

Syria Calling: The Obama Administration's chance to engage in a Middle East peace

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When the Israelis' controversial twenty-two-day military campaign in Gaza ended, on January 18th, it also seemed to end the promising peace talks between Israel and Syria. The two countries had been engaged for almost a year in negotiations through intermediaries in Istanbul. Many complicated technical matters had been resolved, and there were agreements in principle on the normalization of diplomatic relations. The consensus, as an ambassador now serving in Tel Aviv put it, was that the two sides had been "a lot closer than you might think."

At an Arab summit in Qatar in mid-January, however, Bashar Assad, the President of Syria, angrily declared that Israel's bombing of Gaza and the resulting civilian deaths showed that the Israelis spoke only "the language of blood." He called on the Arab world to boycott Israel, close any Israeli embassies in the region, and sever all "direct or indirect ties with Israel." Syria, Assad said, had ended its talks over the Golan Heights.

Nonetheless, a few days after the Israeli ceasefire in Gaza, Assad said in an e-mail to me that although Israel was "doing everything possible to undermine the prospects for peace," he was still very interested in closing the deal. "We have to wait a little while to see how things will evolve and how the situation will change," Assad said. "We still believe that we need to conclude a serious dialogue to lead us to peace."

American and foreign government officials, intelligence officers, diplomats, and politicians said in interviews that renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations over the Golan Heights are now highly likely, despite Gaza and the elections in Israel in February, which left the Likud Party leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, at the head of a coalition that includes both the far right and Labor. Those talks would depend largely on America's willingness to act as the mediator, a role that could offer Barack Obama his first—and perhaps best—chance for engagement in the Middle East peace process.

A senior Syrian official explained that Israel's failure to unseat Hamas from power in Gaza, despite the scale of the war, gave Assad enough political room to continue the negotiations without losing credibility in the Arab world. Assad also has the support of Arab leaders who are invested in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani,* the ruler of Qatar, said last month when I saw him in Doha that Assad must take any reasonable steps he can to keep the talks going. "Syria is eager to engage with the West," he said, "an eagerness that was never perceived by the Bush White House. Anything is possible, as long as peace is being pursued."

A major change in American policy toward Syria is clearly under way. "The return of the

Golan Heights is part of a broader strategy for peace in the Middle East that includes countering Iran's influence," Martin Indyk, a former American Ambassador to Israel, who is now the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, at the Brookings Institution, said. "Syria is a strategic linchpin for dealing with Iran and the Palestinian issue. Don't forget, everything in the Middle East is connected, as Obama once said."

A former American diplomat who has been involved in the Middle East peace process said, "There are a lot of people going back and forth to Damascus from Washington saying there is low-hanging fruit waiting for someone to harvest." A treaty between Syria and Israel "would be the start of a wide-reaching peace-implementation process that will unfold over time." He added, "The Syrians have been ready since the 1993 Oslo Accords to do a separate deal." The new Administration now has to conduct "due diligence": "Get an ambassador there, or a Presidential envoy. Talk to Bashar, and speak in specifics so you'll know whether or not you've actually got what you've asked for. If you're vague, don't be surprised if it comes back to bite you."

Many Israelis and Americans involved in the process believe that a deal on the Golan Heights could be a way to isolate Iran, one of Syria's closest allies, and to moderate Syria's support for Hamas and for Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department. There is a competing view: that Assad's ultimate goal is not to marginalize Iran but to bring it, too, into regional talks that involve America—and perhaps Israel. In either scenario, Iran is a crucial factor motivating each side.

These diplomatic possibilities were suggested by Senator John Kerry, of Massachusetts, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who met with Assad in Damascus in February—his third visit since Assad took office, in 2000. "He wants to engage with the West," Kerry said in an interview in his Senate office. "Our latest conversation gave me a much greater sense that Assad is willing to do the things that he needs to do in order to change his relationship with the United States. He told me he's willing to engage positively with Iraq, and have direct discussions with Israel over the Golan Heights—with Americans at the table. I will encourage the Administration to take him up on it.

"Of course, Syria will not suddenly move against Iran," Kerry said. "But the Syrians will act in their best interest, as they did in their indirect negotiations with Israel with Turkey's assistance—and over the objections of Iran."

President Assad was full of confidence and was impatiently anticipating the new Administration in Washington when I spoke to him late last year in Damascus. Trained as an ophthalmologist, partly in London, he took over the Presidency in 2000, after the death of his father, Hafez Assad, who amassed enormous personal power in thirty years of brutal rule. Bashar had not expected a life as the Syrian leader—his older brother, Basil, who was killed in an accident in 1994, had been groomed to replace their father. Bashar, thirty-four when he became President, was said to be a lesser figure than either of them. He has since consolidated his position—both by modernizing the economy and by suppressing domestic opposition—and, when we spoke, it was clear that he had come to relish the exercise of power.

Assad said that if America's leaders "are seeking peace they have to deal with Syria and they have to deal with our rights, which is the Golan Heights." In the Six-Day War, in 1967, Israel seized the Golan Heights, about four hundred and fifty square miles of territory that is

rich in Biblical history and, crucially, in water. It includes part of the Jordan River Valley and a plateau overlooking the river which extends to Mt. Hermon, in the north. Syria was left with no access to the Sea of Galilee and the upper Jordan River. Roughly twenty thousand Israeli settlers live there, and they have built towns, vineyards, and boutique hotels in its valleys and strategic heights.

Assad said, “The land is not negotiable, and the Israelis know that we are not going to negotiate the line of 1967.” But he suggested that compromises were possible. “We only demarcate the line,” he said. “We negotiate the relations, the water, and everything else.” Many who are close to the process assume that an Israeli-Syrian settlement would include reparations for the Israelis in the Golan Heights, and, for a time, the right of access to the land. Assad said, “You discuss everything after the peace and getting your land. Not before.”

If Israel wants a settlement that goes beyond the Golan Heights, Assad said, it will have to “deal with the core issue”—the situation in the West Bank and Gaza—“and not waste time talking about who is going to send arms to Hezbollah or Hamas. Wherever you have resistance in the region, they will have armaments somehow. It is very simple.” He added, “Hezbollah is in Lebanon and Hamas is in Palestine. . . . If they want to solve the problem of Hezbollah, they have to deal with Lebanon. For Hamas, they have to deal with Gaza. For Iran, it is not part of the peace process anyway.” Assad went on, “This peace is about peace between Syria and Israel.”

In his e-mail after the Gaza war, Assad emphasized that it was more than ever “essential that the United States play a prominent and active role in the peace process.” What he needed, Assad said, was direct contact with Obama. A conference would not be enough: “It is most natural to want a meeting with President Obama.”

If the Netanyahu government is to trade land for peace, it needs to be assured of domestic political support—and help from Washington. In September, 2007, Israel destroyed what it claimed was a potential Syrian nuclear-weapons reactor during a cross-border raid, an action that won the approval of the Israeli public. (Syria insisted there was no reactor on the site.) At the time, the two countries were already laying the groundwork for the indirect negotiations. In December, 2008, Ehud Olmert, who was then Prime Minister, flew to Ankara, Turkey, and conducted more than five hours of intense talks on the return of the Golan Heights, with the mediation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was often in direct telephone contact with Bashar Assad. But Olmert’s standing was tarnished, both inside Israel, by a series of criminal investigations that led to his resignation (he has denied any wrongdoing), and outside Israel, by the Gaza war, which began days after he left Ankara.

Netanyahu’s coalition government will include, as Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, the head of the Israel Beytenu Party, who has argued for a measure, aimed at Israeli-Arabs, requiring citizens to take loyalty oaths or forfeit many of their rights, and has rejected any land-for-peace agreement with Syria (though he is open to trading other territories); and, as Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, the Labor Party leader, who has consistently supported talks with Syria. Current opinion polls indicate that the majority of Israelis do not support a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Netanyahu himself—in what was widely seen as a plea for votes—declared two days before the elections that he would not return the Golan Heights.

Daniel Levy, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, who served on Israeli peace

delegations in 1995 and 2001 and also as an adviser to Prime Minister Barak, said that Netanyahu “may have huge coalition problems, not least within his own Likud Party,” and that he “may have to publicly disavow any land-for-peace agreement, given his political position. Can the Syrians swallow that? If they can’t, it means that the only option left will be secret talks.” Levy added, “Barak’s appointment does not change the fundamental dynamics of the coalition, but it means that Bibi [Netanyahu] has a Defense Minister who will be on board for dealing with Syria, who wants to deal with Syria—and who also will be on board for doing it in secret.”

Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli Ambassador to Washington, who was Israel’s chief negotiator with Syria under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and informally advises his government on Syrian issues, argued that the war in Gaza had not changed Israel’s essential interest in a Golan Heights settlement: “Gaza is Gaza, and I say that Bashar Assad definitely wants to go ahead with the talks. And he may find a partner in Bibi Netanyahu. Bibi would prefer to make a deal with Syria rather than with the Palestinians.”

But if the talks are to proceed, Rabinovich said, “they will have to be transformed to direct negotiations.” This would require the support and involvement of the Obama Administration. Rabinovich said that he thought Obama, like Netanyahu, “after weighing the pros and cons, will see a Golan Heights settlement as being more feasible” than a deal with the Palestinians. “The talks are serious, and there is a partner.”

The former American diplomat, who is an expert on the Golan Heights, said that it would take between three and five years to evacuate Israelis living there. “During that time, if there is a party moderating the agreement—the U.S., perhaps—it would be necessary for that party to stay engaged, to make sure that the process stays on course,” he said. This factor may explain why Assad wants the U.S. involved. “The key point is that the signing of an agreement is just the beginning—and third parties are needed to reinforce the agreement.”

Obama’s Middle East strategy is still under review in the State Department and the National Security Council. The Administration has been distracted by the economic crisis, and impeded by the large number of key foreign- and domestic-policy positions yet to be filled. Obama’s appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy for Middle East diplomacy, on January 22nd, won widespread praise, but Mitchell has yet to visit Syria. Diplomatic contacts with Damascus were expanded in late February, and informal exchanges with Syria have already taken place. According to involved diplomats, the Administration’s tone was one of dialogue and respect—and not a series of demands. For negotiations to begin, the Syrians understood that Washington would no longer insist that Syria shut down the Hamas liaison office in Damascus and oust its political leader, Khaled Meshal. Syria, instead, will be asked to play a moderating role with the Hamas leadership, and urge a peaceful resolution of Hamas’s ongoing disputes with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Syrians were also told that the Obama Administration was reëvaluating the extent of Syria’s control over Hezbollah. (The White House did not respond to requests for comment.)

The United States has been involved in negotiations over the Golan Heights before, notably those brokered by Bill Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in 2000. Those talks, despite their last-minute collapse over border disputes, among other issues, provided the backbone for the recent indirect negotiations. Martin Indyk, who advised Clinton at Shepherdstown,

said that those talks were about “territory for peace.” Now, he said, “it’s about territory for peace *and* strategic realignment.”

During the long campaign for the White House, Obama often criticized Syria for its links to terrorism, its “pursuit of weapons of mass destruction,” and its interference in Lebanon, where Syria had troops until 2005 and still plays a political role. (Assad dismissed the criticisms in his talk with me: “We do not bet on speeches during the campaign.”) But Obama said that he would be willing to sit down with Assad in the first year of his Presidency without preconditions. He also endorsed the Syrian peace talks with Israel. “We must never force Israel to the negotiating table, but neither should we ever block negotiations when Israel’s leaders decide that they may serve Israeli interests,” he said at the annual conference, last June, of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). “As President, I will do whatever I can to help Israel succeed in these negotiations.”

The differences between Obama’s Syria policies and those of the Administration of George W. Bush have attracted relatively little attention. In December, 2006, the Iraq Study Group called for direct talks with Syria. In a speech soon afterward, Bush explained why he disagreed. “I think it would be counterproductive at this point to sit down with the Syrians, because Syria knows exactly what it takes to get better relations,” he said. The President then provided a list: stop its support for Hamas and Hezbollah; stop meddling in Lebanon; cooperate in the investigation of the murder, in 2005, of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon’s former Prime Minister; and stop serving as “a transit way for suicide bombers heading into Iraq.” (The Bush Administration accused Syria of failing to monitor its long border with Iraq, and, last October, staged a raid into Syria, killing eight people, one of whom was said to be a senior Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia operative. A huge number of Iraqi refugees have also fled to Syria, straining the economy.) Bush added dismissively, “When people go sit down with Bashar Assad, the President of Syria, he walks out and holds a press conference, and says, ‘Look how important I am. People are coming to see me; people think I’m vital.’ ”

An official who served with the Bush Administration said that late last year the Administration thought it was unrealistic to engage Syria on the Golan Heights. “The Bush view was, if we support the talks, with no preconditions, what are we going to say to our supporters in Lebanon who are standing up to Hezbollah? ‘You stood up to Hezbollah’—and where are we?”

Assad noted late last year that the Bush White House did not “have to trust me, because they are not involved in peace anyway. . . . They created a lot of problems around the world and they exacerbated the situation in every hot spot [and] made the world more vulnerable to terrorism. This is the most important thing,” he said. “Nobody can say the opposite.”

As the Bush era wound down, U.S. allies were making their own openings to Syria. In mid-November, David Miliband, the British Foreign Secretary, distressed the White House by flying to Damascus for a meeting with Assad. They agreed that Britain and Syria would establish a high-level exchange of intelligence. Vice-President Dick Cheney viewed the move by Britain—“perfidious Albion,” as he put it—as “a stab in the back,” according to a former senior intelligence official.

In his e-mail, Assad praised the diplomatic efforts of former President Jimmy Carter. “Carter is most knowledgeable about the Middle East and he does not try to dictate or give sermons,” Assad said. “He sincerely is trying to think creatively and find solutions that are outside the box.” Carter’s calls for engagement with Hamas have angered many in Israel

and America. In “We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land,” published in January, Carter described Syria as “a key factor in any overall regional peace.” Last December, Carter visited Syria, and met not only with President Assad but with Khaled Meshal, the Hamas leader.

A senior White House official confirmed that the Obama transition team had been informed in advance of Carter’s trip to Syria, and that Carter met with Obama shortly before the Inauguration. The two men—Obama was accompanied only by David Axelrod, the President’s senior adviser, who helped arrange the meeting; and Carter by his wife, Rosalynn—discussed the Middle East for an hour. Carter declined to discuss his meeting with Obama, but he did write in an e-mail that he hoped the new President “would pursue a wide-ranging dialogue as soon as possible with the Assad government.” An understanding between Washington and Damascus, he said, “could set the stage for successful Israeli-Syrian talks.”

The Obama transition team also helped persuade Israel to end the bombing of Gaza and to withdraw its ground troops before the Inauguration. According to the former senior intelligence official, who has access to sensitive information, “Cheney began getting messages from the Israelis about pressure from Obama” when he was President-elect. Cheney, who worked closely with the Israeli leadership in the lead-up to the Gaza war, portrayed Obama to the Israelis as a “pro-Palestinian,” who would not support their efforts (and, in private, disparaged Obama, referring to him at one point as someone who would “never make it in the major leagues”). But the Obama team let it be known that it would not object to the planned resupply of “smart bombs” and other high-tech ordnance that was already flowing to Israel. “It was Jones”—retired Marine General James Jones, at the time designated to be the President’s national-security adviser—“who came up with the solution and told Obama, ‘You just can’t tell the Israelis to get out.’ ” (General Jones said that he could not verify this account; Cheney’s office declined to comment.)

Syria’s relationship with Iran will emerge as the crucial issue in the diplomatic reviews now under way in Washington. A settlement, the Israelis believe, would reduce Iran’s regional standing and influence. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall when Bashar goes to Tehran and explains to the Supreme Leader that he wants to mediate a bilateral relationship with the United States,” the former American diplomat said, referring to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An Israeli official acknowledged that his government had learned of “tensions between Syria and Iran in recent months.” Before Gaza, he said, there had been a noticeable change in the Syrian tone during informal contacts—“an element of openness, candor, and civility.” He cautioned, however, “You can move diplomatically with the Syrians, but you cannot ignore Syria’s major role in arming Hamas and Hezbollah, or the fact that it has intimate relations with Iran, whose nuclear program is still going forward.” He added, with a smile, “No one in Israel is running out to buy a new suit for the peace ceremony on the White House lawn.”

Martin Indyk said, “If the White House engages with Syria, it immediately puts pressure on Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah.” He said that he had repeatedly sought, without success, to convince the Bush Administration that it was possible to draw Syria away from Iran. In his recent memoir, “Innocent Abroad,” Indyk wrote, “There is a deep divergence between Iran and Syria, captured in the fact that at the same time as Iran’s president threatens to wipe Israel off the map, his Syrian ally is attempting to make peace with Israel. . . . Should negotiations yield a peace agreement, it would likely cause the breakup of the Iranian-Syrian axis.” When we spoke, he added, referring to Assad, “It will not be easy for him to

break with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran, but he cannot get a peace deal unless he does. But, if he feels that things are moving in the Middle East, he will not want to be left behind.”

Thomas Dine, who served as the executive director of AIPAC in Washington for thirteen years, said, “You don’t have to be Kissingerian to realize that this is the way to peel the onion from Iran.” Dine went on, “Get what you can get and take one step at a time. The agenda is to get Syria to begin thinking about its relationships with Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah.” A Pentagon consultant said, “If we ever really took yes for an answer from Syria, the Iranians would go nuts.”

The official Syrian position toward Iran, which Assad repeated to me, is that Iran did not object to the Golan Heights talks, on the principle that any return of sovereign land was to be applauded: “They announced this publicly . . . and I went to Iran and I heard the same.” But there is some evidence that the Syrians may be, in Dine’s terms, reassessing the relationship. The senior Syrian official said that an opening to the West would bring the country increased tourism, trade, and investment, and a higher standard of living—progress that would eventually make it less reliant on Iran. If Israel then attacked Iran, he asked, “what will Syria do?” His answer was that Syria wouldn’t do more than condemn the attack. “What else *could* we do?”

In an interview in Berlin, Joschka Fischer, the former German Foreign Minister, who has continued to closely monitor Middle Eastern affairs, argued that the Iranians would “have to make a public move” after a settlement. “Yes, they will react to an Israeli-Syria deal, because they do not want to be isolated, and do not want to lose their last ally to the West.” In other words, serious regional diplomacy could be possible.

However, Alastair Crooke, a former British intelligence officer who operated in the Middle East and later served as an adviser to the European Union and a staff member for a fact-finding committee on the Middle East headed by Mitchell, said that the new Administration should not assume that Bashar Assad could be separated easily from Iran, or persuaded to give up support for Hamas and Hezbollah. “Bashar now has enormous standing in the Arab world, and it comes from these pillars—he was among the first to oppose the American war in Iraq and his continued support for Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas,” Crooke said. “He cannot trade the Golan Heights for peace with Israel, and cut off his allies. What Syria can do is offer its good standing and credentials to lead a comprehensive regional settlement.” But, he said, “the Obama Administration is going to make it really painful for Syria. There will be no bouquets for Syria.”

He went on, “The real goal of Assad is not necessarily an agreement on the Golan but to begin to engage America and slice away the American demonization of his state.” The changed political landscape in Israel would complicate this process for the Syrians. He said, “They’re starting all these processes to break their isolation and change their strategy. It’s going to be bloody difficult for them to manage this.”

Robert Pastor, a former National Security Council official who has visited Damascus with former President Carter, similarly said that he believed the Syrians had no intention of ending their relationship with Iran. “The Syrians want bilateral talks with Washington and they also want America to be involved in their talks with Israel on the Golan Heights,” Pastor said. “They also believe their relationship with Iran could be of help to the Obama Administration. They believe they could be a bridge between Washington and Tehran.”

Khaled Meshal, the leader of Hamas, works in an office in a well-protected, tranquil residential area of Damascus. In recent years, he has met privately with Jewish leaders and Americans. Meshal is seen by Israel as a sponsor of suicide bombers and other terrorist activity. In 1997, he survived a botched assassination-by-poisoning attempt by Israeli intelligence which Netanyahu, then the Prime Minister, had ordered. Under pressure from Jordan and the U.S., the Israelis handed over the poison's antidote, saving Meshal's life.

Speaking through a translator, Meshal said that he believed that the Iranians would not interfere with negotiations between Israel and Syria, although they were not enthusiastic about them. Meshal also said he doubted that Israel intended to return the Golan Heights to Syrian control. But, he said, "If we suppose that Israel is serious, we support the right of Syria to negotiate with Israel to attain its legitimate rights."

Hamas's presence in Damascus had, he knew, been a contentious issue in Syria's relations with both the United States and Israel. "Bashar would never ask us to leave," he said. "There are some who believe that Hamas would react defensively to an agreement, because of our presence in Syria. But it does not make a difference where our offices are. We are a street movement and our real power is inside Palestine, and nothing can affect that. We are confident about Bashar Assad, and we would never risk being a burden to him. . . . We can move at any time, and move lightly. The Hamas movement will not work against the interests of any other country, and any agreement can be concluded, whether we like it or not. But, also, we don't want anyone to interfere in *our* affairs."

Farouk al-Shara, the Vice-President of Syria, was, as Foreign Minister, his nation's chief negotiator at Shepherdstown. When he was asked whether Syria's relationship with Iran would change if the Golan Heights issue was resolved, he said, "Do you think a man only goes to bed with a woman he deeply loves?" Shara laughed, and added, "That's my answer to your question about Iran."

There are other impediments to a new relationship between the United States and Syria, including the still unresolved question of who killed Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, who was assassinated in February, 2005. Years of investigation have produced no criminal charges. The Bush Administration suggested that the Syrians were at least indirectly responsible for Hariri's death—he had been a sharp critic of Syria's involvement in Lebanon—and it wasn't alone; Hariri's murder exacerbated tensions between Syria and France and Saudi Arabia. But the case is clearly less important to French President Nicolas Sarkozy than it was to his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, who was close to Hariri. ("This was personal for Chirac, and not political," Joschka Fischer said.) An adviser to the Saudi government said that King Abdullah did not accept Assad's assurances that he had nothing to do with the murder. But there has recently been a flurry of renewed diplomatic contacts between Damascus and Riyadh.

One issue that may be a casualty of an Obama rapprochement with Syria is human rights. Syrians are still being jailed for speaking out against the policies of their government. Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East director for Human Rights Watch, said that Assad "has been offering fig leaves to the Americans for a long time and thinks if he makes nice in Lebanon and with Hamas and Hezbollah he will no longer be an outcast. We believe that no amount of diplomatic success will solve his internal problems." The authorities, Whitson said, are "going after ordinary Syrians—like people chatting in cafés. Everyone is looking over their shoulder."

Assad, in his interview with me, acknowledged, “We do not say that we are a democratic country. We do not say that we are perfect, but we are moving forward.” And he focussed on what he had to offer. He said that he had a message for Obama: Syria, as a secular state, and the United States faced a common enemy in Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism. The Bush White House, he said, had viewed the fundamentalists as groups “that you should go and chase, and then you will accomplish your mission, as Bush says. It is not that simple. How do you deal with a state of mind? You can deal with it in many different ways—except for the army.” Speaking of Obama, he said in his e-mail, “We are happy that he has said that diplomacy—and not war—is the means of conducting international policy.”

Assad’s goal in seeking to engage with America and Israel is clearly more far-reaching than merely to regain the Golan Heights. His ultimate aim appears to be to persuade Obama to abandon the Bush Administration’s strategy of aligning America with the so-called “moderate” Arab Sunni states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—in a coordinated front against Shiite Iran, Shiite Hezbollah, and Hamas.

“Of course, the Iranians are nervous about the talks, because they don’t fully trust the Syrians,” Itamar Rabinovich said. “But the Assad family does not believe in taking chances—they’re very hard bargainers. They will try to get what they want without breaking fully from Iran, and they will tell us and Washington, ‘It’s to your advantage not to isolate Iran.’ ” Rabinovich added, “Both Israel and the United States will insist on a change in Syria’s relationship with Iran. This can only be worked out—or not—in head-to-head talks.”

The White House has tough diplomatic choices to make in the next few months. Assad has told the Obama Administration that his nation can ease the American withdrawal in Iraq. Syria also can help the U.S. engage with Iran, and the Iranians, in turn, could become an ally in neighboring Afghanistan, as the Obama Administration struggles to deal with the Taliban threat and its deepening involvement in that country—and to maintain its long-standing commitment to the well-being of Israel. Each of these scenarios has potential downsides. Resolving all of them will be formidable, and will involve sophisticated and intelligent diplomacy—the kind of diplomacy that disappeared during the past eight years, and that the Obama team has to prove it possesses. ♦

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