

Been There, Done That

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Last week, even before the carnage in Qana, a parade of pundits, lawmakers, and former policymakers started calling for Washington to reengage in a dialogue with Damascus. President Carter, Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, among others, argued that the Bush administration should talk with Syria about reining in Hezbollah, perhaps with an eye to breaking the Damascus-Tehran axis.

This policy prescription is ill-advised and poorly timed. Moreover, the strategy was tried and failed during President Bush's first administration. Washington engaged Syria in a robust fashion from 2001 through the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, sending no less than five senior-level U.S. delegations to cajole Bashar Assad to change his unhelpful behavior. Discussions during this period focused on Iraq—in particular on Syria's role in destabilizing the newly liberated country—but also touched on Syrian interference in Lebanon, provision of safe haven to Palestinian terrorist groups, and ongoing support for Hezbollah.

It's no secret that the administration was divided over the utility of this engagement, but, nevertheless, the effort was made in good faith. On a broad range of U.S. policy concerns articulated during these meetings, Syria was without exception unresponsive. And this was when things were going relatively well for the United States in the region.

Why then does anyone believe that Syria will be responsive now, when U.S. leverage is diminished by the deterioration of conditions in Iraq and by Iran's seemingly effortless foray into the nuclear club? Assad is clearly feeling emboldened: Inconclusive U.N. reporting on the Hariri assassination has given him the impression that Syria has dodged the bullet of international sanctions for the killing. The Syrian reform movement has been duly repressed, Syria's economy is performing fairly well, and now, with Syrian assistance, Lebanon is once again on the verge of ruin.

Given this state of affairs, it seems naive to expect that Washington will be able to convince Assad that a change of policy would really be in his regime's best interest. In fact, from where Assad sits, things could hardly be better. The Assads have controlled Syria for some 35 years and are doing quite well, thank you. Why mess with success?

The notion that the Bush administration will somehow be able to tempt Syria away from its Iranian patron and Hezbollah is a long shot at best. The potential costs of such a gambit, however, could be steep.

Granting Damascus a reprieve from its well deserved international isolation would undermine what remains of U.S. credibility with Syrian reformers and Lebanese democrats. Reengagement would also practically invite a Syrian return to Lebanon. Even more problematic, as Assad has put it, “Syria is not a charity,” and as such we can expect that Damascus would extract a high price for even temporary compliance with U.S. demands.

The price is not hard to envision. At a minimum, the Syrians would need the U.N. to bring the Hariri assassination investigation to a swift conclusion without implicating the Assad regime. Assad would also no doubt want a free pass from Washington for his ongoing repression of the Syrian people, and an end to the freedom agenda as it relates to Syria.

In any event, Syria’s behavior—its bellicose statements about military conflict with Israel, its playing host only last week to meetings with Iran, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, and its attempts to rearm Hezbollah—do not suggest that Assad is looking for a deal.

Should Syria make an abrupt about-face in its unhelpful policies on Hezbollah, Iraq, and the Palestinian terrorist organizations—by, for instance, expelling Iraqi insurgents and Hamas leaders—Washington might want to consider robust engagement. But as long as Syria demonstrates itself to be an active part of the Hezbollah problem, it would be foolish to look toward Syria as part of the solution.

David Schenker is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006, he was the Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestinian affairs adviser in the office of the secretary of defense. ❖

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