including two of my friends and colleagues at *An Nahar* newspaper, Gibran Tueni and Samir Kassir.

Most Lebanese probably would point the finger at Syria just as the evidence so far that Mehlis and Brammertz collected provides at least circumstantial evidence of Syrian involvement. Most of the high-profile political assassinations that have occurred in Lebanon since Syrian forces entered Lebanon in 1976 were carried out by the Syrians and their allies, though some were carried out by the Israelis and their proxies.

The other thing that the Syrians would like to get from the Americans is an American acquiescence in Syria's attempt at restoring, as much as possible, its previous influence, if not its previous hegemony, over Lebanon. Sometimes the Syrians say this bluntly, sometimes with some finesse.

Even if we detest policies by some leaders in the region, any attempt at reviving the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians or the Israelis and the Syrians and the Israelis and Lebanese should be pursued.

Obviously the Syrians would like to talk about the Golan. Here I think the Bush administration made a tremendous strategic blunder by ignoring the Arab-Israeli conflict for the last six years. Very few people in Washington could defend this posture. Engaging Syria on the Golan, trying to revive the peace process, should not be seen as a reward to Bashar al-Asad. Even if we detest policies by some leaders in the region, any attempt at reviving the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians or the Israelis and the Syrians and the Israelis and Lebanese should be pursued.

At this stage, Syria is perhaps not in a position to enter into that kind of long, tough slog that will involve negotiations with the Israelis, or — even if they enter into a peace agreement and sign it — whether this weak regime that presides over a country with hollow, brittle institutions can deliver on the requirements of peace. There isn't a single working university in Damascus. There isn't a single modern hospital in Damascus. When Farouk al-Sharaa had a heart attack a few years ago, he was flown by helicopter to the American University's hospital in Beirut.

But I think the Syrians are correct in saying they want to pursue peace, although I think Bashar is doing it as a tactic and not really as a serious commitment. He should know that Israel today has the weakest government since 1948. His own Syrian government is weak, and the United States is seen by many in the region as bogged down in Iraq. The United States is much weaker today as a potential mediator between the Arabs and the Israelis than in 1991, when the Madrid peace conference was convened.

Let me try to put Syria into its current strategic environment. Syria's stature as a regional power shrank considerably in 2000 with the demise of Hafez al-Asad. Over 30 years, he ruled Damascus, the longest tenure of an Arab ruler in Damascus since the days of the Umayyad dynasty.

Hafez al-Asad gave Syria a kind of influence that was incommensurate with its economy, geography and demography. By sheer guile, cunning and tactical dexterity, he turned a weak state into a regional player. He was cool, occasionally cruel, a practitioner of violence when necessary to preserve his interests, but never a practitioner of gratuitous violence, like Saddam Hussein, for instance.

If you want to summarize Hafez's foreign policy, it was a ceaseless quest for alliances, grand or small, to check his real enemies, the Israelis; not to defeat them, but to check them. Hence, he worked very hard to establish a special relationship between the two other regional powers that he needed, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In 1973, he went to war with Israel, alongside Egypt, with Saudi Arabia as their backer. Asad must be turning in his grave watching his son squander these alliances and that kind of a legacy: alienating the Egyptians, calling the Saudis and Egyptians half men in a recent speech, and, most important, for losing Lebanon, the country that gave Syria regional influence. Syria today finds itself in the ironic and unenviable position where it has to rely not only on Iran but on a non-state actor like Hezbollah to maintain the little that is left of its regional influence.

Now, a few words about Syria and Lebanon: the Lebanese and the Syrians have much in common. For the Lebanese, whether they like it or not, the closest Arabs to them are the Syrians and the Palestinians, culturally, politically, historically. We eat the same food; we enjoy the same folklore and music. Lebanon's longest land border is with Syria. Syria is Lebanon's gateway to the Arab East. In many ways, Lebanon cannot survive economically without an open relationship with Syria.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Syria's influence in Lebanon was limited by Egypt's assertive leadership under Gamal Abdel Nasser. In the 1950s, if you wanted to elect a president in Lebanon, you had to have the acquiescence of the Egyptians. Things changed with the emergence of Hafez al-Asad in 1970, and particularly after the entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon in 1976. From 1976 to 2005, Syria was the hegemon in Lebanon, the decision maker.

Lebanon lost what was left of its sovereignty and Hafez al-Asad was brilliant in the way he penetrated tactically every Lebanese community. The old man had his own Sunnis, his own Shias, his own Maronites, his own Druze, his own Palestinians. He was brilliant at playing these communities against each other, maintaining an uneasy balance that safeguarded Syria's interests in Lebanon.

In those days, the Syrians would look at Lebanon and see two camps: the collaborators and the enemies. Conversely, the Lebanese looked at Syria and half of the Lebanese saw in Syria the protector; the other half saw the tormentor. This was an extremely unhealthy relationship.

The only exception is Syria's relationship with Hezbollah. Hezbollah imposed itself as a major player and now as a partner to Syria because of its relationship with Iran, the Shia plurality in Lebanon, and the assertive leadership of Hezbollah, especially under Hassan Nasrallah today.

Syria used Lebanon to enhance its political influence in the region and strengthen its hand vis-à-vis Israel, whether in the case of war or in peace negotiations. Economically, Syria benefited tremendously from Lebanon, a place where Syria would send its surplus labor. Lebanon was also a market, and there was a great deal of smuggling.

Practically all Syrian officials involved in Lebanon, particularly in intelligence and the high-ranking political leadership, enriched themselves. Rifaat al-Asad, Hafez's brother, lives like a king in Europe today thanks to the treasures of Lebanon.

The return of the Golan to Syrian sovereignty provides a far better security guarantee to Israel, as peace with Syria isolates Iran,...Hezbollah... [and] Hamas.

Lebanon also benefited from Syria. There was a flight of Syrian capital to Lebanese banks, so it was not really a one-way street. But the Syrian political and economic class milked Lebanon with the collaboration of many, many Lebanese political leaders. The Syrians would not have enjoyed the kind of influence they had in Lebanon without it.

This peculiar relationship can never be as healthy or correct or friendly as it should be unless there is a change in Damascus or in Lebanon. Even if you had a representative government in Syria, however, many Syrians probably would find it very difficult to accept Lebanon as a separate sovereign entity. Bashar al-Asad has yet to accept the fact that Lebanon is not a Syrian protectorate, that Lebanon is not a Syrian province.

The Syrians have always felt uncomfortable in what they see as their truncated state. Alexandretta was given to the Turks; Lebanon became independent; Palestine was given to the Zionists and Israel was established. When Asad the elder came to power, he realized this and began this ceaseless quest to build alliances to compensate for Syria's inherent weaknesses. Because of his personality, he was able to form alliances that his son totally squandered.

As far as Lebanon is concerned, many Lebanese are watching Washington carefully because they see an aspect of naiveté. Baker-Hamilton came up with 79 recommendations and told the president of the United States to take it in toto or leave it. That's not a viable approach.

Anybody who thinks that it is possible to engage Iran or Syria in a productive way now after six years of the Bush legacy is dreaming.

MURHAF JOUEJATI: NESAS, Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University

I subscribe fully to the remarks of my first two colleagues and in large part to what Hisham said, although I might add to what he said that the best school of corruption in the world happens to be in Lebanon, and the Syrian political elite were fast learners. To sum up Syria's external actions, two patterns of behavior are discernable. First, Syria torpedoes initiatives, and it brews regional instability when its interests are not taken into account. One case in point may be the May 17 agreement that Syria torpedoed between Lebanon and Israel. There are many other examples.

Second, Syria is constructive when its interests are taken into account. Henry Kissinger called Syria a "stabilizing force" in Lebanon when Syria controlled the Palestinian resistance in the south in the 1970s. Syria participated in the U.S.-led coalition of forces in the first Gulf War. Syria accepted the invitation to the Madrid conference, which led to the Middle East peace process, which in turn led to Oslo and to a Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty.

These two patterns may seem contradictory, and they are. But I think Syria has been very consistent. If we ask the question, "what does the regime in Damascus want?" First and foremost, it is, regime survival. Second, it is to advance purely Syrian interests. Third, it is to advance the broader Arab national interest.

We know what regime survival means, but what about state interests? What is Syria's interest in the region? First and foremost, it is to regain its sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The recovery of the Golan is at the epicenter of Syria's foreign policy — and this has been Syrian foreign policy since 1970. All else derives from that.

The Golan, as you know, was occupied in 1967, but not as a result of unprovoked Syrian fire from above onto the kibbutzim below, as Israel would contend. Rather, Syrian fire was provoked by Israeli encroachment into the DMZs, the demilitarized zones, according to the observers of the UN Mixed Armistice Commission. This fact is also included in the memoirs of Israeli General Shalev Gazit, according to whom Israelis have not always been lambs, and Syrians have not always been wolves. It is also confirmed in the writings of General Moshe Dayan.

A hundred thousand Syrian refugees from the Golan Heights, with their offspring today, number over 550,000. The occupation of the Golan Heights is in violation of Article II of the UN Charter, which emphasizes the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war. The continued occupation of the Golan Heights is also in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 242.

Some might argue, as Daniel Pipes and Professor Marius Deeb do, that Syria is really not interested in the recovery of the Golan Heights. What it is interested in is not even peace, but the process itself, because that process apparently legitimizes the Syrian regime. This assumption is based on the domestic-insecurity hypothesis: regimes that are domestically insecure look for trouble externally in order to divert attention from problems at home.

Let's look at the regime of Hafez al-Asad. Yes, he had many problems. It was a minority regime. It was corrupt, abused power, was undemocratic. However, Asad did not invent the Arab-Israeli conflict. He tried to recover the Golan Heights, first by war in 1973, but failed, then through peace. That is what he meant when he declared that peace to be Syria's strategic option. Given the acute awareness of Israel's military superiority over any combination of Arab power, the only way to contain Israel in its 1967 boundaries was through peace.

This is why Asad pushed for the Madrid conference, accepted the invitation, went to the Middle East peace process, accepted a bilateral Syria-Israel track, and recognized Israel's security interests on the Golan Heights. We know from the talks at Shepherdstown, West Virginia — the last serious talks that took place between Syria and Israel — that Syria was ready to recognize Israel and to normalize relations with it, among other things. According to the Clinton memoirs, Hafez al-Asad did not explode the peace with Israel; Israel did. It was Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak who apparently got “cold feet” and made Syria an offer that was less than the offer Israel had previously advanced — a withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, lines.

With regard to “Asad, Jr.,” the domestic-insecurity hypothesis might be more plausible. In addition to all the problems that Hafez had, Bashar has even more. He rules over a smaller social base. There is the emergence of a domestic opposition that he has to contend with. He is less credible than Hafez. He is, rightly or wrongly, implicated in the Hariri assassination. The combination of the above is a whole lot of domestic insecurity. Thus, his desire to resume talks with Israel may (or may not) be, as Hisham puts it, tactical.

Still, it is interesting that when Bashar first came to power, he sought the resumption of talks with Israel before the accumulation of domestic problems, Syria endorsed the Arab peace plan that was advanced by then-Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

In sum, Syria wants peace, not because Syria is John Lennon [“All We Are Saying, Is Give Peace a Chance”], but because it is in its national interest. Unfortunately, thus far, it has not had a partner for peace. Israel is militarily superior and has full U.S. backing, and there are those in the Bush administration who have weighed in on the debate in Israel against resuming talks with Syria. Thus, from a hawkish Israeli mindset, why would Israel give Syria anything at this point?

In terms of balance of power, Israel may be right. But peace with Syria, i.e., the return of the Golan to Syrian sovereignty, provides a far better security guarantee to Israel, as peace with Syria isolates Iran. Peace between Syria and Israel isolates Hezbollah. Peace between Israel and Syria isolates Hamas. If my assumptions are right, it is the resumption of talks leading to the return of the Golan Heights rather than sanctions and isolation, that will make Syria more cooperative. A more cooperative Syria, in turn, would advance U.S. and Israeli interests.

Conversely, an uncooperative Syria, one that brews regional instability, threatens these interests. Therefore, I believe Washington must take Syrian interests into account. The Golan Heights must be part and parcel of an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. While President Bush's vision of a two-state solution is good, it is not sufficient if it excludes the Golan Heights.

Addressing Syrian grievances, namely the end of Israeli occupation of the Golan, is the key to constructive Syrian behavior. This, as Hisham says, is not appeasement; it is doing the right thing.

Q & A

AMB. RUGH: As to the question of economic incentives in dealing with Syria, Ambassador Kattouf talked about Syria's financial dependence on others and the oil question. Do economic incentives work with Syria? When I was at the American Embassy in Damascus more than 20 years ago, the U.S. Congress cut off economic assistance to President Hafez al-Asad's regime, expecting him to change his behavior. He pretended not even to notice, and it had apparently no effect. That's withdrawal of an economic carrot. Maybe there are other ways to influence the Syrian regime through economic incentives.

A second issue: Martha talked about fighters crossing the border and said there are different estimates as to the numbers. I've seen one comment by a U.S. official that 90 percent of the foreign fighters come across the Syrian border. The question is, why is Syria allowing that? Why is it in Syria's interest to continue to do that? How does it affect Syria's influence in Iraq and in the region?

On the question that Hisham raised, comparing Hafez al-Asad with Bashar in terms of formation of alliances, I don't disagree that Bashar is less adept at regional politics than his father was — that's certainly the case. But it seems that Bashar certainly has a strong strategic alliance with Iran, and, as Ted noted, it probably cannot be broken any time soon without paying a very high price.

It is an alliance that he has maintained, that his father established. There are also some connections between Damascus and Riyadh. The recent Arab summit saw King Abdullah praising Bashar and supporting him on Iraq. At least, with lip service. I concede that Hezbollah is a small player in the region and not a major alliance partner, but maybe Bashar does have other options.

Finally, what is the role of Syria in the connection between Iran, on the one hand, and Hamas and Hezbollah, on the other? The United States is concerned about Iranian support for and sponsorship of Hamas and Hezbollah. Do these connections go through Damascus? I understand Hisham doubts that that is a very important connection, even though Khaled Mashal of Hamas sits in Damascus. But to what extent is Syria a problem because of the continuing activity of Hezbollah and Hamas?

AMB. KATTOUF: I am glad that Ambassador Rugh picked up on my remark about Syria's financial vulnerability. I certainly wasn't suggesting that we pile more U.S. unilateral sanctions on top of the ones that have been in place. Some have been in place since 1979, when Syria was sanctioned for being a state sponsor of terror. I think that was the proximate cause of its losing its USAID grants. Then, of course, the president implemented some of the actions from the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. But we do have carrots to offer.

We have actually been effective in keeping Syria from applying to the WTO, which I've never quite understood because WTO membership would actually require Syria to

reform its economy. It would take an incredible number of years for Syria to comply, if it complied at all. So there are many points along the way when we could stop the process if we were dissatisfied. But, even before the Hariri assassination, we blocked the WTO application of Syria.

We've also been successful in getting the Europeans to deny Syria certain economic concessions under the Barcelona process that involved a number of Mediterranean countries. I think Syria is the only Mediterranean attendee of the conference that doesn't have such concessions. That, too, would have forced Syria to make some reforms. It's not clear to me that it would have benefited Syria; it might have benefited the Europeans more. But because we have put on these sanctions, we are in a position to offer the Syrians certain carrots, and I think they are going to need, down the road, some financial aid. You can stay in power, as Saddam showed, even when your people are reduced to abject penury, but it means that Bashar will have to become a brute at home, and I'm not sure that he's temperamentally suited to that.

I don't disagree with Hisham that Bashar obviously is not his father. I've said many times myself that Hafez al-Asad made the regime, but the regime made Bashar al-Asad. Bashar's mistakes are rather obvious. Yet my recent visits to Damascus show me that the Syrians are feeling quite confident right now. In fact, I've actually cautioned one senior official not to confuse being lucky with being good, because they have benefited from even worse mistakes that this U.S. administration has made. Nevertheless, I can tell you that in Damascus they're not wringing their hands and worrying. They think they're in a pretty strong position.

MS. KESSLER: I agree with Ted that positive economic incentives are most likely to work with Syria. One of the things that has impressed me over 30 years of watching not only Syria but other countries in the region, is how grossly we underestimate their willingness to take economic hardship if it's a matter of principle. This certainly applies to Syria. So I do not think the sticks work very well at all.

I, also, take the point that Bashar is not his father. Sons never are, and in their 30s they are certainly not what their fathers were in their 60s and 70s. What Asad, Jr., has had to face simply couldn't have been conceived of by his father during the tutorial. We went way off the script of anything he had been prepared for. Our standards for judging how effectively he's been able to manage Syria during his short period in power should take into consideration those issues. My understanding of his domestic situation now is that it has stabilized, which obviously is the most important thing. Getting his internal house in order is the number-one priority, and at the same time dealing with a regional crisis of enormous proportions strikes me as an accomplishment. Survival is not generally thought to be what one aims for, but in these circumstances, I think it's quite surprising. So I agree that he's made some terrible blunders, but if you want to make a comparison, you've got to look at what happened in the early years of his father's regime. There were stumbles there as well.

As to the interesting question that Bill has raised about Syria's relationship with Hamas and Hezbollah and whether dealing with Syria will really make any appreciable difference with regard to those two, those issues have to be dealt with in the context of

Iran. Failing that, I think that dealing with Syria certainly could make a difference in terms of the muscle with which Hezbollah acts in the region. There isn't any question that Syria has been a conduit for the resupply of Hezbollah, and its endorsement has been important to the flexibility of that group.

With regard to Hamas, it's much less clear. But I've always believed that for a true Israeli peace to be negotiated, Syria must be included, as remarked on by Professor Jouejati. To do so immediately limits the ability of groups that are opposed to peace to operate. This was true in the early '70s, when Henry Kissinger started to negotiate a peace agreement, throughout the Carter years, and throughout the Clinton years. To ignore Syria was to ignore a major strategic aspect of this problem. The piecemeal-confidence-building approach was almost doomed when you had a party sitting on the sidelines that had virtual veto power. It never made sense to me then, and it certainly doesn't make sense to me now. Syria's assets in Hamas are not nearly those that it has in Hezbollah, but, nevertheless, this is an important checkmate to the ability of Hamas to operate.

MR. MELHEM: I don't want to belabor the father-son relationship, but both Hafez and Bashar, when they took over, were relatively young. Three years into his reign, Hafez went to war. A year or two later, he found himself negotiating with the likes of Henry Kissinger. Even when he was young, Hafez was different than his son. So I would like to think that Bashar represents a glaring example of the pitfalls of political inheritance. If you can avoid it, don't do it. I will always blame Hafez for committing the biggest blunder in his life when he decided to bequeath his realm to his son.

But, in his last years he made some bad mistakes, obviously, even for a brilliant tactician. He, for instance, did not see the rising rapprochement between Turkey and Israel and allowed the Abdallah Ocalan case to humiliate him publicly — the Turks said, get rid of Ocalan or we'll send troops across the border. Uncharacteristically, he bowed down and did it.

As for Iran and Syria, this relationship is one of the longest-enduring fixtures of modern Middle Eastern history. It is not based on ideology, shared values or common strategic vision, but on some practical interests it is a temporary or *Pleasure Mut'a marriage*, which means, basic interests. But when Hafez began to nurture this relationship in 1979-1980, when Saddam invaded Iran, Iran became more dependent on Syria than vice versa.

Today, many Syrians resent the fact that their country is moving in the political orbit of Iran and not the other way around. Even those who have their own cold-blooded calculus about this relationship and the need to maintain it are not comfortable with it because it is alienating many Arab allies. You have a bunch of people in Iran who wrote the book on political cunning, and they have a strategy. But there is no Arab strategy vis-à-vis Iran.

Bill raised the issue of Syrian involvement in allowing jihadists to go to Iraq. I still believe that people exaggerate the role and the lethality of the foreign jihadists who went to Iraq through the Syrian border, although there are other jihadists who are going to Iraq through other borders. I fail to see the tangible benefits the Syrians could give the Americans if they engaged them on Iraq.

On Lebanon and Palestine, I still have questions about Bashar's ability to deliver. The old man was extremely rational in his dealings — even supporting Amin Gemayel, the president of Lebanon at one time, who cursed him publicly when Gemayel found himself bereft of American support following the Americans redeployment in 1983 after the bombing of the Marine barracks. Hafez al-Asad with open arms received Amin Gemayel in Damascus God knows how many times because he got what he wanted. He was like a mafia boss — it's nothing personal; it's business. And it worked. When Hafez was around, we knew that there was an Allawite core to the regime, but there was a Sunni façade. Now that veneer is gone, and we have a family dynasty where the Makhoulouf branch is milking the country economically, and the Asad family is controlling the country politically. It's the president, his younger brother, his sister, and his brother-in-law. It's all in the family.

I'm not saying don't engage Syria. Murhaf is absolutely correct. The brilliance of Hafez was his willingness and courage to swim against the tide. In 1976, he entered Lebanon, and I remember as a young man I demonstrated against the Syrian entry into Lebanon. Later on, I found myself with the Syrian camp when they were trying to undermine the May 17 agreement signed by Lebanon in the shadow of Israeli bayonets. As someone who was born in Lebanon, I did not want to see Lebanon in the political orbit of Israel. It was difficult to be 100 percent against Hafez or 100 percent with Hafez.

He was correct in 1980 not to support Iraq in Saddam's war against Iran. And he was correct in going to Madrid. He was correct in 1991, when he saw that a huge Desert Storm was going to hit the region. He felt he should be like a palm tree and go with it. He was brilliant, and he collected the financial and political rewards afterwards.

Syria's strategic environment has changed a lot. They can still have some influence in Lebanon. They still have some politicians in Lebanon who cannot maintain their standing unless they work with the Syrians. If the United States engages Syria, it should say that we respect your legitimate interests, economic and otherwise in Lebanon, but you have to treat Lebanon as a sovereign state.

Reviving the peace process was not a reward for Hafez. If I were a Syrian, I would demand the return of every inch of the Golan. I think the Bush administration has made a lot of mistakes in this regard in ignoring the peace process because they wanted to dismiss everything that was associated with Bill Clinton. Yes, Bill Clinton did not push enough; yes, Bush senior did not push enough; and yet "W" also did not push enough. I think Zbigniew Brzezinski in his recent book is correct when he said these three leaders did not do enough to push both sides to achieve peace.

Let's challenge Bashar. If he can deliver on the requirements to have an open society, to deal openly with a state like Israel that has much stronger institutions, let's see how the Syrian society will react. I believe firmly that if you unleash the Syrians, they will do tremendous work. Look at their communities all over the world. This is a country that has two of the most important Arab cities, Aleppo and Damascus. Under Bashar today, Syria is a minor player. But they may benefit from other people's blunders, including the American administration's. There's a dearth of leadership in the Arab world — Iraq is in flames, Egypt has marginalized itself, the Saudis are trying on their own to at least come up with some sort of a strategy. Maybe Bashar looks somewhat different, you know.

DR. JOUEJATI: Isn't it mind boggling that we ask of Syria to open up, and we also arrest its application to the WTO, which would force it to open up? We also pressure the EU to postpone its association agreement with Syria, an association agreement that would have required the opening up of many different aspects of the Syrian economy and society. There were civil-society clauses, human-rights clauses. So, by pressuring the EU we have denied the Syrian people the ability to get to where they want to go

On the question of Syria and Iran, I believe it is the most enduring alliance in the Middle East. Under Hafez al-Asad, it was a partnership of equals. When the peace talks with Israel came along, Hafez kept his distance from Iran, telling them, "this is in my interests." Now it looks more like a patron-client relationship in which Syria is dependent. But still, I refer you to a recent media interview that Bashar did. He was asked about Iranian President Ahmadinejad's remarks on the destruction of Israel, and he replied, "we want to make peace with Israel, not war." So there is a fissure in the Syrian-Iranian relationship that might be exploited if, of course, Syria had a reason to leave that alliance. This brings me to the last point about Syria and radical groups. When the peace talks were going well, former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam — this is not a secret, it was in the media — gathered leaders of Palestinian guerrilla organizations in Damascus and told them to go look for a job because the business of resistance was over. If Syria had cause to see a light at the end of the tunnel in terms of its recovery of the Golan, the same might be done again.

Q: How does the panel look upon the Pelosi mission, which included Tom Lantos, a Zionist; Nick Rahall, an Arab-American; and Keith Ellison, the first Muslim congressman?

AMB. KATTOUF: It strikes me that the Democrats, having come out for withdrawal of U.S. troops at some point in 2008, are taking another page from the playbook of the Baker-Hamilton Commission: that if you're going to get out, there needs to be an important diplomatic component to what you're trying to do. And, of course, the panel recommended engaging Syria and Iran both multilaterally and bilaterally as part of the effort to stabilize Iraq and allow for an orderly U.S. departure and an Iraq that at least had a chance to keep the violence down and to stay a unified country.

I think Speaker Pelosi was wise in who she took with her. It's hard to get better cover than Tom Lantos. Nobody would ever accuse him of being weak on the issues that the administration cares about vis-à-vis Syria, be it Lebanon or support for groups that have engaged in terrorism, such as Hezbollah. I sat in on a meeting with Tom Lantos and President Bashar while I was still ambassador. I suspect that Tom Lantos would not have been in the room if he had been leading the delegation. He would not have gotten the appointment with Bashar. Nancy Pelosi gave him the entrée he might not have been able to get again on his own. And he gave her cover to protect her from criticism.

Q: Would the achievement of the Golan Heights put the regime's survival at risk? They wouldn't have an excuse to use the emergency law to ensure security .

DR. JOUEJATI: If the regime gets back the Golan, it would be very, very popular. But another reason to get back the Golan, other than that it is Syrian land, is that it would deny the regime justification for the continued imposition of martial law. This is what I want.

Q: When you talk about Syria in Washington, you are giving it a cover. Why don't you look at Syria's suppression of its people?

DR. JOUEJATI: I don't think you'll find anybody in the Bush administration who will claim Syria is an asset in the Middle East. You are saying that, by engaging the Syrian regime, you are giving it legitimacy and therefore prolonging its life. But I think there is real fear in the United States, and certainly in Israel, about who is going to come after the Asad regime. Is there going to be chaos on the northern border of Israel? Is it going to be the Muslim Brotherhood that is in charge of Syria? There are all these unknowns that would limit either the Bush administration's push against the Syrian regime, or even an Israeli one.

Q: One important factor is the increasing role that Saudi Arabia is playing in a number of major diplomatic initiatives. This carries complications from a Syrian standpoint. I wonder if the panelists could comment on how they see the Saudi role.

MR. MELHEM: Obviously, the recent diplomatic moves by the Saudis were not seen in a positive light by the Syrian leaders. The Saudi leadership believes that Syria was involved in the assassination of Hariri. There are personal relationships between the Hariri family and the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, but there are also political alliances.

The Saudis are also not comfortable with the close relationship between Bashar and the Iranians. The Saudis feel that they have to stand up to Iran's influence in the region, and that explains in part why they worked on the Mecca agreement between Hamas and Fatah in the Palestinian Authority. It explains in part what they are trying to do in Lebanon to defuse the crisis, contain the influence of Iran's allies and prevent the situation from degenerating into civil strife.

The Saudis were very angry at Bashar when he called them, as well as other Arab leaders, half men. So if you are in Bashar's position in Damascus, you shouldn't be comfortable with these Saudi moves in the region. They are directly or indirectly aimed at you. They are seeking to limit Syria's influence in Lebanon or maybe even in the Palestinian territories, and also to provide some sort of an Arab alternative in dealing with Iran.

I don't see a Wahhabi element, unless you're talking about the Sunni-Shia rift in the region. Obviously, the smart people, whether in Iran or Syria or Saudi Arabia, should be horrified by the potential for a deepening rift between the Sunni and Shia communities, where the two live side by side — in Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and of course Iraq.

Most Arabs now get their news from television, and every Arab watches al-Jazeera and al-Arabia, and they see the blood-letting in Iraq and the sectarian rhetoric getting out of hand. This is deepening the tension in Lebanon; it's creating tension in Kuwait and other places where these two communities live — even in Syria, given the fact that the Alawis are an offshoot of Shia Islam.

I don't think the Saudis would like to see a Shia-Sunni rift. Smart people in Iran don't want to see that. Many Iranians in the political hierarchy cringe when Ahmadinejad makes his stupid remarks and when they see an uneasiness on the part of many Arab Sunnis about the growing role of Iran. Many Arabs look at Lebanon and realize that, if

the Lebanese government falls, it will not be seen as a victory for Hezbollah or even, by extension, Iran; it will be seen as a Sunni defeat. This is the sad reality of politics in the Arab world today.

There are people who are concerned about these negative trends. But where is the Arab responsibility for dealing with Iraq? It's easy to complain about the American blunders in Iraq, but Arabs rarely ask the question, what is our role here? Is it in our interest to see Iraq degenerate into a full-fledged civil war that will have tremendous ramifications for the region, given the Sunni-Shia fault lines.

AMB. RUGH: I would add that the landscape has certainly changed, when you look at the role of the Saudis. In the past they have been very reticent to take any leadership position in diplomacy, and now they are convening a conference to bring the Palestinian factions together and they are very active, whereas the Egyptians, who used to have a major leadership role, and the Syrian leader, are both quiescent.

Q: What kinds of incentives would you give the Syrian regime and government to convince them to have national tribunals? As to the question of the Hariri assassination and the fact that demonstrations have been held in Beirut to block parliamentary sessions from authorizing the tribunal, what kinds of incentives could be offered to Syria to encourage its friends in Lebanon to allow for a tribunal?

AMB. KATTOUF: This is an existential question for the regime. If the assassination of Rafik Hariri and his associates reaches to the senior levels of the Syrian regime, as some people suspect it does, there is no way that President Bashar al-Asad can acquiesce in a tribunal that could demand that he allow people close to him to be transported to the Hague or wherever to stand trial. What he's doing right now is waiting for Chirac to be replaced by a new French president. He hopes that he can cut a deal with the next French president, who will not have the ties that President Chirac had with the late Rafik Hariri, which were very, very close. He's also waiting for this U.S. administration to leave. He's learned one thing from his father. He's learned how to sit on a position. You don't give him enough credit.

MR. MELHEM: I don't think Bashar can or will cooperate on the international tribunal for the obvious reasons that Ted mentioned. I agree, Bashar is waiting for Blair and Chirac to go, and for this administration to become truly a lame duck to try to stop the tribunal. That's why I think the United States, the French and the British should go to Chapter Seven and have the tribunal.

Q: Do the panelists think, given that Hamas and Hezbollah have achieved their positions through democratic elections, that it's time to adjust this matter of declaring them terrorists? I'm particularly concerned about the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza with this administration's refusal to recognize a unity government or deal with it. Second, the Syria Accountability Act was passed in a frenzy of disinformation and exaggerations from players like former Ambassador John Bolton. The assessments regarding Syria that I heard from Washington did not come true. They said Syria would never leave Lebanon. They did leave Lebanon. They said that President Asad would not cooperate with the

UN investigation. They did cooperate. And there are a lot of ambiguities in the latest Brammertz report, which doesn't make it clear that there weren't motives in Lebanon in the other direction — that Rafik Hariri was interested in reconciliation.

Last, General Aoun, when he was here in Washington and out of power, sounded very anti-Syrian. Yet, on his return to Lebanon, he changed his views. Shouldn't the Americans, perhaps, be listening to his reasoning now a little bit more?

These ambiguities need to be said on the record, because in Congress and the White House, things are much too black and white. I don't think Syria has been given credit for the compromises that it's made.

DR. JOUEJATI: On the Syria Accountability Act, I was asked to testify at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I said that I didn't think it would have much effect on Syria or the regime and that, by increasing pressure, Washington was throwing Damascus into the lap of Iran.

MS. KESSLER: I don't think you can understand what has been done with regard to Syria in the last several years outside of the context of a belief among many in this administration that this regime has to go. So much of what has been undertaken with regard to Lebanon and the Accountability Act has been to provide a *raison d'être* for getting rid of the regime in Damascus. I can't analyze it any other way. There are so many contradictory and seemingly irrational aspects to this with regard to truth on the ground, that it has to be understood in that context.

The second point is a little less clear. The hypocrisy that goes with promoting democracy in Iraq and then not recognizing a democratically elected country is hurting us enormously in the region. There is a whole set of issues that has stimulated an image of U.S. foreign policy as being enormously hypocritical. I think it is the major stimulant to the worst aspects of a militant Islam, and it gives credibility to some of our worst enemies. Your point that this ought to be re-thought is, in my view, absolutely apparent.

Q: My question is for Ms. Kessler. You commented that honest cooperation with this regime is going to require our administration's assurances about regime change. What kinds of assurances do you think would be satisfactory?

MS. KESSLER: I'm not sure what form those assurances would take, and I am even less hopeful that they would be given because to do so is to acknowledge that, in fact, regime change was the agenda. This issue, by the way, was more or less directly taken on in an interview with Foreign Minister Moallem, who said the security of Syria has to be taken into account in any kind of engagement. I think that the best we could hope for, if this kind of dialogue were to be undertaken within the lifetime of this administration, would have to be a gradual confidence building that this was not the case. It would also involve running out the clock. So I didn't have in mind explicit assurances. I don't think that's possible; it would just be Syria's measure of how safe it is with regard to U.S. intentions.

Q: Do you think it's too late for this administration?

MS. KESSLER: I am not certain of that. It all depends. If I were asked to give a timetable, I think the feeling is that, if this surge strategy has not produced some publicly

acknowledged or accepted results by the summertime, we're going to have to change strategies. So we're talking about late summer or early fall, of perhaps trying a diplomatic gambit, in which case that's not necessarily too late. We will have to measure on a gradual basis how forthcoming and honest the Syrians would be in making commitments. Actions are going to speak a lot louder than anything else.

Q: I wonder about the long-term implications of having these large immigrant populations in other states and how they're going to be handled, whether you grant citizenship or whether you establish permanent refugee camps. What sorts of effects are they having?

MS. KESSLER: This is one of the really serious long-term problems, in addition to history telling us, both in Jordan and in Lebanon, that refugee populations can have an enormous impact on political behaviors and intentions. I see it as an extraordinary problem. The great hope is that those 1,300,000 refugees inside Syria would be resettled relatively quickly once stability is established, but that is very optimistic. Syria has done reasonably well in integrating its Palestinian refugee population into its social fabric. Whether it can manage that many Iraqi refugees is an entirely different question. It will almost certainly need international assistance in doing so, as will Jordan.

Over the long term, I think that it almost certainly would have consequences for the stability and character of the regime, particularly since, in the case of the Palestinians, there was no state entity when they moved into Syria to identify with. In the case of Iraq, they will have one. And if they remain in Syria and Jordan as a dissident, very unhappy refugee population, I think the prospects for enduring stability in Iraq are very dim. You have put your finger on one of the very serious consequences of this conflict.

AMB. KATTOUF: At the risk of, again, stating the obvious, I'm struck by how little credit Syria gets for having accepted all of these refugees, whether it's 800,000 or 1.3 million. They have kept the borders open. Hisham said, "if they close the border to Lebanon, the United States would close the border to Iraq." The Syrians might say, "go ahead; you deal with the refugees; you figure out what to do with all the people who are going to come to the border and not be able to get entry into Syria." But, as Martha said — and having lived in Syria three different times, I know for a fact — the Palestinians are far better integrated than people are led to believe. Palestinians own businesses; they are part of the fabric of life. The one-time big camp Yarmuk has basically become just a neighborhood of Damascus. If Syria were a more favored state, you would be seeing feature articles about their humanitarian gestures to Iraqis. Accepting this number of refugees can be destabilizing, particularly for an impoverished country, and particularly since some of these refugees are bringing their own religious baggage with them in terms of the tensions that exist today in Iraq.

MR. MELHEM: When I talked about closing the border with Syria, I was talking about economic exchange. That the Americans in Iraq could stop the movement of goods but not the movement of people. Obviously, the Syrians have a very good record in treating refugees, be they Armenians, the first-wave of non-Arab refugees, or the Palestinians; and they should get credit for taking in the Iraqis. The administration was late in recognizing this. I think the Syrians should be supported in this endeavor. I don't think refugee

citizenship is in the cards. They will have a tremendous demographic and political impact on Syrian society and politics. The United States has a moral, as well as a political and even legal, responsibility to help the Jordanian government and the Syrian government in this regard. If it had not been for the invasion and the war and the occupation, there would not be 800,000 or a million Iraqi refugees in Syria. And I think the Syrians deserve understanding and support from the United States, in particular, and the Europeans to deal with these mounting problems that are inevitable in a small economy like Syria's.

AMB. KATTOUF: I don't want to see the border with Lebanon closed by Syria. Don't misunderstand my remarks, but I'm just being a bit ironic that if they try to do it for economic reasons, I'm sure the Syrians would say, "okay, it's closed."

MR. MELHEM: The Syrian governments always play games with their borders. They did close the Iraqi pipeline in the old days. They did close the Jordanian border in the past. They did close their border with Lebanon many times.

Q: Is it too late to talk to Syria about Iraq now?

AMB. KATTOUF: They didn't listen to me when I was in the government; I doubt they will listen to me now. It's not too late to talk to the Syrians, but we shouldn't have illusions. I agree with Hisham. The Syrians at this point aren't going to give us much. They figure, we have seen this administration; we don't like them. If they want to engage, we'll engage, but we are almost sure to get a better deal from the next administration, whoever it is, Republican or Democrat. Why give these guys very much? But they see the advantage of engagement themselves because they are hoping it will shield them from some of the sanctions and other policies that we have promoted to isolate them. By the way, they are not isolated. I was in Damascus at the beginning of March. You had the Belgian foreign minister; you had the German minister of interior; you had the Iraqi vice president, the Sunni vice president over there. And there were others as well. Trust me, they are not as isolated as some people would have you believe they are. The Syrians right now are going to ask for a much higher price than they would have asked three or four years ago if we had dealt with them. Then, we thought we could have it all, and there was no need to give them anything.

AMB. RUGH: The premise of the discussion has been when we meet with Syria. And I think it's fair to say all of the panelists support engagement rather than isolation. But they have pointed out very nicely in various ways, on various issues, the difficulty of moving forward with engagement. One conclusion might be, yes, we should engage, but don't come to the negotiating table with any illusions.