

# The Lebanon Red Line

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## Articles & Testimony

**W**hen President George W. Bush arrives in Israel in the next few days, it is possible that Syria will be a major topic and not just the Palestinians and Iran. Damascus is one issue which Washington and Jerusalem view very differently. Those in Israel pressing for a revived Syria peace track have failed to identify the problem with the U.S.; nor do they realize that the solution to this policy difference between the two friends may be found in Beirut.

The common view is that the Bush administration does not want Israel to hold talks with Syria because Damascus is on the "waiting list of the 'axis of evil.'" To be sure, the U.S. has no love lost for Syria due to terrorism, but as Annapolis indicated, the U.S. knew when it was advantageous to invite Syria to a peace conference. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice believes Syrian participation in Annapolis could reduce terrorism.

Rather, the Bush administration's anger with Syria is most pronounced over Lebanon, an issue which has become more acute as Syria continues to block the naming of a new Lebanese president. Of all the reasons Bush cited at his last press conference in late December when he stated, "my patience ran out on President Assad a long time ago," the longest explanation focused on Syria's efforts to destabilize Lebanon.

What is not appreciated in Israel is that the Bush administration deems the very fragile Lebanese sovereignty as one of the great successes of its Middle East policy. There may be military successes now in Iraq under General David Petraeus, but the war is certainly not over. In contrast, Lebanon is viewed by the administration as a success story, as Syria ended a 29-year occupation and a pro-Western, democratic government emerged in its wake.

Some in Israel may claim that Syria's exit was not a function of successful diplomacy between Washington, Paris, and Riyadh, but rather a function of the tragedy Syria allegedly committed - in other words, Syria created a Lebanese backlash by its alleged murder of a beloved former prime minister, which united the non-Shi'ite elements in Lebanon. However, the Bush administration does not see the Lebanese public protests as foreordaining Syria's exit, but as a function of U.S.-led concerted action.

Moreover, while the Bush democracy doctrine in the Mideast has become largely a dead letter after the Hamas victory in January 2006, Lebanon is viewed by the Bush administration as a place where it has a chance to succeed. Bush does not speak about Mideast democracy as he did with the fervor at the start of his second term in 2005, but at the same recent press conference he said, "it's very important that Lebanon's democracy succeed."

The problem is not just that Israel does not understand how President Bush views success. It also seems unaware that some in the Bush administration believe Israel would undo that success in exchange for a Golan peace deal. In other words, members of the Bush administration think that Israel would not hesitate to "sell" Lebanon to Damascus in order to make peace with Syria, and therefore an Israel-Syria peace negotiation is too risky a proposition. Some in Washington see that Israel has not publicly disavowed this idea that it will sell out Lebanon as evidence that Israel would make a deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense, while it is also possible that Israel - beset with a myriad of other challenges - never thought this was an issue. Silence from Jerusalem on this question is often interpreted negatively in the U.S., and not as negligence.

While Washington and Jerusalem have worked closely together on a range of issues, few issues have been more problematic. Lebanon is one such issue and it has affected the way the U.S. views talks with Syria. It is sometimes carefully couched, so the U.S. can deny it is vetoing peace talks. When an Israeli reporter asked Bush about such a veto several months ago, Bush was careful to say that no such veto existed. However, as one senior Israeli cabinet official put it, "given Bush's tone, it was like a parent telling a child that if you want you can play in traffic. We didn't see it as a green light."

It is clear, based on my recent trip to the Mideast with a delegation of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Israel's security establishment believe it is worth exploring whether a breakthrough with Syria could both weaken Iran's power in the region and weaken Palestinian rejectionists as well remove an arms conduit for Hezbollah. On the eve of Annapolis, Jordan's King Abdullah made his first trip to Damascus in four years believing Syria must return to the Arab fold and away from Tehran. Our visit to Amman indicates that Jordan believes Syria chafes at the devolving junior partner role it plays today, unlike the role it had for years in the past as Iran's equal.

There are many questions on whether Syria is willing and capable of reorienting its regional foreign policy away from its participation in the Iranian "quartet" (Tehran, Damascus, Hamas and Hezbollah) as part of peace with Israel. Further legitimate questions will arise as to how this proposition can be tested in order to minimize risk. If Syria is willing and capable of realigning its policies, such a track could facilitate rather than undermine peace prospects with the Palestinian Authority. Syria probably sees peace talks with Israel as a means of improving ties with the U.S., but talks will inevitably fail anyway if the U.S. and Israel are at odds.

The first step is to align Washington and Jerusalem. Given U.S. anger with Syria over Lebanon, it is unclear whether this will succeed. Yet, the only way it has a chance, it would seem, is if Israel makes clear to the U.S. that it has a "red line" in peace talks with Syria. Israel should say it will not sacrifice Lebanese sovereignty on the platter of peace with Syria.

Either in public statements or in private talks between President Bush and Prime Minister Olmert in the coming days, it is important to restore the trust between the U.S. and Israel over how Israel would conduct peace negotiations with Syria. Coordination between Washington and Jerusalem does not guarantee Israeli success with Syria, but it is its prerequisite.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of its [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16) . ❖

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