

Make Syria Pay a Price for Peace

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Articles & Testimony

The millennial year opened on a high note for U.S. diplomacy, with Syria-Israel peace talks convening yesterday in Shepherdstown, W.Va. Unlike the other two participants, however, Washington has so far not indicated what it wants from these negotiations or what it is willing to pay to get it.

Although Washington dons the cap of the impartial mediator, it is disingenuous to suggest that the U.S. cares equally about advancing the interests of both Israel and Syria--one an ally, the other a charter member of the list of states that sponsor terrorism. It is also naive to suggest that the U.S. should not, through these negotiations, promote its own wider strategic interests.

It's obviously in Washington's strategic interest to help Israel achieve its goal of peace with security, even if that requires additional military aid and a contribution of a small contingent of U.S. personnel to monitor provisions of a peace agreement. The real dilemma for the U.S. concerns whether, in the context of a peace deal, Washington should also provide aid to Syria. Following every Arab-Israeli agreement to date--from Camp David to Oslo to Wadi Arava--Washington has rewarded the Arab peacemaker with financial aid, military assistance and a political blessing.

He's vulnerable.

For Syrian President Hafez Assad, that is the real prize. Perhaps the most urgent objective for the 69-year-old Mr. Assad is to exploit peace with Israel to cultivate among the American political elite an interest in the survival of his brutal dictatorship. Even a small aid package would achieve this goal, an especially important one when reports of Mr. Assad's declining mental and physical capabilities and his family's violent internal feuding suggest profound vulnerability within his regime.

What makes this issue especially complex is that Israel is usually the chief lobbyist on behalf of U.S. aid to the Arab side. That is because Israel believes that Arab clients of Washington are less likely to break the peace and risk losing American largesse. It is also because Israel knows that the U.S. is more likely than any other major power to take Israel's interest into account when considering Arab military requests. Out of such enlightened self-interest, Israel and its American supporters are the most ardent advocates for U.S. aid to Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

While it is for Israel to decide whether to trade land for peace with Syria, it remains for America to decide whether it

should extend its political umbrella to the Assad regime. The operational question for U.S. policy--one that deserves to be debated now, before Washington makes premature commitments to ease the passage of an Israel-Syria peace agreement--is whether the U.S. should, under any circumstances, care about the fate of Mr. Assad's Syria.

Here, the legacy of Egypt-Israel peacemaking is instructive. When Jimmy Carter helped strike the Camp David deal in 1978, he not only brokered the first Arab-Israel peace accord; he put the capstone on a five-year, bipartisan effort to wean Egypt away from the Soviet Union. That was one of America's greatest victories in the Cold War. The billions in aid that subsequently flowed to Cairo were rewards for Anwar Sadat's heroism both in making peace with Israel and in throwing in his lot with the West. In practical terms, that meant close cooperation in Persian Gulf security, the first large-scale joint military exercises in the Arab world, U.S. access to a military facility on the Red Sea coast, and an aggressive Egyptian posture toward Muammar Gadhafi. In addition, Sadat welcomed U.S. economic aid conditioned on liberalizing his economy and opening it to the world.

Today Arab leaders like Mr. Assad and Yasser Arafat seek U.S. patronage not because they want to jump from the Soviet ship but because the Soviet ship sank. America has a lesser interest in supporting such men than it did in supporting Sadat in the 1970s. That does not mean the U.S. should reject in principle their application to join "our club." It only means that the membership fees should be much higher than they were two decades ago.

Most observers tend to focus on the steps Syria needs to take to merit removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism as the price it will pay to earn a new relationship with Washington. This is wrongheaded. Ending support for terrorism--as well as providing full cooperation to U.S. investigations of anti-American terrorist attacks, extraditing Nazi war criminals, securing the freedom of Israelis still missing in action, and stopping transport of Iranian arms to Hezbollah across Syrian-controlled territory--should be the beginning of this process, not its end.

The Clinton administration has signaled otherwise by agreeing to defer redress on these issues to host a negotiation that enhances Syria's prestige and that is, in part, designed to address Damascus' grievances. Washington has never fully spelled out the specific requirements Syria must meet to be removed from the terrorism list. Past precedent suggests this can be a very politicized process. In 1982 the Reagan administration was under no illusion that Saddam Hussein had forsworn terrorism, but it still removed Iraq from the terrorism list in order to help Baghdad in its war with Iran.

Beyond these preliminaries--and in addition to Syria satisfying Israel's demands for peace--membership in America's club in the Middle East today means opening the economy and subscribing to U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. The latter would entail active support for the containment of Saddam Hussein's regime--i.e., closing the Syrian-Iraqi border to illegal trade, offering overflight rights to U.S. and allied aircraft, perhaps even hosting a tour of the Air Expeditionary Force that rotates around regional states to patrol no-fly zones over Iraqi territory. It would also mean severing a strategic relationship with Iran, including shutting down access to the Bekaa Valley for Iran's Revolutionary Guards and terminating cooperation with Tehran and Pyongyang in ballistic missile development.

A Syria that is a full partner in America's two great regional projects--Arab-Israeli peace and security in the Gulf--and that is committed to market-oriented economic development is a country that would merit US. support. It would also be a very different Syria, one that could see progress toward human rights and democracy. Though they risk spoiling the mood in Shepherdstown, U.S diplomats should waste no time in making clear to Syrians and Israelis alike that only a different Syria is welcome in our club.

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