Syria:

Prospects for 'Strategic Realignment'

by Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)** , Ehud Yaari **(/experts/ehud-yaari)**

Oct 17, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew J. Tabler (/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

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.

Ehud Yaari (/experts/ehud-yaari)

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.

In-Depth Reports

Download **(templateC04.php?CID=317)** the complete proceedings.

On October 17, 2009, Amr al-Azm, Andrew J. Tabler, and Ehud Yaari addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Amr al-Azm, a Syrian historian and archaeologist, is an assistant professor of Middle Eastern history and anthropology at Shawnee State University in Ohio. Andrew J. Tabler is a Soref fellow in The Washington Institute's **Program on Arab Politics (templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** , where he focuses on U.S.-Syrian relations. Ehud Yaari, Israel's leading interpreter of Arab politics, is a Washington Institute Lafer international fellow and Middle East correspondent for Israel's Channel Two.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Amr al-Azm

The Syrian regime is indeed interested in improving relations with the West and Israel. Yet one must recognize the factors that would preclude Damascus from agreeing to a final peace deal. Most important is that the regime will not compromise its own survival or stability. Therefore, any meaningful engagement with Syria must include some mechanism for addressing what the regime considers its legitimate security concerns.

One such concern is the prospect of an anti-Syrian government forming in Lebanon. Damascus has long believed that a friendly government in Beirut is essential to guarding its flank -- it has not forgotten the Maronite-Israeli cooperation during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The idea of Israeli tanks rolling into Lebanon and parking on the Masnaa -- essentially a downhill road to Damascus -- is truly frightening to the Syrian regime.

Hizballah is Syria's most realistic hope of ensuring a friendly government in Lebanon. Accordingly, maintaining the organization's strength has become a common interest for both Damascus and Tehran. From Syria's perspective, submitting to U.S. demands that it back out of Lebanon and cut ties with Iran is not in its strategic interest. Hizballah is an ally Damascus believes it cannot afford to lose.

Without some major quid pro quo on this issue -- such as a proposal that ensures at least limited Syrian sway in Beirut -- Damascus will not bend to Western pressures. And the notion that strong sanctions will bring Syria to its knees is neither realistic nor plausible given the regime's longstanding resilience against past Western sanctions.

While the U.S. policy of engagement has so far been frustrating for Washington, from Syria's perspective things are actually looking up. With six official U.S. visits to Damascus since the beginning of the Obama administration -- and, later this month, the first high-level Syrian visit to Washington in five years -- the regime believes it is proving its point that cooperation with Syria is necessary for comprehensive Middle East peace. If Washington does not move ahead with engagement, Syria believes it can wait out the American election cycle for a more forthcoming administration.

Another factor that might preclude Syria's "strategic realignment," especially with regard to peace with Israel, is the Baath ideology that still plays a role in holding the country together. Sacrificing current alliances and agreeing to normalization with Israel would require a major change in Syria's identity -- one that the country has so far proven unwilling to make.

Andrew J. Tabler

"Strategic realignment" -- the idea that Syria can be induced to abandon its alliance with Iran and terrorist groups and move in a pro-Western direction -- has had many names over the years. It first emerged after the 1973 October War under the rubric of "constructive engagement" -- the idea that the United States had a greater ability to reward Syria's positive behavior than to punish its negative behavior, and that it could therefore pull Syria out of its Soviet orbit. The

1970s effort to engage Damascus (which included about half a billion dollars in U.S. aid) paralleled similar outreach toward Egypt. Yet, while Cairo went on to sign a peace deal with Israel at Camp David in 1978, Syria rejected that route and was placed on the State Department's founding list of state sponsors of terrorism the following year. Washington then cut off all aid programs to the country.

U.S.-Syrian relations remained bad throughout the 1980s. A form of constructive engagement briefly reemerged during the 1991 Gulf War, when President George H. W. Bush asked Syria to join the coalition against Saddam Hussein. Gradually, however, the fraught though relatively stable relationship became one of outright confrontation during the George W. Bush administration, as Syria allowed jihadist fighters to cross the border into Iraq to kill American personnel following the 2003 invasion. Washington tightened sanctions against Damascus in May 2004, making it more difficult for American companies to do business in Syria than Iran.

At the tail end of the Bush administration, as Washington focused on stabilizing Iraq, U.S. officials began a form of limited engagement with Syria to discuss Iraqi security and the flow of foreign fighters. Yet, the regime of Bashar al-Asad waxed triumphant in its opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq and eagerly awaited the coming of a new American administration. There soon emerged an unbridgeable expectations gap, evident in the regime's demand for high-level talks and an end to sanctions. These demands came amid growing U.S. skepticism on four major issues: Syria's deepening ties with Iran, its continuing support for Hamas and Hizballah, its facilitation of fighters entering Iraq, and the International Atomic Energy Agency's discovery of undeclared nuclear material at al-Kibar, the eastern Syrian site bombed by Israel in September 2007. When coupled with the breakdown of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria following the upsurge in Gaza hostilities, this skepticism slowed U.S. engagement to a crawl.

Washington's renewal of sanctions in May and August of this year finally caught the Syrians' attention -- they are now focused on seeking relief from the economic restrictions. Syria has traditionally concerned itself primarily with political matters, not economic ones. Yet, as the regime attempts to create jobs for its 1980s boomer generation, the Obama administration has discovered that it now wields unexpected economic leverage. Engaging Syria remains a key part of Washington's policy of rolling back Iranian influence in the Levant. Moving forward, U.S. policymakers will try to take advantage of their newfound economic influence to achieve this end.

Ehud Yaari

For years, Israel's leaders believed strongly in the "Syria first" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is no longer the case today. The Syrians are not ready to be flipped, and it is not in Israel's interest to flip them, particularly if that means postponing the Palestinian issue for the final round of peacemaking. From Israel's perspective, it is too late for Syrian engagement at the moment -- the Palestinian track must take precedence.

During the secret indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel in Ankara -- which broke down in December 2008 after years of effort -- Damascus did not rule out the idea of a comprehensive peace deal. In reality, though, implementing such a deal would be a dangerous proposition for the regime given its current situation and alliances. For one thing, if Syria agreed to full normalization with Israel, it would have to permit Lebanon to do the same, and Hizballah and its Iranian sponsor would not react kindly. Holding sway in Lebanon via Hizballah is much more important to Syrian interests than regaining a winery and a crocodile farm in the relatively inconsequential Golan Heights. In that sense, a peace deal with Israel is not a priority for Syria.

As for Iran, Damascus will never formally divorce Tehran, even though there are some areas of divergence between the allies (particularly in Lebanon and Iraq). Their alliance is not merely a marriage of convenience -- it stretches back thirty years, to the legacy of President Bashar al-Asad's father, Hafiz, and the current regime feels comfortable with it. Even if Syria were willing to carry out such a split, the Iranian problem would not significantly change for Israel and the West. Iran does not depend on Syria for its penetration of the Arab world.

It must be remembered just how deeply President Asad believes in his doctrine of mumanaa (opposition or rejectionism) vis-Ãƒ -vis Israel and the West. From his perspective, Syria's current strategic orientation has been effective: the Americans are sending delegations to talk to him; Damascus has more clout in Lebanon today than it did during the heyday of Syrian occupation; and a new anti-Western axis appears to be forming in the Middle East, one that will eventually span Syria, Iran, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey, and Iraq (depending on how political developments in Baghdad play out). For the moment, then, only containment and pressure can move Syria in the right direction. ❖

RECOMMENDED

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)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)