

## Toward a Syria Policy

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer)

Apr 20, 2010

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.

---

**M**iddle East Bulletin, a publication of the Center for American Progress, interviewed Institute Next Generation fellow Andrew J. Tabler about U.S. policy toward Syria. The following is the published Q&A.

The recent reports about Syria transferring Scud missiles to Hezbollah have only fed into a fractious debate about what U.S. relations should be with Syria. What can you tell us about this specific case and how it relates to larger issues of weapons transfers to Hezbollah?

The United States has said quite clearly that it does not comment on matters of its intelligence, but there is great concern arising from that intelligence that there is the potential for Syria to transfer some form of Scud missile to Hezbollah. Where such actions are taking place -- whether in Lebanon or in Syria along the frontier -- is unknown, but it is a serious enough issue that everyone involved in engaging Syria, including the State Department, Senator Kerry and a number of others, have been raising this issue privately with the Syrian embassy in Washington and President Assad personally over the last few weeks. Thus far it seems they have been unable to resolve the issue. This doesn't help those who want to engage Syria; in fact, it makes it much harder for those who believe in the utility of peace negotiations to solve the Arab-Israeli problem.

How is this different from other weapons transfers or from what has already been happening?

Transfers have been going on for years, but recent reports indicate the sophistication of arms has increased. These include short range arms, rockets and now missiles such as Scuds. Scuds are strategic weapons in that they have an extended range and can carry WMD payloads -- although there is nothing from recent reports to indicate Syria or Hezbollah have such intentions. The Israelis have been pretty clear that Hezbollah is the first organization of its kind in the world to acquire such weapons. So it's quite worrying for the United States because it has created a very tense situation that could very easily lead to war in the coming months.

Can you talk a little bit more about that and how it's affecting Israel's strategic calculations?

Peace talks have not taken place either on the Palestinian track or on the Syrian track. As tensions have risen, Israeli seizures of weapons from Iran destined for Syria and Hezbollah have increased. This has caused a number of people inside Israel to question the utility of negotiating with Syria. Syria, meanwhile, says it doesn't find a peace partner in the Netanyahu government either. Israel points to the arms transfers and says Syria is not a peace partner and says it wants peace but does not in reality. As reiterated by Israeli President Shimon Peres this week. It's a vicious cycle. The arms Israel has seized over the last year have been short-range; ones that while disturbing are not as the Israelis

call it "game-changers." Scuds are game-changers. They put all of Israel within range of those rockets and markedly increase the threat from the north. This is especially important in the context of not only dealing with Hezbollah but also Israeli calculations of dealing with Iran, which I wrote about most recently in Foreign Policy

How do you think these reports are affecting the nomination of Robert S. Ford as ambassador to Syria? His nomination has come out of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and is supposed to go to the floor now.

It certainly has not helped. I think, however, that Ford will be confirmed, and I believe placing him in Damascus will be very helpful for the administration in communicating with the Assad regime. The question many are asking is: 'And then what? Is there a plan to achieve our objectives? What are we going to do differently that we haven't done in the last 40 years of engaging Syria?' In terms of averting an immediate crisis, getting Ford to Damascus is important. But which way are the Syrians going to read this? Is it going to fuel their bout of triumphalism over the last year? How do better communications translate into decreased tensions in the Levant in the coming months and years?

So what is your sense of the administration's efforts at engagement thus far? What is your sense of where it has gotten us in terms of the U.S.-Syrian relationship?

A number of senior officials, including George Mitchell, William Burns, Dan Shapiro and Jeff Feltman have made trips to Damascus over the last year and a half. The Syrians haven't made it easy on us. First, as Williams Burns departed for Damascus in February we announced that we were nominating Robert Ford as ambassador. He's a very seasoned diplomat and his testimony showed he was very well briefed. To have President Assad, while sitting beside Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus, come out and publicly mock Secretary Clinton a few days later about U.S. objectives to bend or to break Syria away from Iran was the first sign that things were not going well. The second sign is of the alleged missile transfers.

The thing that is fueling this is an expectations gap that has steadily increased over the last year. This comes from how Syria is misreading the U.S., and vice versa. Syria is not very high on the list of the Obama Administration's priorities. Iran is a much bigger concern. We don't have a dedicated Syria policy -- as the country's relative importance always makes it an appendage of other U.S. policies in Iraq, Lebanon, or concerning other policies such as the Arab-Israeli problem or terrorism.

What is your sense of Syrian calculations? What are their goals? What is pushing them?

I think they realize now that the peace negotiations with Israel that Damascus wanted are not coming in the near term. There were indirect talks in Turkey in 2007-2008. Getting negotiations going is very important for a regime like the Assads. It's not just a matter of trying to get back the Golan Heights: peace talks with Israel are the air conditioner that cools down an otherwise hot room and decreases tensions on the myriad of other issues the U.S. is trying to deal with on Syria.

During the cold war between the Bush administration and the Assad regime, we found out a number of things about the Assad regime that we didn't know previously. That it had a nuclear program, for example, which is currently under IAEA investigation. The regime allowed foreign fighters to transit its territory to Iraq to fight the United States and Iraqis. The latter issue has improved, but in Ford's confirmation hearing he was quite specific that it is unclear on whether that was a result of Syrian efforts or from coalition efforts in Iraq, including the "Awakening" campaign.

There are different theories about Syria's current calculations. Some say they have decided to create a proxy deterrent in Lebanon or just a proxy deterrent with Hezbollah. The other theory is, and I'm not sure what to think of it because it's a bit bizarre, is that Assad's decided to escalate to pressure the United States diplomatically to pressure Israel to come to the table. And the reason that that doesn't make much sense is that I don't think that would work with this particular coalition in Israel. Certainly it wouldn't work in public proximity talks, whether it would work in private talks -- I doubt it.

Where does Iran fit into Syria's calculations?

The Iranians keep the Syrian's backs. The fact that all the mocking of Clinton and the weapons issue has come not only in the face of U.S. engagement, but following the meeting between Ahmadinejad, Nasrallah and Assad in Damascus, shows that the Syrians are an important card for the Iranians. They clearly wanted a public show of support from Assad, and they got it. A lot of diplomats don't just worry about a war breaking out in the Levant; they worry about such a war distracting the United States from its efforts to isolate the Iranian regime regarding its nuclear program. And I think that's a big worry. If you look back in recent history, the Syrians very much capitalized on Hezbollah's war with Israel in 2006 to break their international isolation.

What about other regional actors' roles? There has been an effort on the part of the Egyptians and Saudis to engage with Syria. Do you think that affects Syrian calculations?

The Saudis and the Egyptians have their own interests in all of this. It is also derivative of the fact that we don't really have a coherent plan to reach out to the Syrians so they're making their bets based on which way they see the wind blowing from Washington. The Saudis have their calculations, especially in Iraq and Lebanon. The Egyptians have their calculations vis-a-vis Hamas. The French have their calculations, which in some ways parallel ours. As a result of this chaotic engagement Damascus hasn't had to make any concessions. They have pocketed a lot of what people have been willing to give them and then they themselves have not changed their own positions radically.

We have an interest in there being fruitful negotiations and fruitful engagement with Syria. I think the best way to solve that is by better coordinating with our allies. I would suspect we are doing it, but maybe we need to pay more attention to it.

You've been pointing toward the need for a policy toward Syria. What would you advise that that policy be?

As a long-term goal, we should try to foster talks between Israel and Syria. That will help deal with the core of the problem. But in the meantime, we're going to have to deal with these other issues that have been growing between the United States and Syria over the last decade.

The main way to deal with that coherently is through U.S. sanctions. They're up for renewal in May; the national emergency that underpins the sanctions has to be renewed every year by President Obama. And the reason why sanctions are important isn't because of the way they punish Syria, though they have had an increased impact on Syria. The reason why is that the sanctions legislation is the only place in the United States government where you can actually find a Syria policy, as it lists all the different issues with Syria.

The other reason to deal with sanctions is that as a part of the engagement between the United States and Syria, Damascus has actually put sanctions on the table. This is very interesting, because until recently, the Syrians absolutely refused to admit that they had any kind of impact. Obviously they do. I would never say that sanctions can bring the regime to its knees, I don't think that's the way to look at it, but it does change their calculations. And if we don't have much leverage with Syria, it's an area where we can focus our efforts in the near term and have them deal with some of their more troublesome behavior as we try to push for the regional peace option.

Can you expand a little on the issues between the United States and Syria?

For example, there is the question of Syrian behavior in Lebanon and issues of sovereignty, which deals with the crisis du jour of the missiles. There is the issue of sponsoring terrorism -- and that is not just Hamas and Hezbollah and so on, that is also concerning the jihadi groups and other Al Qaeda affiliates that have trained in Syria in the last seven or eight years. There is Syria's worsening human rights record. The sanctions regime talks about the fact that the United States is concerned by Syrian activities that destabilize the government in Iraq. Given where the Iraqis are at the moment, stability in Iraq is important to the United States. So we would have negotiations on that. There

are some other money-laundering institutions that are derivative of the other problems that are dealt with in sanctions. Those are the core issues right now.

Are sanctions effective because of the state of Syria's economy?

Sanctions have evolved over time, and some of the sanctions have had particular impact on the Syrian leadership. They've designated certain individuals, including President Assad's cousin. They have also had a very big impact on Syrian Arab Airways, which only has a few planes left that can fly, and this has been a very big issue in the near term.

Then there's the issue of the economy at large, and that's a larger argument. Syrians are fantastic capitalists and continue to thrive despite decades of poor economic policy. Recently, due to the efforts of Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari -- the regime's chief reformer -- the regime has been able to tap into the people's formidable economic prowess. But even as the Syrian economy is doing better, there are a lot of very deep problems that are hard for the regime to deal with. And the regime's ability to fund itself is increasingly being called into question due to decreased oil production, which has ramifications for U.S. policy.

The good thing about these U.S. sanctions is that they have been pretty good at targeting the right people. Our sanctions don't include food and medicine, so we're sending the right message to the Syrian people: we have no problem with you. But to the Syrian regime we're sending another message, which is that support for these policies is going to cost you -- it's not necessarily going to break you, but it's going to cost you. And obviously it has or they wouldn't be talking about it. The Syrian regimes are some of the shrewdest negotiators in the world, if they put something on the table, that's because they want something from it, and there's a reason they want to put sanctions on the table. I think we should just take that at face value. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## **Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy**

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### **TOPICS**

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### **REGIONS & COUNTRIES**

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)