

# Talking to Syria: An Important Test for Damascus

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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

The New York Times convened an online panel of five Middle East experts to discuss the Obama administration's recent decision to send two diplomats to begin "preliminary conversations" with the Syrian government. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute Soref fellow Andrew J. Tabler, the cofounder and former editor of [Syria Today \(http://www.syria-today.com\)](http://www.syria-today.com). [Read \(http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/talking-to-syria/?scp=1&sq=andrew%20tabler&st=cse\)](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/talking-to-syria/?scp=1&sq=andrew%20tabler&st=cse) the entire discussion on the Times's website.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's decision to dispatch two senior officials to Syria is an important early test to see if engagement will lead Damascus to re-evaluate its policies at home and abroad.

Washington's list of grievances with the Syrian government has never been longer, including its support for Hezbollah, Hamas and jihadis entering Iraq, its efforts to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty and its poor human rights record. Making matters worse, a report last week by the International Atomic Energy Agency all but confirmed suspicions by American officials that a site in eastern Syria bombed by Israel in September 2007 was part of a clandestine nuclear program.

Dispatching Jeffrey Feltman, the acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, sends a signal to the Syrian leadership that discussions will be about the hard issues that divide the two countries. Mr. Feltman is a former United States ambassador to Lebanon whose support for that country's anti-Syrian March 14th alliance -- which leads the current government in Beirut -- openly angered Damascus. In sending Daniel Shapiro, the Middle East chief on the National Security Council and an adviser to the Obama campaign, Washington is showing Damascus that President Obama is listening.

The risks of engagement with Syria are all too apparent to United States officials, as the poor track record of American officials visiting Damascus shows. Its position on Hamas, Hezbollah and jihadi fighters are a tough sell. On the one hand Syrian government officials claim to have influence over these groups, but when confronted they often say the groups are outside their control.

But there are opportunities. Syria's economy is being hit hard by the global economic crisis, declining oil production and a third straight year of drought that has left the government there in a vulnerable position. This explains why

more and more Syrian officials are now demanding that Washington lift its sanctions on Syria.

Frank talk combined with "smart sanctions" and political pressure from the Hariri Tribunal, along with the nuclear issue, could spin Damascus out of Tehran's orbit. And this "strategic realignment" is necessary for a significant improvement in relations with Washington -- and a peace treaty with Israel. ❖

NYTimes.com

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