

Syria, Israel, and Lebanon

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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President Obama will essentially face the same challenges as President Bush but his campaign promises and general philosophical orientation appear to be dramatically different from the outgoing president. These differences can be seen in sharp relief, in the Levant, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian issue as well. President Obama provided a glimpse of his approach during the campaign through two positions. One was his pledge to appoint a Middle East coordinator and diplomatic envoy. The other was regarding his disposition to engage Iran but also Syria.

Obama has a profoundly different view of Syria's regime than Bush. I think that President Bush saw President Bashar al-Asad based on his behavior in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian arena basically as irredeemable, Obama appears to believe that Syria can play a more productive role in the region and that the Asad regime can be convinced to change. We have already seen a number of senior Obama Middle East advisors meet with Asad in recent months, including Dan Kurtzer and the former advisor Rob Malley. Dennis Ross, himself who is being mentioned as the possible Middle East coordinator has written that Asad should be tested.

The question remains about how exactly they will be tested. The goal of course is to engineer a strategic reorientation of the Asad regime, the idea that it can be somehow moved away from Tehran, that it would jettison Hizballah and Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups and move into the Western camp.

I do not think there is anybody who debates that success in this effort would be a great and very productive development in the Middle East. It would change the balance, it would undermine Tehran, and it would be a great advance in U.S. interests.

Actually if you look at what somebody like Robert Malley has written, this is not quite the argument. He doesn't really believe, as he has written, that Asad will undergo this type of strategic orientation but suggests rather that the United States can ferment a slow process of evolution.

Under Obama, I think, we are going to see very quickly a return of the U.S. ambassador to Damascus. Ambassador Scobey was withdrawn the same week that former premier Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Lebanon in February 2005.

We are also likely to see a U.S. willingness to get involved in the Israel-Syria track, in the talks. The question to be answered, of course, is how hard the Obama administration will push for progress. I imagine this will depend perhaps on who becomes Israel's next prime minister. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni already articulated how she sees the framework for a deal with Syria. That is, the return of the Golan in exchange for full peace from Syria.

The Asad regime said "no" and immediately dispatched their minister of defense to Tehran to sign another memorandum of understanding just a day after the secret talks with Israel were made public. Of course, these negotiations make Tehran nervous and this, I think, is something good. But how does anyone -- the United States or Israel -- ensure that any potential pro quo for a deal is enforceable.

What does strategic reorientation mean? What will it mean for the United States? How does Israel enforce Syrian compliance? There is not a great track record of Asad sticking to deals here. And how do you verify it? Can something potentially be written into a peace agreement that talks about Syrian relations with Iran?

The wider and most important question is whether Obama can build some sort of consensus in the Arab world that a peace agreement between Israel and Syria is not something that is contingent only on the return of the Golan, but rather on this strategic reorientation of Syria. Moderate Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan would all like to see Syria move away from Tehran, so I think this would gather some sort of support.

At the same time, the Obama administration, does not appear to be as inclined as the Bush administration was to employ pressure on Syria. What will happen to the international tribunal established to prosecute the murderers of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri? This is the one point of international leverage on the Syrian regime. It will be interesting to see what type of position the administration takes, for example, on the UN vote as to whether the tribunal moves ahead in the Security Council under chapter 7 authority, that is, enforceable militarily. The Bush administration has supported it.

What Obama does in this regard will have a profound effect on developments in Beirut. Is Obama less committed to the tribunal? I think the impact will be that March 14, pro-democracy, elected government of Lebanon will not fare well in the spring 2009 elections. We may be facing a Lebanese government in spring 2009 that is headed by Hizballah. That is certainly not in U.S. interests. What would the Obama administration do if there were another round of fighting between Hizballah and Israel?

Another question is how or whether the Obama administration would engage with Islamists. Some close to the campaign have suggested that the U.S.

government should in fact engage with Hamas. Will the U.S. government change its view? I think this is unlikely, particularly given the U.S. predisposition toward pushing for a Syria-Iran split. Nevertheless, we do not know where Obama is going to come down.

Regarding Israel-Palestinian issues, looking at developments on the ground, it is difficult to see this as being a good time for making any progress on the Palestinian track. Still, there will be a new Middle East coordinator in this administration, and there is, I think, a predisposition to push on this track. I have a hard time seeing this as an initial priority of the administration given other pressing issues.

Nevertheless, I think the Obama administration will have an ambitious agenda. Its focus on diplomacy and coalition-building will benefit from a tremendous amount of international goodwill, at least initially, as well as the belief he can bring "hope" and "change." But I think that within a year, Obama, too, will have to deal with the realities of the Middle East.

David Schenker is a senior fellow and director of 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. Previously, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as Levant country director. He is author of *Palestinian Democracy and Governance: An Appraisal of the Legislative Council* (2001). ❖

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