

Syria Clenches Its Fist

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

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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.



Articles & Testimony

Assad to Obama: Thanks but no thanks.

Early last week, nearly seven months to the day after the Barack Obama administration took office and began its careful, critical engagement with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, rumors swirled in Washington and the Middle East that the White House was preparing to turn a new page with Damascus. The first test of this new relationship would be over the issue that caused the breakdown in U.S.-Syrian relations more than six years ago: the flow of jihadi militants from Syria to Iraq.

The Obama administration's outreach to Syria had been clear and forthright. It included six high-level visits by U.S. officials to Syria, Washington's announcement that it would return an ambassador to Damascus, a reported letter from President Obama to President Assad, and the facilitation of export licenses for aircraft parts waived under U.S. sanctions against Syria. A Centcom-led delegation visited Damascus two weeks ago and concluded a tentative agreement with Syria on a technical assessment of Iraqi-Syrian border posts. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, miffed at being left out of these promising talks, visited Damascus last week to seal the tripartite deal. The string of blasts that greeted him upon his return on Aug. 19 -- the bloodiest in more than 18 months and now claimed by an al Qaeda affiliate -- has led Baghdad to demand that Syria expel Iraqi Baathists and jihadi militants from its soil and recall its ambassador. Damascus responded in kind, effectively blowing up Washington's initiative on the launchpad.

Until last week, talks over Iraq-related regional security issues appeared to be a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak U.S.-Syrian engagement process. Washington has quietly asked Damascus over the last seven months to use its influence to promote reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Following the most recent visit to Damascus by U.S. Mideast envoy George Mitchell, Syria, along with Turkey and Egypt, pressed Hamas to allow Fatah members in Gaza to attend their party's conference earlier this month -- an important first step in forming a united Palestinian position. It didn't happen.

Damascus instead took credit for an alternative "breakthrough" -- Hamas' recent announcement that it would accept and respect the 1967 border between Israel and the Palestinians in return for Israel's conceding Palestinians the right of return and allowing the establishment of a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this position falls dramatically short of the conditions of the "quartet" (comprising the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations): that parties to the peace process recognize Israel without preconditions, abide by previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and renounce violence as a means of achieving goals. On peace talks with Israel, Damascus continues to demand that Israel commit to withdrawing from the Golan Heights to the line of June 4, 1967, and resume Turkish-sponsored indirect talks from where they left off last December. Israel, which favors direct negotiations without preconditions under U.S. auspices, has refused.

French efforts last year to coax Damascus to open an embassy in Beirut and appoint an ambassador there led many to speculate that Damascus was willing to turn a new page with its western neighbor, Lebanon. But Syria's ambassador to Beirut spends most of his time in Damascus, and statements on Lebanon are put forward by pro-Syrian Lebanese politicians such as Wiam Wahhab who, due to his role in helping Damascus call the shots in Lebanon prior to Syria's 2005 withdrawal, has earned a reputation as one of Syria's last unquestioning proxies in Lebanon. Following the defeat of Syria's allies in Lebanon's June 7 elections (despite intensive Syrian efforts to swing the poll Syria's way), Damascus and its allies have stymied the formation of a government by the pro-independence March 14 block. Meanwhile, an interview Aug. 25 in the Lebanese daily An-Nahar with a senior U.S. official made apparent Washington's frustration with Syria, most notably its smuggling to Hezbollah of increasingly advanced weaponry across the Lebanese-Syrian border, which Damascus still refuses to demarcate despite promising to do so.

Concerning relations with Iran, on Aug. 19 (the same day as the Iraqi attacks) Assad said during his fifth state visit to Tehran that the June re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- the controversy surrounding which he attributed to "foreign intervention" -- meant that "Iran and Syria must continue the regional policy as in the past." The visit, combined with recent reports of a crash in northern Syria of a short-range missile developed by Syria, Iran, and North Korea, as well as the Assad regime's continued refusal to answer the International Atomic Energy Agency's questions about uranium particles found at not one but two Syrian nuclear sites, shows Damascus remains firmly ensconced in the Iranian-led "resistance axis." As for human rights and domestic reforms, not only is the regime rounding up dissidents as usual, but it is now going after its lawyers and the president of the Syrian Human Rights Organization as well. Damascus clearly feels that it has been let off the hook.

Washington intended the Centcom-led mission as the first step on a long road to reconciliation with Damascus, with the potential for even higher-level engagement by U.S. officials. But last week's battery of negotiations and bombings, as well as the charge of diplomatic distrust it generated, shows just how

explosive and uncertain engaging Damascus over Iraqi border security really is. The only way to truly "solve" this issue would be for Damascus to publicly disavow the al Qaeda facilitators within its country and expel the Iraqi Baathists who support them from its soil. Last week's deadly blasts in Iraq clearly show Damascus is unwilling to take such a step.

This is because the actual problem of fighters entering Iraq has less to do with security arrangements along the border and more to do with the Faustian bargain Syria's minority Alawite-dominated regime cut with Sunni-based al Qaeda fighters who regard their hosts as apostates. This agreement, forged during the height of Assad's Cold War with the George W. Bush administration, underlies the al Qaeda facilitators and the "rat lines" of jihadi fighters they operate in and out of Iraq. Syria is unwilling to cut them off over fears of risking domestic attacks. In short, Damascus wants high-level U.S. engagement without making hard sacrifices.

During the 1970s and 1990s, when the United States tried ultimately unsuccessful policies of "constructive engagement" with Damascus, Washington would have allowed Syria to skirt the issue and quietly deal with the issue from "behind the scenes." But last week's blasts and other jihadi attacks originating out of Syria this year show that giving Damascus a pass on the issue allows the Assad regime to keep its hand on the foreign-fighter tap. This leaves the strategic initiative in Damascus' hands to use as leverage as the United States withdraws from Iraq. U.S. support for its Iraqi allies to roll back the fighters are likely to remain Washington's safest bet.

With Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations stalled, the easiest issues to benchmark and verify concern Lebanon, where U.S. officials are still trying to promote the country's sovereignty and independence. The formation of a government, the delineation of the Syrian-Lebanese border, and shutting down the Syrian-dominated PFLP-GC bases are three urgent issues that require U.S.-Syrian cooperation. All three are more useful barometers for gauging Syrian intentions than the Assad regime's murky relationship with al Qaeda and former Iraqi Baathists, as the former can be more easily benchmarked and verified. And most importantly for Washington and Damascus, progress on all three is more likely to lead to tangible improvements in U.S.-Syrian relations in the year to come.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Soreff fellow in the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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