

RESHUFFLING THE CARDS? (II): SYRIA'S NEW HAND

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RESHUFFLING THE CARDS? (II): SYRIA'S NEW HAND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Syria typically, and at times justifiably, brings to mind stagnation and immobility. Yet, over recent years, change has been afoot. In 2008, it agreed to Turkish-mediated talks with Israel. It built ties with the Iraqi government after long depicting it as the offspring of an illegitimate occupation. It began to normalise relations with Lebanon, after years of resisting its claim to sovereignty. It accelerated economic reforms. These steps fall short of being revolutionary; some were imposed rather than chosen and reflected opportunism rather than forward thinking. Still, by Syrian standards, they are quite remarkable, especially in contrast to recent fervent militancy.

In a companion report with identical policy recommendations published on 14 December 2009, Crisis Group analysed the factors behind Damascus's strategic evolution. Here, it explores in detail the mechanism, extent and limitations of these adjustments as well as challenges faced by the Obama administration if it wishes to exploit and solidify them. Only so much can be done in advance of genuine progress in Israeli-Syrian negotiations. For reasons Israeli, Syrian and American, that could be some time in the making. In the interim, Washington and Damascus should move beyond their tactical interaction by heightening the level of their engagement, broadening its agenda and quickly focusing on joint steps on Iraq.

There was nothing preordained or inevitable in Syria's moves. Each reflected a cautious, deliberative process in which the regime carefully assessed the impact of one step before taking the next. Each involved at times starkly diverging views about how best to defend national interests. All pointed toward a more powerful, assertive President Bashar al-Assad, who must nonetheless contend with competing power centres and divergent outlooks, while suggesting the growing weight of a generation of insiders he has methodically put in place. Occasionally, there was backsliding, indicating the shift from greater militancy to more pronounced pragmatism is susceptible to negative changes in the regional landscape or to blowback from Syria's allies and so is anything but irreversible.

Barack Obama's election had little if anything to do with the evolution. The changes were initiated while the Bush administration was in office, when many Syrians were wagering on John McCain's victory and for reasons almost entirely independent of the U.S. Still, the triumph of a man who had promised to make engagement a foreign policy leitmotif gave rise to hope that the bilateral relationship would more rapidly to a sounder footing and that the two sides might find ways to work together on regional policies.

So far, that has not been the case. Each side has its own explanation. Syria is convinced it has taken the first steps – in Iraq and Lebanon in particular – and that the onus is on Washington to do its part. Damascus expected the administration to reverse at least parts of the Bush-era legacy, reestablish normal diplomatic relations by sending an ambassador, show greater flexibility on sanctions, push for a resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks and, more broadly, propose a partnership on regional issues where Syria claimed it was willing to cooperate. It says that without a minimal common vision, it is not about to simply do America's bidding. It feels it is being asked to prove its worth, not treated as a worthy partner.

The U.S. sees a traditional Syrian pattern repeating itself – halting some hostile action and expecting recompense while continuing to engage in unfriendly activity (such as allowing some insurgents to slip into Iraq or arming Hizbollah) and counting on a blind eye. Besides, the young administration believes it has more pressing matters, must contend with a sceptical Congress and even more sceptical regional allies (notably in Lebanon and Iraq) and fears that renewing the Israeli-Syrian track at a time when the Palestinian track is at a halt risks jeopardising any chance of breathing life into the latter.

As a result, each side has tended to see significant value in its own goodwill gestures, while essentially dismissing the other's. The U.S. has indeed engaged, repeatedly dispatching officials to Damascus. But it has stopped well short of initiating a thorough strategic dialogue with Syria in which views of the region's future are exchanged. Nor, on the issue of arguably greatest immediate concern,

Iraq, has it implemented a bottom-up approach designed to build trust and produce tangible results. Instead, it cancelled security talks on that subject as soon as that country's prime minister – alleging Syrian complicity in a tragic series of bomb attacks – chose to oppose them. Syria, for the most part, has done what it does best: sit and wait. It has refrained from putting forward its own approach to successful engagement, let alone a vision for the region that might gain U.S. buy-in.

It always was unrealistic to expect that the mere call for or initiation of engagement would overcome years of mistrust, divergent conceptions for the region and conflicting alliances. Right now, a productive process is needed, not immediate, dramatic results. But there is not even that.

It is still early. President Obama has not personally invested himself in the Syrian file, the Israeli-Syrian track could revive, both the U.S. and Syria continue to profess their shared desire for a new page and, in terms of atmospherics at least, the improvement in bilateral relations is notable. But they are not where they should be and little has been done with the opportunities that have arisen.

There also are potential clouds on the horizon. The international tribunal on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri could develop in ways that that will significantly complicate management of the Syrian file; so too could the investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into Syria's alleged nuclear program. Violence in Iraq also could produce a further downturn in U.S.-Syrian relations in the absence of a joint security framework. The situation at the Israeli-Lebanese border remains tense. The roots of the 2008 Gaza war are still unaddressed. A confrontation around Iran's nuclear program could move the region in unpredictable and dangerous ways.

The most realistic measure of success is not whether the U.S. and Syria achieve a quick breakthrough. At best, that will take time and will have to await changes in the region and real progress toward Israeli-Syrian peace. The test, rather, is whether they can move the relationship far enough so that it might resist crises that, almost inevitably and always unexpectedly, will arise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the U.S. Administration and Syrian government:

1. Devise a process of mutual engagement revolving around concrete, realistic goals, notably:

- a) containing Iranian assertiveness in new arenas such as Iraq or Yemen (rather than aiming to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran);
- b) working toward national reconciliation in Iraq, by combining U.S. leverage with the Iraqi government and Syrian access to the insurgency and former regime elements;
- c) encouraging the Lebanese government to refocus on issues of domestic governance and containing the risks of a new Hizbollah-Israel conflagration; and
- d) combining Syrian efforts to restrain Hamas and reunify Gaza and the West Bank with U.S. adoption of a more welcoming approach to intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

To the U.S. Administration:

2. Establish an effective line of communication by:
 - a) sending an ambassador to Damascus, part of whose mission should be to build a direct link with President Bashar al-Assad; and
 - b) identifying a senior official to engage in a strategic dialogue aimed at exchanging visions for the region and determining a blueprint for future bilateral relations.
3. Recalibrate U.S. efforts on the peace process by:
 - a) displaying interest in both the Palestinian and Syrian tracks;
 - b) working at improving Israeli-Turkish relations as a step toward resuming Israeli-Syrian negotiations under joint U.S.-Turkish sponsorship; and
 - c) making clear that, consistent with past Israeli-Syrian negotiations, any final agreement should entail full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, firm security arrangements and the establishment of normal, peaceful bilateral relations.
4. Restart bilateral security talks related to Iraq, beginning with border issues, either immediately or, at the latest, after parliamentary elections in Iraq.
5. Soften implementation of sanctions against Syria by streamlining licensing procedures and loosening restrictions on humanitarian or public safety grounds.

To the Government of Syria:

6. Facilitate access for U.S. diplomats to relevant officials upon arrival of a new ambassador.
7. Utilise existing security cooperation mechanisms with countries such as the UK and France to demonstrate tangible results, pending direct talks with the U.S.

8. Articulate proactively its vision for the region in talks with U.S. officials.
9. Consolidate improved Syrian-Lebanese ties by demarcating the border and providing any available information on Lebanese “disappeared”.
10. Clarify what immediate, positive contributions Syria could make in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon and what it would expect from the U.S. in turn.

**Damascus/Washington/Brussels,
16 December 2009**

RESHUFFLING THE CARDS? (II): SYRIA'S NEW HAND

I. INTRODUCTION

Beleaguered and on the defensive from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq onwards,¹ Syria began to seize the initiative in 2008. It initiated a series of uncharacteristic moves: accelerating economic reforms, resuming (indirect) peace talks with Israel, normalising its interaction with Lebanon and devising a more balanced policy toward Iraq. For many within the regime, these were far from being foregone conclusions; as they saw it, the decisions involved significant risks or futile compromises. Every stage of this gradual evolution from dogged defiance to more pragmatic repositioning thus gave rise to intense internal debate. Because they were concentrated over a short period of time and involved both broad strategic choices and more mundane tactical moves, these discussions offer useful insights into Syrian policymaking.²

First, internal dynamics suggest the existence of a relatively deliberative process. Events that occurred in 2008 confirm that President Bashar Assad has grown increasingly assertive and appears to have the ultimate decision-making responsibility. But they also indicate he must be sensitive to various viewpoints; can neither ignore nor suppress criticism from his entourage;³ and has to contend with a powerful constituency convinced that Syria should remain firmly embedded in a so-called resistance front. According to this latter worldview, the nation's strength derives first and foremost from its current web

of alliances, uncompromising positions and military capabilities. Concessions or gestures of any kind at best will earn Syria nothing and, at worst, will raise eyebrows among its friends, while persuading its foes that pressure works.

Secondly, far from being abrupt, the shift toward a more pragmatic stance appears to have resulted from a cumulative, self-reinforcing process in which each step depended on the fallout from the preceding one. At each stage, the regime engaged in cost-benefit analysis, weighing risks against potential gains. In other words, had policy choices involved a steeper price – eg, prompting more hostility from allies or less recognition from the West – they likely would have pushed the regime and its president in a more rigid, hardline direction, restricting their margin of manoeuvre. As discussed in a companion report,⁴ Syria's decision-making is less a function of predetermined ideological precepts than of the regime's constantly readjusted reading of internal and external environments. Changes viewed as harmful to Syrian interests – ranging from domestic strife resulting from economic reforms to heightened friction with Tehran arising from the West's simultaneous engagement with it and pressure on Iran – thus could reverse at least some of the more positive recent trends.

Thirdly, there are limits to how far Syria will go. Until now, decisions have been driven by short-term objectives: ending its isolation and broadening its range of alliances and strategic portfolio; lessening inter-Arab tensions; perpetuating the existing balance of power in Lebanon; reactivating peace talks with Israel; and pursuing indispensable economic reforms. But, as discussed in the companion report, Damascus's read of regional trends gives it reason for caution. Given the essentially reactive nature of Syrian foreign policy, moving beyond these steps will require a clear quid pro quo. This would need to combine concrete incentives (return of the Golan; support for economic reforms) and, perhaps more importantly, a vision for the region in which Syria's role continues to be central. In this sense, much will depend on what

¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°23, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004.

² To a large extent, these debates and policy revisions tend to be dismissed in the U.S. where such dynamics typically are given short shrift unless they suggest serious internal dissent. As a U.S. analyst put it, "what from Syria's vantage point can look like a dramatic change often barely registers in Washington. Besides, Syria will not get credit simply for not maximising the damage it otherwise could inflict". Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2008.

³ Many observers have sought to depict the debate as one opposing "old" and "new" guards. In reality, the president's entourage appears to combine pragmatic as well as conservative veterans with younger advisers who are not always or unambiguously forward-looking.

⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009.

the U.S., Israel and the Europeans put in the balance. With Europe often taking its cue from Washington and Israeli moves largely dependent on U.S. prodding and assurances, the Obama administration's vision for the region ultimately will be a decisive factor.

II. LESSONS FROM 2008

The most critical changes in Syrian foreign policy occurred in 2008. At the time, most members of the international community – with the notable exception of France⁵ – evinced little willingness to alter their approach toward Damascus. Most Syrian officials and analysts wagered that Senator John McCain, not Barack Obama, would win the presidency. From Syria's standpoint, in other words, prospects remained at best mixed.⁶ Yet that is when the country began to emerge from the radicalisation phase it had experienced from the 2003 Iraqi occupation onward. Understanding why it made certain choices despite the absence of tangible U.S or Western incentives sheds light on its internal decision-making process.

A. FROM RADICALISM TO PRAGMATISM

Already rattled by the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and subsequent escalation of tensions with Washington,⁷ Damascus made matters far worse when, a year later, it pressured Lebanon's parliament into extending the mandate of the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud. The decision, which Syrians themselves viewed as a serious misstep,⁸ led to the country's unprecedented isolation. Soon thereafter, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri – widely blamed on Damascus – triggered massive anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut, the humiliating withdrawal of Syrian troops that had been stationed in Lebanon since 1976 and the coming to office of a relatively powerful pro-Western coalition.⁹ The rapid succession of events plunged the country into a state of shock. Questions were raised by regime officials and ordinary citizens alike about the leadership's capacity to survive.

Seeking to weather the storm, the regime began by opening space for internal debate. It used the June 2005 Tenth Baath Party Congress to conduct a wide-ranging consultative process on future options, allow members to vent frustration and build a measure of consensus. A journalist who attended the proceedings recalled:

⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°27, *Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience*, 15 January 2009.

⁶ At the time, an official commented: "I would describe the current situation as chaotic, tenuous and dangerous. The whole regional system could collapse. Worse, no one can predict when, in what way or to what extent things may fall apart". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Syria Under Bashar (I)*, op. cit.

⁸ President Assad made a remarkably candid confession to that effect in an interview to *al-Safir*, 25 March 2009. See below.

⁹ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°39, *Syria After Lebanon, Lebanon After Syria*, 12 April 2005.

Some argued that Syria should make a deal with the U.S., even if that meant reconsidering our ties with Hamas and Hizbollah. The opposing view held that Syria ought to face down the pressure, strengthen relations with Hizbollah and Hamas, reinvigorate relations with Iran and basically close ranks. The two options were summed up as “going West” or “going East”. Ultimately, the latter prevailed. Assad went to Tehran to congratulate newly elected President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad. He held meetings with Hizbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders. At the same time, he reshuffled the cabinet and launched a new economic policy, partly designed to offset the impact of U.S. sanctions and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. He also pledged to initiate long-overdue political reforms, such as passing a political parties and electoral law as well as legislation granting citizenship to the Kurds [to whom it had been denied since a flawed 1962 census].¹⁰

During the second half of 2005, the regime dashed hopes for genuine political reform, apparently fearing a revival of its long-dormant opposition.¹¹ Instead, it sought to stoke patriotic and nationalistic sentiment, denounced foreign interference and in particular U.S. and Israeli policies, embraced the so-called resistance front comprising Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran, delivered defiant speeches and organised mass rallies.

Over the following months, the strategy appeared to be vindicated. In January 2006, Hamas scored a resounding victory in Palestinian parliamentary elections. In July,

Hizbollah stood its ground in the face of Israel's military attack. At the same time, the conflict in Iraq was descending into chaos and civil war. Buoyed and emboldened, Damascus persevered in its new course. Toward year's end and into 2007, gradual re-engagement by various European states and tentative steps by the U.S. further entrenched Syria's posture insofar as these efforts involved neither credible threats nor enticing incentives that might have engineered a change.¹² This is not to say that the regime felt wholly comfortable or secure. In Lebanon, a dangerous standoff, potentially extremely costly to Syrian interests, prevailed. In Iraq, the sectarian polarisation risked spilling across the border.¹³ All the while, concern about a possible Israeli military operation, whether in Lebanon, Gaza or even Syria, remained.¹⁴

The November 2007 Annapolis peace conference opened up a short-lived parenthesis.¹⁵ After an energetic internal discussion, and despite considerable scepticism about the purpose of the gathering, Syria agreed to attend. Advocates on both sides of the debate concurred that the event essentially was a public relations exercise meant to project the U.S. administration's interest in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.¹⁶ Disagreement centred on what Syria might gain – or lose – by attending.

Proponents of participation argued that to snub the conference would set a dangerous precedent by removing the Golan from the agenda.¹⁷ They also stressed the need for Damascus to project a more pragmatic image, demonstrate the seriousness of its calls for peace and display willingness and ability to distance itself from its more militant allies. A few weeks later, an official looked back at these arguments:

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, May 2007. Assad was the first world leader to visit Ahmadinejad in Tehran following his August 2005 election victory, a mere five days after he took office. The two countries staged a summit in Damascus in February 2006, during which the leaders jointly announced formation of an alliance to confront foreign pressures. On the final day of his state visit, Ahmadinejad met with Hizbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Meshal, Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdallah Shallah (whose movement had just claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) secretary general, Ahmad Jibril. On the relative political opening that took place in the wake of the Hariri assassination, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria After Lebanon*, op. cit., pp. 29-30. Notably, none of the legislation mentioned in the text was enacted.

¹¹ Regime officials appeared shaken by the strong language in the “Damascus Declaration” – the first united political statement in decades from Syria's opposition – blaming the “authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish” Syrian regime for bringing about “stifling isolation” through its “destructive, adventurous, and short-sighted policies on the Arab and regional level – especially in Lebanon ...” “The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change”, 16 October 2005.

¹² See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°83, *Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, 11 February 2009, pp. 18-19.

¹³ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°77, *Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, 10 July 2008, pp. 16-22.

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°63, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, 10 April 2007, p. 20.

¹⁵ On the conference, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°22, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Annapolis and After*, 20 November 2007.

¹⁶ In the words of a senior Baath party official, “although in the end we decided to go to Annapolis, we were convinced the conference would not serve the cause of peace, that it served domestic U.S. and Israeli interests rather than Palestinian or Arab ones”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2007.

¹⁷ “We conditioned our participation on the Golan explicitly being on the agenda, whereas the U.S. wanted the focus to be exclusively on Israeli-Palestinian issues. Syria is directly concerned by this conflict and cannot be considered as an Arab country among others. Leaving the Golan issue on the shelf would have been unacceptable to our people and would have created a dangerous precedent”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

Syria had to take part for several reasons. First, as a rule it is better to attend than remain isolated. Secondly, lack of goodwill regarding the peace process would damage the credibility of our claims. Thirdly, we had an opportunity to send positive signals, notably that we are capable of taking positions independent from Tehran [which strongly opposed the conference].¹⁸ Fourthly, it was a gesture to the Egyptians and Saudis, ahead of the Arab summit scheduled in March [to be held in Damascus and which Riyadh and Cairo threatened to boycott].¹⁹ Fifthly, we owed it to those who had gone out of their way to convince us. The Russians promised a meeting in Moscow devoted to the Golan.²⁰ The French and other Europeans came to us, as well as some Arabs. It would have been difficult to disappoint them. If the Golan was included in any way, Syria had no choice but to attend.²¹

In response, others claimed that attendance would harm Syria's interests. Implicit endorsement of the event would turn what otherwise might have been viewed as a failure into a relative success – thereby offering an undeserved gift to a hostile Bush administration. Damascus risked coming across as caving in to U.S. pressure. Signalling readiness to compromise in return for the Golan Heights would damage the regime's reputation as a stalwart advocate of resistance to the U.S. and Israel. They also underscored the danger of sending a wrong message to allies upon whom Syria still heavily depended in a context that held little prospect of serious improvement with the West.²²

¹⁸ "In my view we went to Annapolis for two main reasons. We wanted the Golan to be on the table. Whether the U.S. did anything about it or not, we wanted to restate that this is a national priority which we will simply not forget. We also wanted to send the message that we were ready to move in a moderate way, even when the Iranians were dead set against it. We sensed that our relationship with Iran had become an obsession to many abroad, so it was important to reassert that Syria would act according to its own national interests". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2008.

¹⁹ "A key argument was that nobody would attend the Arab summit in Damascus if we didn't do our bit in Annapolis". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2007.

²⁰ "Despite our scepticism, we agreed once our conditions had been met. We also received an assurance by [Yevgeny] Primakov, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's envoy, that a follow-on meeting would take place in Moscow and give a central role to the Syrian/Israeli track". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, December 2007. That follow-on meeting has yet to materialise.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Baath official, Damascus, December 2007.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, November-December 2007.

In the end, Syria conditioned its attendance on two requests: a formal invitation and explicit inclusion of the Golan on the agenda, both of which the U.S. had resisted.²³ Once these had been met, Syria dispatched its deputy minister of foreign affairs rather than the minister himself and had him deliver a carefully crafted speech whose moderate tone surprised many.²⁴

Syrians' expectations regarding the conference were low but, in their eyes, even these were not met. Damascus was counting on some payoff; instead, U.S. policy remained static.²⁵ A Syrian official said:

We had a debate both before and after. I deeply opposed Annapolis. It cost Syria in many ways and brought us nothing. Even though we attended and showed restraint, we got strictly nothing in exchange. The U.S. demonstrated its unwillingness to alter its policies, and Arab states remain as cold as before.²⁶

The experience helped tilt the balance toward a more hardline stance, and Damascus soon adopted a more militant tone.

The Annapolis disappointment was only one of several challenges faced by Syria by late 2007, early 2008. In September 2007 Israel attacked an alleged nuclear facil-

²³ "The Golan must be listed as an item on the agenda. Once that is done, we will have a meeting to discuss whether we attend or not. In the meanwhile, no decision will be made". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Annapolis and After*, op. cit., pp.15-16; Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Arab officials, Washington, November 2007.

²⁵ As the U.S. administration viewed it, Syria's attendance in and of itself hardly warranted recompense. In the absence of changes in Syria's behaviour on other regional matters – from Iraq to Lebanon – it deemed that there was no justification for a shift in its own approach. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, December 2007.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2007. Another official said, "The U.S. is as hostile to Syria as ever. We gave them an opening, and now they want to break our bones. Only days after Annapolis they were using the harshest language against us. And the U.S. continues to oppose real movement on the Syrian-Israeli track". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2008. In December 2007, Bush declared that his "patience ran out on President Assad a long time ago ... because he houses Hamas, he facilitates Hezbollah, suiciders go from his country into Iraq, and he destabilises Lebanon". BBC News, 20 December 2007. The Baath party in particular reportedly faced intense questioning from within its ranks. "Annapolis generated very negative reactions within the party, both before and after the event. The question that keeps coming up is 'what did we get out of it?'" Crisis Group interview, senior Baath official, Damascus, April 2008.

ity in the country's north east; then, in February 2008, Imad Mughniyeh, a senior Hizbollah official accused of violent attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets, was assassinated in the heart of the Syrian capital.²⁷ Neither of these incidents – which involved violations of Syrian sovereignty – prompted a response or reaction from Damascus, highlighting the regime's inability to defend national borders and generating disquiet.²⁸

Washington imposed more targeted sanctions in early 2008, singling out Assad's cousin and business tycoon, Rami Makhluf.²⁹ At roughly the same time, President Nicolas Sarkozy – disappointed at Syria's apparent lack of cooperation toward ending Lebanon's presidential vacuum – broke off official contact after an intense courtship.³⁰ Syrian-Saudi relations also plummeted. In March, a day after the U.S. deployed its navy off the Lebanese coast in what was widely interpreted as a message to Syria, Saudi Arabia urged its citizens to evacuate Lebanon. In addition, Washington and Riyadh, joined by Cairo, pressed others to boycott the Arab League summit due to be held in Damascus in March.³¹

Syria hunkered down. Both officials and commentators toughened their stance, referring quasi-obsessively to the country's sovereignty, national dignity³² and support

for all forms of resistance.³³ Privately, they displayed a mix of resignation and self-assurance. Despite intense external pressure, they argued they had seen the worst of it, that even that was insufficient to make Syria bend³⁴ and that nothing could be done about it anyway insofar as their foes would not stop short of Syrian capitulation or "suicide".³⁵ But anxiety was right beneath the surface. Officials and businessmen wondered "just how long we can keep on like this".³⁶ For a time, the entire decision-making apparatus appeared to have been put on hold, a result of external uncertainties and internal wavering.³⁷

The next critical decision point was the Arab League summit. For Syria, the stakes were high: the self-proclaimed "beating heart of Arabism" was hosting its first summit since the League's creation in 1945.³⁸ Although such gatherings have tended to be non-events, where significant decisions are postponed and rivalries papered over, holding it in Damascus was far from guaranteed. The state-owned media routinely and harshly attacked Syria's Arab detractors; many – analysts and officials alike – were touting the idea of a "summit of refusal" (*qimmat al-mumana'a*) that would serve as a platform from which to berate U.S. imperialism and Israeli belligerence, as well as collusion by some Arab regimes with both.

²⁷ Months later, in August, one of Assad's confidants, General Muhammad Suleiman, was killed near Tartus, on the Syrian coastline. He reportedly worked at the palace on security issues. A former senior Israeli official confidently stated that the Mughniyeh and Suleiman assassinations were perpetrated by Israel. Crisis Group interview, November 2008.

²⁸ The regime's inertia was widely perceived as a sign of weakness. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 2007-2008. According to an analyst, "there has been significant pressure from Syrians to respond to these provocations. The Israeli raid and Mughniyeh assassination were extremely embarrassing". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁰ Crisis Group Briefing, *Lessons from the French Experience*, op. cit.

³¹ Ibid, p. 19. An Egyptian official said, "the Arab summit in Damascus will be reminiscent of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow [when 61 countries joined a U.S.-led boycott]. If no solution is found to Lebanon's crisis, I also expect further sanctions to be imposed on Syria and the work of the international tribunal [investigating Rafiq Hariri's assassination] to accelerate". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, January 2008. A Jordanian official acknowledged that the king was pressured by Riyadh following his November 2007 visit to Damascus. "Saudi Arabia is not at all interested in dealing with Assad. They are adopting a hard line, scolding us for our policy of engagement". Crisis Group interview, Amman, March 2008.

³² See, eg, Imad Fawzi Shueibi, "The Rules of Syria's Game", *Syria Today*, January 2008.

³³ In January 2008, for example, Damascus hosted a "resistance conference" of Palestinian groups rejecting negotiations with Israel.

³⁴ An official said, "I don't think the French can do much to harm us. They have to defend their interests in Lebanon and protect their troops. Americans too are stuck: What more can they possibly do?" Crisis Group interview, senior Baath official, Damascus, January 2008. Another official echoed this view: "What can the Saudis or the Egyptians try to do against us in Lebanon? They've already done it all". Crisis Group interview, Baath official, Damascus, March 2008.

³⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., p. 21.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, March 2008.

³⁷ An analyst said, "there is considerable speculation regarding a possible, imminent cabinet reshuffle. Truth is, nobody knows. The sense in Syria is that we are headed toward a confrontation and that's not the time to change your team. You want to ensure ministers know where the emergency exits are – that is, how to behave at a time of crisis. Moreover, a reshuffle means altering the existing balance of power, which would create unwelcome friction at this time". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008. A prominent businessman commented: "At this point I see our policy-making process as four men pulling at the four corners of the meeting table. There is significant energy spent and no movement". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

³⁸ In the words of a senior Baath party official, "the summit is far from unimportant to us, as it is held on our soil. Accordingly, we will work to achieve a degree of Arab unity and consensus". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2007.

A vigorous internal debate between senior officials ensued. One official explained:

There were conflicting views among the leadership. On one side, some called for a clean break: they wanted to use the summit to reassert our toughest positions, label some Arabs as U.S. agents and so on. On the other side, some saw the need for conciliation. The latter position prevailed. As the summit proceeded, most of our guests were surprised by our moderation.³⁹

Prior disagreement aside, the summit's organisation was highly disciplined and tightly orchestrated. State-employed journalists were instructed to drop their vehement attacks.⁴⁰ Only a handful of spokespersons were empowered to make official statements;⁴¹ some of the regime's most familiar outspoken figures went silent. Syria also took steps to mollify concern about its alliance with Iran: Assad invited participants to frankly voice their concerns⁴² and formally sided with the United Arab Emirates in its longstanding territorial dispute with Tehran.

From Damascus's standpoint, the boycott by several countries ended up a blessing in disguise. Without Saudi or Egyptian representatives, the explosive issue of Lebanon's presidential vacuum slipped off the agenda.⁴³ In this sense, efforts by Riyadh, Cairo and Washington to thwart the summit essentially backfired. Shortly before it was held, an official said:

We are surprised at their clumsiness. They publicised their attempts to hurt us, even leaking information to *The Washington Post* to the effect that Saudi Arabia

was coordinating with the U.S. to harm Syria. They played up the inevitability of the summit's failure. This means we can present whatever happens now as a victory. They could have kept quiet and humiliated us by boycotting the summit at the last moment. Instead, they turned it into this big thing that blew up in their face.⁴⁴

Officials expressed visible relief at the event's mixed results, which they depicted as a significant success "given Syria's many challenges".⁴⁵ Greater friction or embarrassment at the summit likely would have dealt the regime's more conciliatory line a serious blow. In the event, its advocates emerged strengthened and emboldened. Although several factors combined to prompt Syria's broader shift toward a more accommodating posture, in hindsight the summit seems to have been a turning point. In stark contrast with the atmosphere that prevailed early in the year, in mid-2008 an official said, "the name of the game now is all-out pragmatism. The thinking is: open up as many doors as possible".⁴⁶

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

⁴⁰ One such journalist said, "we were told this would be reviewed and discussed in light of the summit's atmosphere". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

⁴¹ As one official put it, "it was quite clear that the minister of foreign affairs would be the principal speaker, because his particular vision was what the leadership wanted to project at that time. Uncharacteristically, there were no publicly expressed competing views, no stray comments, no leaks". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008.

⁴² A senior official said, "the purpose of these summits should be to discuss such matters. During the closed meeting of foreign ministers, the issue of Iran was raised. The president remarked that this was a source of constant accusations against Syria, so he would, therefore, take a pass but would gladly listen to the others' views. We were surprised that many expressed a desire for dialogue, peace and normalised relations with Tehran. Two Gulf representatives spoke in this way, arguing against any escalation". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

⁴³ "Those who could have raised the question of Lebanon were not in the room, while those who were present were reluctant to touch upon it". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, April 2008.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Syrian diplomat, Damascus, March 2008.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, April 2008. A senior Baath party official offered this assessment: "All in all, I see the summit as a success. No one was willing to risk an escalation and pay the price of a scandal at a time when Arab public opinion is hostile to displays of disunity. Plus, attendance exceeded our expectations. We were slightly disappointed by Jordan's low participation level given its prior signs of goodwill. But that aside, the Egyptian and Saudi posture was predictable. The king of Morocco sent his brother. The Yemeni president couldn't come due to serious civil strife. The sultan of Oman never attends any summit. And Tunisia, which shares this tradition, for once showed up. As for the Iraqis, they had their own domestic reasons not to attend. In short, this was not the massive boycott for which some had hoped". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008. In the Arab theatre, Syrians claim that (somewhat cosmetic) efforts to restore a semblance of cohesion continued after the summit. "Immediately after the Arab summit, the President was keen to give Syria an active role, reopen channels for dialogue and so forth. He rapidly embarked on a diplomatic tour, and several mediation efforts were attempted by the Qataris and others to improve our relations with Saudi Arabia. We were willing to be flexible, but nothing came of it". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, September 2008. "There were no tangible results from the president's Gulf tour, but his moderate discourse impressed his interlocutors. He's trying to lay the ground for more significant developments". Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, June 2008.

B. THE ECONOMIC GAMBIT

An early manifestation of the new climate was the relatively abrupt implementation of long-postponed and overdue economic reforms. In the summit's wake, the domestic priority became the budget crisis, triggered by the combination of dwindling oil production and inordinate public spending, notably on diesel and propane subsidies.⁴⁷ A blueprint on subsidy elimination had been assembled in mid-2007, prompting considerable anxiety.⁴⁸ The timing and scope of the decision to move forward in early May 2008 generated considerable resentment; it could not have been taken lightly.

Lifting subsidies had the greatest impact on the regime's historical support bases: peasants, blue collar workers, civil servants (including security apparatus employees, generally poorly paid) and members of minority groups living in remote parts of the country. They traditionally had relied on subsidised oil products for heating, cooking and transport; some basic staples such as bread – which is baked in propane-fuelled ovens – also were affected. While the regime eventually took measures to soften the blow, a form of panic initially ensued. Security officials appeared bewildered, struggling both to cope with the effects of rising costs on their own standard of living and to contain risks of civil disorder.⁴⁹ Although no serious strife resulted, popular discontent was palpable.⁵⁰

Any move toward liberalising the economy also threatened a small, but powerful business group, politically well connected and which for decades has led resistance to change. Factory owners, for whom energy subsidies and political cronyism often made up for under-investment and uncompetitive products, were hit hard. The widespread smuggling trade, whose networks extended deep

into power circles, also was affected.⁵¹ A senior official claimed the effort was targeted, in part, at inefficient businessmen and corrupt officials:

We looked at the situation of a poor family. We found we could provide it with 1,000 litres of subsidised diesel and sell the rest at market price. In contrast, more generalised subsidies, on the one hand, benefited wealthy industrialists and merchants who didn't need them and, on the other hand, nurtured corruption. This was leading to an increasingly deep chasm between profiteers and people. Our policy aims at closing that gap.⁵²

Citing ideological reasons, but likely also motivated by self-interest, Baath party officials balked at free-market reforms that threatened them.⁵³ Detractors within policy-making circles argued that the time was not ripe for opening a domestic front at a period of tension on the external one. An official complained:

We cannot afford to simultaneously fight internationally and domestically. We have no guarantee that things will improve in Lebanon, Palestine, Iran or Iraq or that U.S. policy will soon change. And yet, some are pushing ahead with liberalisation, providing all kinds of fantastic figures to make their case. To cushion the hardships, I fear we will draw down on our strategic currency reserves. It will take two or three years to expend them and then what? We will be exposed and vulnerable to outside pressure. This policy cannot be reversed, but at a minimum the pace of liberalisation should be slowed down.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ See *al-Safir*, 4 April 2008. A Syrian economist explained: "On the economic front, I feel we are heading toward a crunch – if not in 2008 then in 2009. Lifting or redirecting oil subsidies has become a key issue. We hardly export any oil any more, so we don't benefit from the rise in prices. Our oil imports are increasing; the diesel bill is huge. And we suffer from massive haemorrhaging through smuggling of subsidised oil. We should have removed subsidies progressively and built refineries in due time. There's been talk about both for the past twenty years. The absence of decision-making definitely is a major problem. Action on gas development was repeatedly delayed since the mid-80s". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, November 2007.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Failed Responsibility*, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2008.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group observations, May 2008. There were reports of spontaneous demonstrations against the measures; if true, it would be a rare and significant event in Syria. See *al-Hayat*, 6 May 2008.

⁵¹ Many had virtually ruled out such a step. An analyst said, "any solution to what ails our economy requires something we lack – an effective state apparatus capable of implementing it. The issue of oil is a case in point. A powerful mafia is involved in systematic smuggling. It has no interest whatsoever in any mechanisms that might curb its activities". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008. A subsequent presidential decree ordered six to twelve year jail sentences for involvement in the smuggling of subsidised products. *Al-Thawra*, 5 August 2008.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008.

⁵³ Before the measures were implemented, the Party command expressed growing concern about the social tensions a steep cost of living increase would engender. See *al-Baath*, 28 February 2008.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008. A senior official went so far as to intimate that Bashar was being deliberately misled in order to weaken the regime. "I am concerned about domestic strife and have opposed these policies in our internal meetings. Popular criticism is growing. A Farmers Union representative told me, 'well, rather than strangle me slowly, why don't you hang me once and for all?' Factories are closing down. These policies don't serve the country's

Disagreements notwithstanding, the momentum kept up. Other decisions followed. These included tougher legislation on public graft, an antitrust law, import liberalisation, plans to introduce a value added tax and final arrangements to establish a stock exchange. The series of steps suggested that the balance of power had tilted toward advocates of more proactive measures and away from those favouring a defensive domestic posture in the face of foreign threats.

This willingness to take risks despite the international environment appeared an indication of the depth of the economic predicament. Traditionally, the regime had tended to downplay economic affairs, displaying little interest, understanding or urgency, dealing with them reactively, cautiously and only when absolutely necessary.⁵⁵ By mid-2008, in contrast, they were at the forefront despite the vast array of other strategic challenges. Indeed, Syria's conciliatory stance at the Arab summit arguably reflected, to some extent, the desire to create a regional climate more appropriate for internal reform. In the run-up to the summit, an analyst posited: "We are experiencing tremendous economic tensions which are generating anxiety and debate within the regime. The impending crisis gives the regime a strong incentive to alter its regional strategy".⁵⁶

The level of risk-taking involved⁵⁷ and exposure to domestic criticism and disaffection within the elite helped

interests. They are a mistake, if not worse. I wouldn't exclude treason and sabotage. Why should we think that nobody here could be bought when that happens everywhere else? We've reached the point where these policies no longer can be reversed. I believe this is by design". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008. Responding to this point, an official said, "our reserves are not being depleted. Our decisions undoubtedly were poorly communicated, but the current effort is unavoidable and will proceed. These decisions are taken at the highest level, where consequences are well understood". Crisis Group interview, official at Syrian presidency, Damascus, May 2008.

⁵⁵ "As a rule, on the economic front, the regime tends to advance only when faced with a crisis. This is why I often say 'please don't discover more oil!' Successive discoveries have fuelled decades of inertia". Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, November 2007.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

⁵⁷ A Turkish official with close knowledge of Syrian affairs, said, "we are concerned about the rapid changes in Syria, which could spin out of control. Perhaps the worst thing would be for Syria to try to stop this dynamic, but the system is being challenged in unprecedented ways, and we hope it won't break. Syrian officials put on a good face, but they clearly are concerned. In Turkey, we went through the same transition, but we were far better prepared as we had a strong economic base and enjoyed international support – both of which Syria lacks". Crisis Group interview, May 2008.

turn this episode into a test of Assad's leadership. In the eyes of many, he had remained in his father's shadow, hesitant to take decisions, inclined both to rule by consensus and defer to the most powerful trends within the regime. His decision to push the reform agenda began to change perceptions; domestic and foreign observers saw signs of newfound resolve.⁵⁸

C. TURKISH-MEDIATED TALKS

By early 2008, Assad's calls to resume negotiations with Israel had become routine to the point of generating little interest. In Jerusalem and most Western capitals, they were viewed as part of an effort to deflect growing international pressure arising out of Syrian policy toward Lebanon and, to a lesser degree, Iraq.⁵⁹

There were grounds for such scepticism. Peace talks – and, often mere talk of peace – long have helped Damascus gain international legitimacy and improve ties to the U.S. in particular.⁶⁰ They also have contributed to regulating relations with Israel, with indirect channels of communication falling short of negotiations enshrining a state of neither war nor peace.⁶¹ In the background is strong suspicion that the regime displays ostensible determination to recover the Golan (as it wishes to show its public a desire to regain land that it lost) even as it possesses little interest in doing so (given the value of its anti-Israeli rhetoric as a source of legitimacy). Further fuelling the sense of doubt are Damascus's close ties to

⁵⁸ A French official said, "Bashar pushed ahead against the advice of the Party, the security apparatus and many within the business community. That's when we began to see him as a more credible interlocutor". Crisis Group interview, January 2009.

⁵⁹ Bashar Assad called for a resumption of peace negotiations with Israel as early as December 2003 in a 1 December 2003 interview with *The New York Times*. See also Crisis Group Report, *Foreign Policy Challenges*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

⁶⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit.

⁶¹ In early 2008, a Syrian official noted: "signals are exchanged all the time with Israel via third parties, especially when tensions mount and must be managed". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008. In April 2007, Bashar said, "there are innumerable contacts being made. Every month we make contacts of this kind. Secret contacts are possible, but we do not accept secret negotiations. Negotiations must be in the public domain. Some of these mediators hear the Syrian standpoint and brief Israel on it and do not come back, while others return. Until this moment, no one has returned with a serious or tangible thing. When a mediator comes back with something serious or significant, we will announce it immediately. The Syrian position does not waive any inch of land, and there will be no negotiations before Israel recognises the full return of the Golan Heights". *Al-Hayat*, 17 April 2007.

Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas and the strategic and material costs it would incur by breaking with them.⁶²

Thus, when discreet Turkish shuttling between Damascus and Jerusalem – reportedly initiated in the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon war⁶³ – led to the 21 May 2008 announcement of indirect talks, the news was met with varying shades of cynicism. In Syria, disbelief about Israel's intentions permeated the general public and political elite,⁶⁴ amid relief that renewed talks at a minimum would make it harder for the U.S. and others to increase pressure and make it easier for some Europeans to re-engage.⁶⁵ In Washington, these very same factors caused unease and fear, as the administration worried that the indirect talks would precipitate a breakdown in efforts to isolate Damascus.⁶⁶ This view was echoed in several Arab capitals and among dissenting Israelis.⁶⁷

In the end, events may have vindicated all sides' predictions. Syria was able to use the talks to break out of its isolation, while they delivered no apparent result. Israeli frustration at Syria's perceived inflexibility was matched by Syria's conviction that Jerusalem was prevaricating,

for domestic political reasons. As discussions approached a possible turning point – a prelude to direct talks – Israel's war in Gaza and the election of a new prime minister put the process on indefinite hold.

Still, several achievements are worthy of note and could be exploited in the future. Syria might principally have seen tactical value in the process,⁶⁸ yet the progression of discussions in a relatively structured, methodical way made them far more substantive than many had anticipated.⁶⁹ In five rounds of Turkish-mediated talks, the two sides confronted their versions of past negotiations, resulting in a surprising degree of consensus.⁷⁰ Both

⁶² See Crisis Group Report, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, op. cit.

⁶³ According to a well-connected Turkish journalist, Israel's prime minister first expressed interest in Ankara's mediation during a meeting with his Turkish counterpart in February 2007. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, May 2008. Initial Turkish efforts began in early 2004. See Crisis Group Report, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁶⁴ In the words of a parliament member, "were the Israelis amenable to peace, they would have jumped at the opportunity provided by the 2002 Beirut declaration regarding the Arab Peace Initiative. It was an unprecedented offer. But the Israelis simply do not want peace". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008.

⁶⁵ A local journalist said, "the average Syrian was satisfied, because the immediate pressure came off, not because of prospects for peace with Israel in which he does not believe, whether he likes the idea or not". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008. For France's reactions, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Lessons from the French Experience*, op. cit. At a time of economic stress, many Syrians felt that peace talks would help allay the country's woes. See Nawara Mahfoud and Robert Worth, "Syrians see an economic side to peace", *International Herald Tribune*, 29 July 2008.

⁶⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

⁶⁷ A senior Egyptian official said, "Israeli-Syrian talks will produce nothing good. Most important for Syria is not the Golan but Lebanon, where it hopes to strengthen its position". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2008. A senior Israeli political leader who disagreed with his government's approach commented: "I don't see Bashar breaking with Iran; the two countries are too intertwined. He is playing games in order to get rid of the Hariri investigation". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, June 2008.

⁶⁸ An analyst said, "I don't think Syrian officials are thinking very far ahead at this stage. What they're interested in now is the process. But the Israelis also are only interested in the process. And that's true too of the Turks as well. But what is the harm?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008. A senior Israeli official concurred: "The Syria talks are preliminary contacts which all are engaged in for their own reasons. Ultimately we will need U.S. mediation for it to work". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, June 2008.

⁶⁹ As far as can be ascertained, the first round of talks focused on methodology and "reconsidering the legacy – ie, what had been done in previous years". At the second, documents pertaining to previous negotiations were exchanged, and the Syrians presented their definition of the 4 June 1967 line (ie, the confrontation line between Israel and Syria on the day before the outbreak of the June 1967 war or, as Syrians put it, the point past which Israelis would not venture without risk of being shot). To this end, Syria put forward three geographical points – "one in the north, one in the middle and one in the south". It reportedly presented three more points at the third session, which also saw "substantive discussions" on wider issues. At the fourth round, the Israeli delegation was expected to react to the six points; based on the answer, Syria was due to provide answers to a number of questions related to its strategic posture in the event of a peace deal. The process was interrupted as a result of domestic legal proceedings brought against the Israeli prime minister. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials privy to the talks, July 2008-January 2009. A fifth round of sorts occurred just days prior to the Gaza attack, on the occasion of Olmert's 23 December visit to Ankara. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan mediated between his guest and, via telephone, President Assad in Damascus. According to a high-level Syrian source, "Olmert in essence said 'we are ready to discuss these points'. Our position was that he had to accept, not agree to discuss them". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009. Erdoğan nevertheless maintained that the parties were only days away from reaching an understanding that would have enabled them to move on to direct negotiations. See his interview in *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2009. A senior Turkish official involved in the talks confirmed this, expressing considerable frustration. Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2009. See also *Haaretz*, 13 February 2009.

⁷⁰ We reviewed a key document adopted in 1995 by the two chiefs of staff at Wye plantation. The Israeli and Syrian ver-

were forced to clarify their posture and positions. Syria provided six points on a map that aimed at clarifying its definition of the 1967 line; in turn, Israel was asked to formulate more precisely than in the past its commitment to a withdrawal to that line.⁷¹ Those six points – which Israel has not accepted – could serve as a useful platform for future discussions. Equally significant, Damascus vowed to clarify its strategic posture in the region.⁷²

If and when the process resumes, these dual undertakings could constitute a valuable starting point. On the one hand, it will be more difficult for Israel to walk back its positions on the scope of withdrawal, certainly if Turkish mediation is involved. In the words of a Turkish official, “the Syrians now want Netanyahu to resume the talks where they broke off. This is asking for more than a mere reconfirmation of [the late] Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s commitment to withdraw to the 1967 line. The Turkish process entailed checking whether Israel was actually talking about the same line as Syria was”.⁷³ On the other hand, Syria too will face constraints. Given how much it has invested in its relationship with Ankara, Damascus would find it difficult to

sions turned out to be nearly identical”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, January 2009.

⁷¹ One official explained: “In Turkey we started from the effort to define the line because the other issues had largely been settled”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, September 2009. In an interview, Assad said, “we defined a number of points on Lake Tiberias, a number of points on the Jordan River, and a number of points in the north and we asked Israel to prove its seriousness by agreeing on these points. They agreed in principle but ... demanded a formulation that would present a kind of ambiguity and foginess, an ambiguity in the sense that these points would be discussed”. *Al-Safir*, 25 March 2009. One mid-level official implicitly suggested that, with regard to the most contentious area – the northeast quadrant of Lake Kinneret/Tiberias – Syria would defer to Ankara’s suggestion to focus on where the line was on the ground rather than on where it was in relation to the water: “The Turks told us to stop focusing on the water line and more on where the ’67 line was; they argued that water has receded and tomorrow could expand, so our former approach does not work”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, September 2008. Because the lake has receded as a result of lack of rainfall, this arguably could make a difference; that said, recent studies suggest that the water did not recede much if at all in that area, because of the steep slope involved. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, November 2009.

⁷² According to the version provided by Syria, “in response to the six points we presented to define the line, Israel raised five or six questions with respect to regional security. We pledged to provide our answers to Ankara once they had deposited their own with the Turks. They never did”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, June 2009.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, June 2009.

evade a serious process managed by Turkey – indeed, arguably more difficult than when it was under U.S. sponsorship.⁷⁴ Damascus also has vowed to address broader regional issues were Israel to clarify its territorial stance.⁷⁵

The Turkish process also shed some light on how Bashar al-Assad intends to deal with his public opinion. After seeking to mobilise popular support for the “resistance”, the regime sought to engender acceptance of negotiations. It did so cautiously. It accepted indirect talks only, arguing these were both easier to sell domestically and less costly in the event of failure.⁷⁶ It also insisted on publicising the talks – a preference motivated not only by the desire to register diplomatic gains, but also to better manage and control internal communications. A senior official explained: “When the Turks offered to mediate, the president welcomed their initiative but insisted on being transparent. He announced it publicly, so as not to pay the price for future leaks”.⁷⁷ It is tempting to dismiss

⁷⁴ A senior Turkish official contended that Syria’s relationship with Turkey in particular was too valuable for Assad to risk offending the talks’ hosts through reckless behaviour: “The Syrians are serious; Bashar basically owes too much to Erdoğan to afford to be playing games”. Crisis Group interview, June 2008. An Israeli official remarked: “Those in Israel who really seek peace with Syria should do so through Turkey. The Turkish relationship is the most important one Syria has and therefore Turkey (a) would be the source of the most effective pressure and (b) offers the greatest chance for implementation since Syria wouldn’t want to alienate Ankara”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, October 2009.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, June 2009.

⁷⁶ A senior official argued: “Syria has a certain style of negotiation, and there are no niceties to be expected. In the 1990s we never shook hands, even between two delegations that warmed to each other one way or another. We see such gestures as a slippery slope. That is the Israeli style, precisely. Changing our own style would be immediately detected and misunderstood by our public opinion”. Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, March 2008. By the same token, the absence of such gestures has had a lasting and negative effect on Israeli public opinion. Crisis Group Report, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008. Bashar announced his approval of the mediation efforts launched by an unspecified third party and clarified his parameters at his 17 July 2007 inaugural speech to parliament. “People have been accusing us of holding secret talks with Israel. When the president went to Turkey, he told the Turks that they could pursue their efforts if they wanted, but that Syria didn’t believe real talks could be achieved. We reached this conclusion based on the Israeli government’s weakness and the existence of a U.S. veto. Also, the backdrop is one of Israeli military build-up, with threats made against us every day, through manoeuvres or other hostile action. [Israeli Minister of Defence Ehud] Barak was talking about peace just hours before he launched the [September 2007] attack on our territory [at the location

the process as one the regime could freely prolong, manipulate or bring to an end. Had direct talks begun, Syria certainly had means at its disposal to obstruct or slow things if it felt it necessary.⁷⁸ Still, seen from Damascus, the regime was taking a risk and politically exposing itself. As talks were under way, a central policy-maker observed:

Some people here were surprised by what we did in the past several months. We want our people to know we are not giving up our principles, but engaging in action to restore our position on the political map, without making concessions regarding our rights. Our transparency is what earns us the people's trust. We kept them informed about the Turkish shuttling as early as July 2007, long before Israel announced them. Our people were prepared all along the way. If we jump to direct negotiations, the stakes are much higher. If they fail, it will reflect on Syria. The people will claim we were mistaken and misled all along. That is why everything must be well-prepared in advance. It is our [post Hafez al-Assad's leadership] first experience with the peace process in our public's eyes, and thus is an important test.⁷⁹

The indirect talks yielded other results. They somewhat altered official perception of Israeli calculations. Although scepticism about the Israeli political class's willingness to make the necessary compromises remained high (and was later reinforced by the talks' collapse), Damascus came to view other parts of the governing structure differently. A senior official said, "the military and intelligence apparatus seems to understand the need for peace. Since 2006, they realise they have reached the limits of what can be achieved purely through military force. This is a new factor, a source of constancy, regardless of what political coalition is in power".⁸⁰ Israel's

of an alleged nuclear facility in north-east Syria]". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

⁷⁸ In the words of a senior official, "moving on to direct negotiations doesn't mean letting things get out of control. Saying everything can be settled in three months is just a manner of speech. Talks could last a year or two. There is still much to discuss. And if the process had to be slowed down, we could always put on the table the issue of the 1.5 million Palestinian refugees residing in Syria". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2008.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, October 2008. In an interview, Bashar implied that the process could lead to more consequential negotiations. "We are realistic, and the Turks are realistic, and we know that this stage is delicate, and it is to lay down a base for direct negotiations. If that base is not sound, these will collapse". Al-Jazeera, 13 July 2008.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008. "The Israelis are a bit wiser as a result of the war in Lebanon. They know the

readiness to engage in a process, despite strong U.S. reservations, also was instructive. It challenged the traditional belief that Jerusalem merely followed Washington.⁸¹ Finally, the talks further confirmed that Syria enjoyed latitude vis-à-vis its allies when it came to dealing with Israel – although that likely was a function of their low level of concern. A Hizbollah official said:

I doubt a deal is in the making. First, Syria didn't drop us when it was under relentless pressure, threatened by war, sanctions and the international tribunal; today its position is far more sustainable. Why would it change postures now? Secondly, Syria remains the heart of Arabism: peace with Israel would be seen by the Syrian people as a betrayal. Thirdly, a pillar of the regime's legitimacy is its support for resistance movements. Besides, supposing Syria signed peace, we wouldn't be worse off than Hamas, which is under siege in a small strip of land, surrounded by Israel and a hostile Egypt. A large portion of the Lebanese people is behind us, and we have had all the time necessary to develop a high degree of sophistication.⁸²

A Hamas official argued: "Syria might be serious about reaching an agreement with Israel, but Israel is far less so. It is not prepared to pay the price. Besides, Syria needs its relations with Hamas and Hizbollah and will not be prepared to give them up. So I am not particularly worried".⁸³

D. THE LEBANESE CRISIS

Syria experienced the events that unfolded in Lebanon from 2004 onwards as an existential challenge. For decades, its core interests had been protected by a relatively well-oiled mechanism involving its heavy and internationally accepted military presence and political domination

risks and costs of war. We see a new way of thinking emerging, intent on avoiding a new confrontation on their northern border. The Israelis understand that talks can create a dynamic that would transform our relations with Iran, that could affect the issue of Hizbollah's weapons – in contrast to the Bush administration, which orders us to cut our ties with our strongest ally while demanding that Hizbollah disarm and capitulate. Israel's overture is not simply the result of a new strategic thinking; there are domestic and other considerations. But this new line of thinking helps. What is important is that the strategic thinking has evolved". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, May 2008.

⁸¹ "We now realise Israel may be the road to the U.S. rather than the other way round". Crisis Group interview, Syrian diplomat, Damascus, May 2008.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2008.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, October 2008.

and lubricated by Saudi financial largesse. In particular, Saudi money shored up Lebanon's economy, co-opted its Sunni community and facilitated networks of corruption linking important components of the Lebanese and Syrian elites. In the words of a Lebanese official, "prior to 2005, Lebanon operated as a Syrian-Saudi consortium. The Syrians exercised political hegemony, while Saudi money smoothed things out".⁸⁴

The Syrian-engineered September 2004 extension of President Lahoud's term, followed by the Hariri assassination, both during the tenure of a U.S. president determined to weaken and destabilise the Syrian regime, helped tear down that structure. Riyadh – particularly incensed at Hariri's murder – joined Paris and Washington in efforts to undermine Syria's influence over Lebanon.

Virtually every phase in the ensuing multi-party struggle was akin to a fight to redefine rules of the game: the nature of the Lebanese state's relations with Syria, shape of its political system, sectarian balance of power and status of Hizbollah's weapons among many others. The institutional crisis that erupted after Hizbollah quit the cabinet in 2006 spilled over into the streets. In early 2008, a Syrian official described the stakes:

So many critical issues are at play: Beirut's relations with Israel on one side and with Syria on the other; Hizbollah's weapons; Lebanon's ability to declare war and peace; the shape of the inter-Arab conflict; the future of Palestinian refugees and more. The confrontation is about clarity on all these issues far more than the precise allocation of ministries.⁸⁵

In Damascus, the feeling was widespread within regime circles that its foes would stop at nothing short of Syria's capitulation; as a result, any compromise was viewed as a risky step on a potential slippery slope.⁸⁶ A senior official explained:

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Lebanese official, Beirut, April 2008. A Syrian official stressed that Saudi funding did more than facilitate Syria's role. It also provided Riyadh with considerable leverage. "Beginning in the 1980s, the Saudis began investing massively in Lebanon. Basically, while Syria was micromanaging Lebanese politics, handpicking every mayor in every village, the Saudis enjoyed the real financial power". Crisis Group interview, Syrian diplomat, May 2008.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2008.

⁸⁶ A Syrian diplomat said, "the issue is not just electing a president and forming a government. It has to be a package deal at different levels, with sufficient guarantees. What we want, and this is where there is absolute consensus between Syria and the Lebanese opposition, is to defend our core interests. We've turned a page on our heavy-handed presence of the past, but Lebanon remains our strategic soft belly, and

Lebanon is in the midst of critical changes. This means we have to be exceedingly cautious. Its existing political system, based on unwritten conventions, including the 1943 power-sharing agreement, is being challenged and transformed. The crisis could usher in new rules at the heart of the political system. For us to make a concession could lead to momentous and unpredictable results."⁸⁷

The crisis culminated in May 2008 with efforts by the Western-backed alliance to curb Hizbollah's military ability (by banning its highly sensitive telecommunications network) and the Shiite movement's violent response. Hizbollah turned its weapons inward and, in a massive show of force, took over large swathes of Beirut, while stopping short of toppling the government.⁸⁸

The ensuing Qatari mediation produced the so-called Doha accords, signed on 21 May – the same day Syrian-Israeli talks publicly were launched. Under the terms of the agreement, a consensus president was chosen and a national unity government formed, pending parliamentary elections to be organised on the basis of a new electoral law. Although the deal reflected core opposition demands (notably the ability to veto key government decisions by controlling more than a third of its

we cannot afford to let it become an instrument in enemy hands. The risks are too great and the stakes too high". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008. In a senior official's view, "the U.S. and others want an absolute victory in Lebanon. This is not about finding a solution with which everyone can live or about preserving all sides' core interests. The Lebanese majority has an ambitious, all-or-nothing agenda". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Baath official, Damascus, January 2008. Some analysts concluded that Syria could live with a stalemate. "When Lahoud left office, the government immediately sought to pass hundreds of decrees that would have led to a complete upheaval of the political system. There is a need to postpone contentious issues. The solution at present can only be based on the following: no winner, no loser, no finishing the job and no reversing it". Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst, Aleppo, March 2008.

⁸⁸ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°20, *Lebanon at a Tipping Point*, 21 December 2006; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008. As events unfolded, a Syrian official said, "we have a new balance of power in Lebanon, which must be reflected politically. The other side started this dangerous game, and they will pay for it. Still, the opposition has showed that it didn't seek to control the country and defeat the majority. It has shown that it was seeking a compromise solution in which its arms would be protected". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008.

members), Damascus earned praise for not obstructing it. France promptly normalised ties with Syria.⁸⁹ The U.S., far less enthusiastic, barely softened its policies.⁹⁰

In reality, to attribute to Syria a role in the Doha breakthrough is somewhat odd. The agreement incorporated much if not all of what Damascus and its allies had demanded; Hizbollah's Beirut takeover, by highlighting the internal balance of power, was what changed the situation.⁹¹ In a sense, Syria benefited both from a perceptions shift among some world actors who had been eager to normalise relations in the first place and from the somewhat stereotypical impressions of the regime that previously held sway.⁹²

⁸⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Lessons from the French Experience*, op. cit., pp. 11-13.

⁹⁰ Immediately after Doha, a White House official said, "there is an internal debate but, frankly, I don't predict a real change. What are the costs of our current posture? There won't be an Israeli-Syrian breakthrough, so we can sit back, wait and pass the baton to the next administration. Although some still are hoping to escalate pressure, that too seems like a lost cause. We won't have international support, especially after the combination of Doha and announcement of Israeli-Syrian talks. The Europeans simply will not be with us". Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2008. See also Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

⁹¹ Bashar al-Assad reportedly said at a 4 June 2008 meeting in Dubai: "The solution in Qatar reached a dead end after a few days. Then Syria was contacted to suggest ideas for an alternative solution. The ideas we provided were the exact same ideas we provided the French last year when they were mediating". <http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=735>. On the eve of Hizbollah's takeover, a Syrian official laid out his country's positions: "The general feeling among the leadership is that a military return to Lebanon is out of the question. We are willing and ready to open diplomatic relations as soon as circumstances permit. We agree to demarcate the border, as long as the efforts proceed from north to south [in other words, postponing the more controversial areas]. We will engage with all sides regardless of past disputes. But with this government, whose main objective is to antagonise Syria, we just can't do it. We need a government that displays a modicum of respect and goodwill. We don't want a pro-Syrian government, which we control. We want a government we can deal with". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

⁹² In the run-up to Doha, an important Lebanese political leader and member of the March 14 coalition gave voice to prevailing conceptions about the Syrian regime: "No deal will ever be possible. This is a regime that thrives on confrontation, with us, the U.S., Israel, etc. If it solves its problems, it loses its justifications for remaining in place. I have watched them for 30 years, and I know. Also they are dependent on Iran and Hizbollah. They could easily have reached a deal but have turned down every offer. Finally, they will stop at nothing less than hegemony over Lebanon. Even if they were given the Golan, guarantees on the tribunal and a non-

With victory essentially in hand, the regime adopted a more low-key, less boastful profile than many had either expected or feared.⁹³ More importantly, it took long-overdue steps to normalise relations with Beirut, establishing diplomatic relations and opening an embassy. In Syria, the decision – at least symbolically a radical break with the past – surprised many officials, analysts and ordinary citizens alike. An official working at the palace acknowledged: "It's a very confusing period for me".⁹⁴ For many Syrians, the two countries remain inseparably tied by family and cultural bonds, with deep historical roots; as they see it, establishing diplomatic relations meant acquiescing to unnatural and unjust borders dictated by colonial powers.⁹⁵ Other, less sentimental arguments also were aired. Prior to the announcement – which he clearly doubted would be made – a mid-level official remarked:

It would be ill advised to let our Lebanese foes achieve anything as a result of their conspiracies. Nor can we allow the U.S., the French or others to set a precedent by interfering in the way we define our relations with our neighbour; that they demand we open an embassy is reason enough not to do so.⁹⁶

hostile Lebanese government, that wouldn't be enough". Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2008.

⁹³ Certainly, the private mood among the elite was quite self-congratulatory. A prominent businessman said, "there is a sense of triumph here. The tables turned as the Saudi ambassador in Beirut [viewed in Damascus as a leader of the anti-Syrian effort] basically ran for cover during Hizbollah's takeover. There is widespread belief among officials that they have been vindicated, in Lebanon, in Iraq and elsewhere, and that the U.S. sooner or later will realise it has no choice but to engage". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008. Ordinary citizens expressed similar feelings. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, June and July 2008. An official said, "on Lebanon, things have changed dramatically, whether March 14 believes it or not. We reached a point of no return. President Assad made decisions we never before had been willing to make". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009. "Hafez Assad had raised the idea of an embassy, and his son did so again in 2005. None of their predecessors had even acquiesced in Lebanon's existence. In the 1950s, the two countries were still so intermingled they shared a single central bank". Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, June 2009.

⁹⁵ After the Ottoman empire's demise, France progressively carved up Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) by surrendering Palestine to Britain, handing Alexandretta over to Turkey, forming a number of ethno-sectarian statelets (in the Christian-dominated Lebanon, the Alawite region and the Druze mountain) and splitting Damascus from Aleppo.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2008.

Even after Bashar announced his decision, cynicism persisted in the U.S. and among some Lebanese.⁹⁷ Not a few March 14 members in Lebanon – including some who had called for the establishment of normal relations and an exchange of embassies – downplayed the move, saying it was a ploy to gain time or, alternatively, a bridgehead for reestablishing Syrian hegemony.

The scepticism was understandable, given Syria's heavy legacy and the ambassador's modest role. It was, in a sense, the least Damascus could do in light of years of political domination that went hand in hand with repression and economic pilfering; these policies, far more than any outside interference, were at the root of the profound crisis between the Lebanese and Syrian people. Moreover, Syria dragged its feet, delaying the actual ambassadorial appointment.⁹⁸ Likewise, it set clear boundaries regarding how far it was prepared to go at this stage. There is much it still has not done: fully demarcate the border,⁹⁹ rescind bilateral structures that pre-existed dip-

lomatic relations, notably the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council;¹⁰⁰ review past treaties;¹⁰¹ and provide substantial information on the fate of Lebanese whom Syria purportedly “disappeared” during the civil war.¹⁰²

Still, for all its limitations, the move must be seen as breaking an age-old taboo. If properly built upon, it could prompt more significant progress in Syrian-Lebanese relations.

There were other signs. In a March 2009 interview with the Lebanese daily *al-Safir*, Assad candidly discussed Syrian “errors” in Lebanon. Asked whether Damascus had lost Lebanon in a fight with the West, he acknowledged the loss and said it should be attributed to Syria's failure to make the necessary adjustments in bilateral ties after the end of the civil war.

No, we did not lose Lebanon because of an extension [of President Lahoud's mandate] or because of Resolution 1559 [demanding Syria's military withdrawal]. We lost Lebanon because of the mistakes made in the drafting of the relationship with Lebanon, especially after 1990. Before 1990 there was a civil war. The situation was different. But after 1990, I believe we were late in taking some steps, especially after 1998, when the building of the army was completed, and General Emile Lahoud moved from the army

⁹⁷ This was true of some Syrian officials as well. A mid-level official said, “let's see it as a process that will make room for considerable flexibility. Syria probably will delay things up to the [June 2009 Lebanese parliamentary] elections, hoping its allies will come out on top. At present, our announcement provides us with leverage in negotiations on the formation of a government and its ministerial statement. For my part, I have yet to understand what the need for an ambassador is anyway”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008.

⁹⁸ A presidential adviser remarked: “The president will send an ambassador when he decides to, so as not to give the impression he is responding to foreign demands. Also, he will wait for an appropriate climate in the region”. Crisis Group interview, adviser to President Assad, Damascus, February 2009. The nomination was announced on 24 March 2009. The ambassador is Ali Abdul Karim, former head of Syria's news agency. This is in line with other nominations of former media officials or party members whose autonomy as ambassador in fact is quite limited, given the regime's preference to manage all important business directly from the capital. Exceptions include some Arab states, where Syria is represented by figures belonging to the inner power circles, as well as London and Washington, where Syrian ambassadors enjoy close ties to the president and comparatively greater room for manoeuvre.

⁹⁹ In an August 2008 summit with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, Bashar agreed in principle to demarcate the border. Although Lebanon named its members to the joint committee and expressed readiness to start discussions, Damascus argued that its experts were unavailable due to the demarcation process engaged in earlier with Jordan. A U.S. official commented: “The Syrians have a track record of renegeing on agreements. Take Sarkozy's visit [to Damascus in September 2008]. It was premised on two tangible commitments. One, opening an embassy in Beirut; ultimately, they did it when they felt like it. The other was demarcating the border. They haven't started yet, claiming their experts are unavailable, too busy demarcating the border with Jordan”. Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Syria's position was expressed from the outset by Foreign Minister Muallim in an interview with *al-Manar*, 21 July 2008. Meetings on border issues, for instance, are conducted through an obsolete bilateral committee. See *al-Manar*, 20 August 2009. The Syrian ambassador in Beirut reputedly is frequently absent, as is his Lebanese counterpart in Damascus.

¹⁰¹ Although reviewing such treaties would involve difficult and protracted negotiations, to date no mechanism has been established to identify contentious issues.

¹⁰² Summary executions and arbitrary detentions were routine during the civil war; Syria aside, they also were perpetrated by several of Lebanon's current leaders. The issue was formally discussed by Presidents Suleiman and Assad in August 2008. Since then, Syria reportedly has provided information chiefly concerning non-political cases. In June 2009 a Syrian official claimed 23 prisoners, including eight “disappeared”, were handed over to Lebanon. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009. According to a human rights activist based in Beirut, Syria to date has not provided information on, liberated or handed over the remains of Lebanese “disappeared,” with the exception of Abdel Naser Masri, a soldier sentenced in Syria for attacking Syrian troops in the North. Crisis Group email communication, December 2009. In a move guaranteed to stir emotions in Lebanon, Damascus issued demands pertaining to its own “disappeared” in Lebanon – soldiers killed during Syria's military presence and workers fallen victim to anti-Syrian sentiment following Hariri's assassination. During Suleiman's visit, a sit-in of families of victims was orchestrated in front of the interior ministry. See *al-Watan*, 12 August 2008.

command to the presidency. Here the mistakes began to accumulate, and their repercussions began to appear on a bigger scale.¹⁰³

The self-criticism would appear to reflect both the evolution in bilateral ties and Syria's greater confidence in its ability to manage relations in the absence of a direct military presence. The prior hegemonic posture had its clear costs;¹⁰⁴ by the same token, Syria's allies performed well after the withdrawal, despite a powerful alliance of foes – a multiconfessional Lebanese coalition; the U.S.; Saudi Arabia and Egypt; France and other members of the international community. The Doha agreement likely helped persuade the regime it could defend core interests via a more political approach.¹⁰⁵ Subsequent events underscored that it need not immerse itself in Lebanese political details; that kind of micro-management necessitates the knowledge and leverage accessible to Syria only when it enjoyed a massive presence on the ground.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Al-Safir*, 25 March 2009. In 1998, Bashar (then his father's heir-apparent) reportedly was in charge of the Lebanese file, giving the self-criticism even greater resonance.

¹⁰⁴ Beyond international criticism due to its military presence, Syrians point to the fact that thriving corruption networks contributed to the regime's eventual loss of control. "In a sense, we are cured of Lebanon. Lebanon corrupted parts of our leadership and endangered the system. Corruption levels have declined due to our withdrawal. More importantly, we realise we don't need Lebanon as much as we thought". Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst, Damascus, September 2008. Some officials say that a triangular alliance existed between Saudi Arabia, senior Sunni Syrian officials (notably former Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the former chief of staff, Hikmat Shihabi, and the former head of Syria's intelligence apparatus in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan) and Rafiq Hariri, that it escaped regime control and that it increasingly became a liability. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, May 2008.

¹⁰⁵ An official said, "at the time of Hariri's killing, we saw the emergence of a powerful front against us. Now, although Syria has no military presence in Lebanon, it continues to enjoy deep social, economic and political ties. These provide us with the influence we need". Crisis Group, Damascus, January 2009. As Syrians see it, Lebanon also must rely on Syria for economic reasons. "Lebanon no longer can hope to become the Middle East's Switzerland insofar as the Gulf is the region's real banking and service sector hub. It must re-define its role and find its added value. And it must do so in partnership with Syria, which holds the keys to port activities, transit trade, cheap labour, etc". Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst, Damascus, January 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Bashar said, "today the political map is different from what it was when we were in Lebanon, and if we did want to interfere in the details, we will not have the same ability to do so. ... Those Lebanese details require a daily presence and contacts every day and every hour. We now see the broad lines in Lebanon, but we cannot see the same details. ... The tendencies behind the names have changed. The alliances have changed in their minute details. We cannot understand them,

Instead, it could operate from a longer distance, remaining a key actor by swapping its role as a hegemon – whose influence inevitably would be fought – for the image of an interested third party, whose intercession arguably increasingly would be sought.

In the run-up to the May 2009 parliamentary elections, Damascus thus refrained from visible interference and made clear its requirements for accepting the outcome.¹⁰⁷ At the announcement of the results, it conceded its allies' defeat, restated the need for a national unity government and ostensibly remained on the sidelines as local actors negotiated over the formation of a new government.

E. IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH IRAQ

By 2008, relations with Iraq appeared to have turned a corner. After a period during which Syria's priority was to support resistance to the U.S. occupation, its threat perception gradually shifted to anxiety about an unstable and conflict-ridden neighbour.¹⁰⁸ In September 2008, capping a series of high-profile meetings (which began with the foreign minister's November 2006 visit to Baghdad), Syria appointed its first ambassador to Iraq in decades – a departure from both its own history of hostile bilateral relations and much of the Arab world's coolness toward the post-2003 Shiite-dominated government.¹⁰⁹

For Damascus, the implicit quid pro quo for diplomatic engagement was stronger commercial ties. Economic talks focused on possible transit trade using Syrian ports, reopening the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline, connecting the Akkaz gas field in western Iraq to Syrian refinery facilities, creating border area free-trade zones and integrating

and we are not compelled to do so. We no longer have the same interest in this". *Al-Safir*, 25 March 2009. As intensive Western and Arab mediation efforts were underway to broker a compromise government, a Syrian official quipped: "I can't tell how glad I am that others have taken over this task. When we were doing it, we had to start cooking a year ahead of the least significant election within the smallest village; just imagine what it takes to form a government". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2007. "Even when we had 45,000 troops on the ground, we faced many difficulties before each and every election. It took months to arrange things. Now it is even more complicated. At every step of the French mediation we had to call our Lebanese friends, let them think the proposition over and get back to us". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, April 2008.

¹⁰⁷ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°87, *Lebanon's Elections: Avoiding a New Cycle of Confrontation*, 4 June 2009, p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Failed Responsibility*, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁹ Syria preceded Egypt – whose ambassador only arrived in November 2009 – and Saudi Arabia, which has yet to appoint one.

the two nations' railroad networks.¹¹⁰ Technical delegations, preparatory committees and memorandums of understanding were designed to lay the groundwork for future relations, a process that culminated with Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri's April 2009 visit to Baghdad.

On Syria's clouded economic horizon, Iraq offers a potentially significant ray of hope. It could export its oil products through Syria, which could also become an important overland transit point for Iraq-bound products, notably European; and its relatively cheap, low-quality products could find a suitable market in its eastern neighbour.¹¹¹ All of which might help Damascus cope with its impending energy crisis while reviving its dwindling port activity. Perhaps more critically, by boosting an ailing economy, such activities could provide the regime the breathing room necessary to manage its reform process at a suitable pace and give Syria's business community – long accustomed to an insular, oligarchic environment – the opportunity to adjust to a competitive, albeit accessible market.

Security relations have been far more ambiguous and controversial. By late 2007 to early 2008, several U.S. officials, including then commander of U.S. forces in Iraq General David Petraeus, acknowledged Syria's role in the significant decline in cross-border militant smuggling.¹¹² But the relative commendation soon gave way to intensified accusations.¹¹³ During his senatorial confirmation hearings to become head of U.S. Central Com-

mand, Petraeus offered a harsh assessment.¹¹⁴ By mid-2008, U.S. and UK diplomats were claiming to possess evidence of active Syrian military intelligence support to the al-Qaeda in Iraq organisation.¹¹⁵ In October, the U.S. – reportedly frustrated by Syrian inaction – raided a suspected site on Syrian territory.¹¹⁶

Several factors might explain this negative trend. For Damascus, a pillar of a healthier relationship with its neighbour was to trade improved security for better economic opportunities. Turning a blind eye to some insurgency-related activity in this sense provides the regime with leverage as it waits for the promise of more fruitful economic ties to become reality.

Politically, too, Syria likely sees advantages in working with networks involved in letting insurgents slip into Iraq. It is a means of gaining intelligence, notably on al-Qaeda in Iraq, and thus enhancing its own security. More generally, ties to armed groups other than al-Qaeda could bolster Syria's influence, thereby giving it a more central role in a putative Iraqi national reconciliation process – and, eventually, in the country itself.¹¹⁷ Observers also have speculated on the existence of conflicting agendas within the regime, with different elements promoting different Iraq policies¹¹⁸ or corrupt officials simply pursuing their own.

¹¹⁰ See, eg. "Syria: Tying the Trade Knot with Baghdad", Oxford Business Report, 1 April 2008. According to Syrian figures, Iraq became Syria's main trading partner in 2008. "The Syria Report", 11 November 2009, www.syria-report.com/index/asp.

¹¹¹ A Turkish diplomat said, "Syrians see Iraq as the economic motor that could save their economy. Obviously you have Iraqi oil exports. You also have transit routes and trade. And the Iraqi market, which is relatively unsophisticated, is suitable for the quality of goods Syria can export, making it a very attractive prospect". Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Damascus, May 2008.

¹¹² "Foreign militants entering Iraq down 50 per cent". Reuters, 11 February 2008.

¹¹³ In the words of a senior U.S. military official, "Syria could do more to help. Key network leaders are coming through there". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, March 2008. An official echoed the view: "The decrease in the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq through Syrian borders has ended. The airport remains a major hub for militants transiting in Syria. We've seen no strong willingness to increase airport security". Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2008. "Some of our success against al-Qaeda in Iraq was due to efforts of outside countries, such as Libya, Saudi Arabia or Egypt in drying up its recruitment. I definitely wouldn't include Syria on that list". Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. military official, Washington, May 2008.

¹¹⁴ Petraeus said, "the Syrian government has taken inadequate measures to stem the flow of foreign fighters through Syria to join al Qaeda elements in Northern Iraq.... As with Iran, the challenge with Syria will be to find approaches that can convince Syrian leaders that they should be part of the solution in the region, rather than a continuing part of the problem". www.centcom.mil/images/multimedia/2008-05-22%2C%20senate%20armed%20services%20committee%20full%20transcript.pdf. See also <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2008/May/Petraeus%2005-22-08.pdf>.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, July 2008.

¹¹⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ A U.S. official said, "our main grievance vis-à-vis Syria is foreign fighters in Iraq. True, at some point we had reports of improvement, but that is gone. Syrian military intelligence seems to be allowing more fighters in. The question is: is it a Bashar double game, or is there a dual power, with military intelligence doing things he doesn't know or can't control?" Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, May 2008.

The renewed accusations coincided with heightened U.S. pressure on other Syria-related issues. As Washington opposed efforts to improve security cooperation with Damascus along the Iraqi border,¹¹⁹ Syrian annoyance mounted.¹²⁰ In this context, Syrian officials and some analysts dismiss the finger-pointing as deliberate and politically motivated overstatements;¹²¹ in contrast Americans saw Syria's purported assistance to the insurgency as lethal retaliation. Moreover, as the flow of militants crossing into Iraq decreased, the U.S.'s considerable intelligence capabilities were focused on fewer targets and produced more precise and reliable information on residual networks; under the circumstances, any Syrian transgression immediately would be spotted and highlighted, amplifying the administration's frustration.¹²²

By late 2008, the basic components of a possible Syrian-Iraqi breakthrough remained at best incomplete. Still, the path at least had been clarified, as had the nature and ultimate requirements for a workable deal. By the time Presi-

dent Obama took office, the challenge was clear: finding a pragmatic way to meet all sides' needs through more productive bilateral security talks, more effective Syrian security steps, greater Iraqi economic enticements to Damascus¹²³ and more constructive U.S. engagement with Syria.

¹¹⁹ In December 2007, Petraeus reportedly offered to visit Damascus to lay down U.S. concerns and initiate coordination efforts, but the White House turned down the suggestion. Even low-key, cross-border interaction between U.S. officers and their Syrian counterparts allegedly was affected. See <http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=849>. See also Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

¹²⁰ A senior Syrian official said, "on Iraq, we are extremely disappointed. The U.S. hasn't taken our efforts into consideration at all, with respect to borders or to Iraqi refugees. Instead, they continuously attack Syria. Of course, although we have made efforts, we haven't had 100 per cent results. But at a minimum, we expect recognition for those results we have produced". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2008.

¹²¹ Bush administration officials often offered inconsistent assessments of Syrian behaviour. In late 2007, a senior U.S. official privately told Crisis Group: "We may be seeing some changes: there is definitely a different trend on foreign fighters (though I believe it is mainly for their own reasons, because they realised the jihadis could present a threat to them), and this could be potentially welcome". Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2007. Around the same time, Assistant Secretary of State David Welch offered a highly negative account in Senate testimony. http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2007/WelchTestimony_071108p.pdf.

¹²² According to a well-informed British diplomat, "our knowledge has vastly improved. U.S. intelligence is far superior to what it was, and the amount of activity requiring surveillance has dramatically decreased. On the border, the number of groups that are operating is substantially down, to the point where taking out a specific ringleader actually can do much to solve the problem. That's one reason why Abu Ghadiya [the primary target of the U.S.'s October 2008 raid] simply was taken out. Also, the U.S. apparently had intelligence that he had orchestrated a cross border attack on a police outpost in al-Qaim, causing many casualties. This was just too provocative and enraged the Iraqis, who pressured the U.S. to act". Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

¹²³ A British official said, "there is deep resentment on both sides. The Syrians feel there has been no acknowledgment of their sacrifices with respect to the refugee crisis; they say Iraq's payback, in terms of access to markets or oil deals, is missing. For its part, the Iraqi government recalls Syria's rhetoric backing the insurgency and its continued harbouring of Baathist figures. Iraq has not been forthcoming concerning Syrian economic aspirations, nor has Syria been proactive in building political ties". Crisis Group interview, February 2009.

III. PRESIDENT ASSAD'S TRANSITION

The transition initiated in 2008 also involved the country's leadership. Bashar, who had inherited a system built by and moulded for his father, largely was perceived up to then as ruling by consensus over a fractured elite. Less powerful than his predecessor, less experienced too, he appeared constrained by an elaborate system of countervailing checks reflecting a complex balance within the regime's inner core, between its several power bases – the security services, army and party – and among its various social constituencies. At best, he was viewed as unsure and undecided, reluctant to challenge entrenched interests¹²⁴ or implement meaningful reforms.¹²⁵ At worst, he was described as a pawn in the hands of more powerful figures – notably from within his own family – operating behind the scenes.

The start appeared shaky. Internal dissent, outside pressure, regional instability and questionable moves regarding Iraq and Lebanon all played their part. Gradually, however, and reportedly buoyed by his early economic reforms¹²⁶ as well as the outcome of the 2006 Lebanon

war,¹²⁷ his self-confidence grew. By 2008, Assad was displaying greater decisiveness. This involved a measure of risk-taking, insofar as controversial decisions – and setbacks – clearly bore his imprint. Conversely, however, success bolstered his standing. According to an observer, “the president began by spending capital inherited from his father. Now he is using his own”.¹²⁸

Not all internal criticism came to an end. Anxiety generated by the global financial crisis fuelled scepticism regarding Syria's economic path.¹²⁹ Some argued that foreign policy achievements were haphazard and reversible, a result of fortunate circumstance or unwise concessions rather than savvy leadership.¹³⁰ Others, particularly among lower-ranking officials, questioned the regime's strategic direction¹³¹ and criticised the growing influence of outsiders recruited among Syrian exiles.¹³²

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, adviser to President Assad, Damascus, February 2009.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, prominent Syrian businessman, Damascus, June 2009. Making the case for his president, a senior official noted at the time: “Not everyone supports our current policy. Some in positions of power vehemently oppose it. They would prefer that we bolster our current position, deepen our traditional alliances and flex our muscles. But the president is ignoring them and forging ahead. He took tough decisions, such as indirect talks with Israel. Even his critics are discovering in hindsight that he was right”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, September 2008.

¹²⁹ “The many opponents of economic opening are invoking the global economic crisis to stall reforms”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, February 2009. One such critic observed: “The economic team has led the country into a trap. If their policy is maintained, there will be no alternative but to seek foreign loans. And the day you say ‘please’, you come under pressure”, Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2009.

¹³⁰ A businessman with close ties to the ruling elite claimed: “What we've seen is not a victory for Bashar. In Lebanon, the Americans got everything they wanted from Syria: military withdrawal, an end to hands-on interference, the exchange of embassies and greater respect for Lebanese sovereignty, a non-aligned president, an army developing ties with the U.S., etc. Of course, the elite understands it needs Bashar to preserve its collective power and interests. Still, he needs a real victory to prove his credentials. For now, he has little to show. Events just turned in his favour”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2009.

¹³¹ “Many people tell me they are disorientated by the regime's policies. They've lost their traditional landmarks. They wonder about the President's intentions and entourage. They sometimes refer to a ‘shadow government’ to make sense of decisions they fail to comprehend. State-employed journalists are in the dark. Baathists are deeply confused. Although Syria retains interests in Lebanon and Palestine, what of the Arab world beyond? Relations with Egypt have soured, and it hardly seems to matter. Forget about North Africa; it's another con-

¹²⁴ The “cliquish” behaviour of the president's entourage has been a target of criticism, even from within. A Syrian businessman with close regime ties said, “I'll put it bluntly. Let's say you have been nominated to a high-ranking position. The following week, your son is driving a nicer car than my son is. The two of them get into a fight for that or whatever other, petty reason. And then one day you learn that – my connections being stronger than yours – I got you fired. It can be as simple as that”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009.

¹²⁵ Although reform-minded officials exist, several of whom enjoy the presidency's clear support, they typically are outmatched, outnumbered and outmanoeuvred. More often than not, they are counterbalanced by figures occupying similar positions within the system and who espouse contrary views.

¹²⁶ A senior official claimed: “The transition that occurred in early 2008 was the result of a cumulative process that began in 2000, although it only became manifest eight years later. With every passing year, the leadership has become more confident; economic reforms gradually made us stronger in the face of outside pressure. That reality was contrary to common wisdom. Reforms prompted a greater influx of capital and improved our hard currency reserves. They encouraged some economic diversification. They triggered a rise in private bank deposits and stimulated tourism. In short, macroeconomic indicators remained solid and even improved. Politically, reforms were paying off”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, October 2009. He added: “When the worldwide financial crisis broke out, we found ourselves in a stronger position than we would have been had we not undertaken these reforms. And with changes in the regional environment, chances of capitalising on them have improved. Take the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia: on the one hand, we immediately can offer the Saudis a promising investment environment; on the other, we do not have to beg for financial assistance”.

Still, overall perceptions appeared to shift as Syria consolidated its gains.¹³³ Domestic opposition notwithstanding, the result has appeared to be greater decision-making clarity in an increasingly centralised process in which Bashar more frequently articulates and implements his vision.¹³⁴ In one indication, he has gradually been appointing more people who share his outlook to important government and security positions; previously he had tended to co-opt powerful figures.¹³⁵ Since May

continent now. What we have are ties to Iran, Turkey, even Azerbaijan. What is left of Arab nationalism? And what is left of the Party without it?" Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, July 2009.

¹³² A Syrian journalist said, "new elites are being parachuted into the country. They are former expatriates who don't have roots in local society. They reflect values from elsewhere. Yet, they insert themselves right at the top, in positions where they can have an impact". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, July 2009. Syria's diaspora in fact constitutes a rich source of human capital for a country in dire need of qualified personnel. An official remarked: "As the system opens up, increasing numbers of expatriates will return. This already is happening [albeit on a small scale]. It is a fantastic resource. They speak foreign languages and have precisely the kind of qualifications we desperately need". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2008.

¹³³ In early 2009, a businessman with close regime ties commented: "Until now we don't trust him as we did his father". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009. A few months later, he said, "Syria proved it cannot be ignored in the region. I have acquired greater confidence in the president's direction. Perhaps it's been part luck, part circumstance, but he has shown his capabilities. Our fate could have been similar to Iraq's". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, August 2009.

¹³⁴ Following a meeting with a Syrian policymaker, a U.S. official said, "we asked our interlocutor to compare Hafez and Bashar. He said Hafez had a longer-term vision, listened hard but didn't take quick decisions. Direct access was limited. Today the son takes decisions faster; he asks to be presented with the options and promptly makes up his mind". Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2008. Syrian officials present their president as avoiding the twin perils of excessive belligerence or caution. As a senior official put it, "the team around him is very heterogeneous. You have those who get too excited and assertive and those who stay too calm and cautious. He finds the middle lane". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009. In the economic arena in particular, Bashar's style appears to be to tolerate and arbitrate between conflicting views in order to both placate power centres and keep options open. Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman, Damascus, March 2009.

¹³⁵ A presidential adviser asserted: "The president clearly is in charge. Foreign policy increasingly is of his making. There hardly is a nomination that is not his own. He waits for the right time to ask people to leave – when they reach retirement age, for example – or finds a subtle way, promoting them in a manner that reduces their power". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009.

2008, he has significantly changed the security services' organisational chart and personnel. Fuad Nasif, a relative of Muhammad Nasif – himself a security establishment pillar – was replaced as head of internal security; his successor enjoys considerably expanded prerogatives. Muhammad Mansura, another prominent establishment member, was removed as political security chief. Ali Mamluk, director of state security, assumed an even more central role. Hasan Turkmani, the defence minister who plays a key role with regard to Iran, was moved (as had been Muhammad Nasif before him) to a less executive and more advisory position.

The culmination of this process was the July 2009 replacement of Asef Shawkat at the helm of military intelligence. The president's brother-in-law, Shawkat long had been considered untouchable. Amid endless rumours regarding his troubled relationship with Bashar, a number of analysts and diplomats speculated that he was the regime's real strongman.¹³⁶ As a result of these changes, power at present appears to lie with younger figures largely unknown to the wider public. In that sense, the transition, which began even as Hafez al-Assad was preparing the succession, seems to have reached completion.¹³⁷

Assad's newfound assertiveness evidently does not rule out the need to contend with and arbitrate among competing domestic constituencies. There are likely to be constant adjustments and occasional policy back-and-forths. In terms of foreign policy, as argued in a companion report, much likely will depend on Syria's assessment of its surroundings; perhaps more than anything else, that will determine whether the president deems his relatively more pragmatic approach sustainable. Bashar's actual manoeuvring room remains an unanswered question. As a visiting Western official put it, "we now know where the regime's centre of gravity is. What remains to be seen is where the centre of gravity's centre of gravity really is".¹³⁸

¹³⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, op. cit., p. 22.

¹³⁷ In other areas, too, the president has ordered personnel changes; a businessman pointed in particular to the stock exchange, which he described as being staffed with qualified people, creating a "small pool of competence". Crisis Group interview, businessman involved in the reform process, Damascus, March 2009.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, October 2009.

IV. SYRIA AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Having long given up on the Bush administration, Damascus placed (cautious) bets on its successor, regardless of who it would be. Throughout 2008, officials realised that their moves had paved the way for a possible improvement of relations with the U.S. and saw the need to “keep up the momentum”.¹³⁹ According to some, this partly explains the restraint after the U.S. targeted alleged al-Qaeda elements in its cross border attack near Abu Kamal.¹⁴⁰

The Obama administration was welcomed as a promising break with the past, as it expressed commitment to re-engagement. So far, however, the record has been mixed. The U.S. initiated a sustained process of dialogue, multiplying official visits and telephone calls. Syrian officials spoke warmly of the new president. Early on, the renewal of U.S. sanctions gave rise to friction, but both sides appeared eager to contain things and project a positive atmosphere.¹⁴¹

Yet, beneath the surface is mutual frustration. Predictably, each side sees significant value in its own goodwill gestures while essentially dismissing the other's.¹⁴² As

¹³⁹The expression came up in several interviews conducted in late 2008 and early 2009.

¹⁴⁰A Syrian analyst said, “after the Abu Kamal attack, we refrained from recalling our ambassador and kept all channels open. We deepened talks between the Syrian and Iraqi interior ministries, focusing on border security. They were not held up by Abu Kamal”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst, Damascus, January 2009. A U.S. official agreed as to the nature of the response (“All they did was shut down a U.S. school and language centre”), but differed as to the motivation. “They knew we had caught them red-handed, and there was nothing they could do in response”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2008.

¹⁴¹A senior Syrian official said he understood the relatively slow pace adopted by the U.S., which he explained in terms of domestic resistance: “We’ve told the Americans it is very important to move on sanctions, which were imposed by Bush under different circumstances, for different reasons. But we know there are constraints and that if things move too publicly too fast, it could harm the process”. Crisis Group interview, October 2009.

¹⁴²Differing perceptions on the U.S. response to Syria’s national day celebration are a case in point. Washington considered attendance by the assistant secretary of state as a strong, symbolic gesture. Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, Damascus, April 2009. Syrians gave it very little weight. Instead, they pointed to one of their own gestures, namely the reopening of the language centre which had been shut down in October 2008. “That was tangible. What was the quid pro quo?”

viewed in Washington, for example, Syrian efforts to stabilise Iraq singularly lack consistency. Damascus continues to harbour former regime officials and people connected to the insurgency, while allowing smuggling networks associated with the al-Qaeda in Iraq organisation to operate, at least on an occasional basis.¹⁴³ U.S. officials gave Syria a barely passing grade in Lebanon, where it was viewed as having done little to press its allies to help form a government and where, they claim, it continues to exercise influence through shadowy means.¹⁴⁴ In the Palestinian arena, Washington still awaits proof that Syria is willing to press Hamas to either moderate its positions or allow the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority to regain a foothold in Gaza.¹⁴⁵

Members of the administration known to advocate more forward-leaning U.S. steps lament that they lack adequate proof of Syrian cooperation to overcome scepticism among their peers – which is strong – and within the Congress – which is stronger.¹⁴⁶ Instead, the pattern of

Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁴³“Syria has done a lot regarding al-Qaeda along the Iraqi border and at the airport, but one or two of their networks always seem to be popping up. There remains a school of thought in Washington that believes Syrian security forces will continue to act in harmful ways regardless of positive movement on the political level”. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, September 2009. Another official said, “our main demand of Syria right now has to do with their facilitation of foreign fighters’ access to Iraq. Yes, things are much better than in the past, but it still is a problem and, from the U.S. perspective, a very damning one. If it were established that some of these fighters were behind an attack that took the lives of U.S. soldiers, all our efforts would have been in vain. Everything could collapse. We are not talking about tribal connections that allow fighters in; we are talking about what the regime is doing to facilitate infiltration”. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, October 2009.

¹⁴⁴According to a U.S. official, speaking in August, “the picture on Lebanon is not rosy. Syria is back to some of its old tricks – they are not dealing with Lebanon through ministers but through the [Syrian-Lebanese] higher committee, which is a bad sign. Their allies in Lebanon are not being helpful. What we really would like from Damascus is to work with Hizbollah to convince [Christian opposition leader Michel] Aoun to join the government and stop being an obstacle. We know Syria can’t do it directly, but Aoun needs Hizbollah, and Hizbollah should tell him they are going to join the government in any event so he should stop obstructing”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, August 2009.

¹⁴⁵In the words of a U.S. official, “so far, Syria has not shown it can or will shift Hamas’s position on any issue – including Palestinian reconciliation talks. They seem more intent on watching the Egyptian-led process fall on its face”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2009.

¹⁴⁶Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, June and September 2009. Scepticism is deeply rooted in the ex-

Syrian behaviour has tended to validate some of the more negative assumptions among U.S. officials.¹⁴⁷

In mirror image, many in Damascus are convinced the U.S. has yet to take concrete action to truly improve bilateral relations, in particular by evading serious review of the sanctions framework and delaying the nomination of an ambassador. They also see no evidence that Washington is pressing its allies – the Iraqi government, the Lebanese majority, the moderate Palestinian leadership or Israel – to compromise. As a result, and despite a feeling that Obama could be different, familiar perceptions of U.S. Middle East policy are resurfacing. A senior decision-maker put it as follows:

I've tried hard to paint the current administration in a positive light. I respect Obama. But he remains a question mark. Why hasn't he done anything concrete? Either he needs a little more time – which I am prepared to believe – or he is surrounded and constrained by lobbying groups. That is what one increasingly hears around here.¹⁴⁸

For the most part, Syria's response to U.S. engagement has been cautious and ambivalent. Consistent with its habitual diplomatic passivity, it has left it to the administration to send one delegation after another,¹⁴⁹ hoping they would bring forth a vision for the region, a blueprint for bilateral relations and concrete suggestions for cooperation. The Bush-era legacy – during which, Syrian officials are persuaded, their gestures rarely were

acknowledged let alone reciprocated¹⁵⁰ – only reinforced the regime's time-honoured determination never to take a step, however minor, without a quid pro quo.¹⁵¹ That said, deeper concerns lie behind Syria's guardedness.

A. WHO GOES FIRST?

Syria's approach appears to be driven largely by the conviction that it already has made a number of concessions for which it still is awaiting reciprocal reward. The regime knew that its moves in 2008 would yield nothing from the Bush administration; the hope, nonetheless, was that the new president might respond.¹⁵² Diplomatic engagement by the incoming administration was welcome, but this had come to be expected insofar as Obama had pledged during his campaign to reach out to Damascus and Tehran. What was awaited in Syrian eyes – and lacking – was significant, concrete action.

Damascus wished the administration would lift some of the sanctions, but despite some U.S. steps toward more flexible implementation and talk of other possible moves, little has changed. To an extent, this could be a case of somewhat unrealistic early expectations: many of the sanctions relate to Syrian policy toward Hamas, Hizbollah, Iraq and WMD proliferation which, as of yet, has not varied.¹⁵³ Even taking those constraints into

experience of the last two administrations: officials who worked under President Bill Clinton recall being "played" by Hafez Assad, as he prolonged negotiations even as Syria continued to provide succour to militant groups; those who worked under President George W. Bush have been shaped by years of mutual hostility and estrangement. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, September 2009.

¹⁴⁷ In the view of some U.S. officials, Syria has done little more than pocket U.S. engagement without altering its stance in any meaningful way. "Obama had said during the campaign that he would engage Syria, so Bashar knew that would happen from the outset. So he just pocketed it – it was not something for which we could bargain. The challenge for us is how to achieve something and avoid engagement for the sake of engagement". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, April 2009. Another official, critical of administration policy, said, "we must be more restrained and avoid harsh statements. Rather than say 'Syria must stop the flow of jihadi militants through Damascus airport', we should speak about wanting to work cooperatively with Syria. But the dominant perception in DC is that if we bend over too far we will look weak". Crisis Group interview, May 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, October 2009.

¹⁴⁹ To date, only one Syrian official has travelled to Washington, and only after the administration had made repeated requests.

¹⁵⁰ See Crisis Group Reports, *U.S. Constraints and Opportunities*, and *Syria After Lebanon*, both op. cit.

¹⁵¹ A senior official complained about the attitude of U.S. officials, saying: "they belong to a generation of politicians who behave like businessmen who would like to go back to their boss and say 'I got you a good deal, which will cost you nothing'. We are interested in taking things forward but not at any cost; we want to discuss the price. That is the soundest base for a better relationship". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁵² Before the engagement process had begun, an official claimed: "After what we've done, we need the first moves to come from the U.S.". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, January 2009.

¹⁵³ In the words of a U.S. official, "we face the age-old problem of us wanting to see them take some steps, while they feel that we have to take steps given the harm they suffered under Bush. This is most evident in the case of sanctions. We need them to take some steps, because even if the executive branch has some leeway, the bulk of the sanctions is connected to a specific behaviour: on Lebanon, on foreign fighters or even on WMD, an area about which Syria won't talk. For its part, Syria seems to want us to remove some sanctions without making any movement on these matters. In reality, as soon as the issue of sanctions is raised, it implicates matters about which they don't want to talk or on which they currently refuse to budge". Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2009.

account, movement has been minimal and, today, the sense of disappointment in Damascus is palpable.¹⁵⁴

The administration's basic approach likewise is criticised as a remnant of its predecessor's outlook: a tendency to put forward a list of demands – roughly the same list, only presented with more diplomatic niceties.¹⁵⁵ An official commented: "We have yet to identify a policy that is specific to this administration. It is closer to a continuation of the past, with minor adjustments on the margins. We've heard the same expectations, albeit more politely expressed".¹⁵⁶ In particular, the absence of a novel, overarching regional strategy is a source of considerable puzzlement and discontent. In the words of a senior official:

We are happy to work hand in hand with the Americans, but not on behalf of a mistaken vision. They seek our help but on what basis? The U.S. has committed massive mistakes in the region, invading Iraq and deepening inter-Arab and inter-Palestinian divisions, and we simply cannot encourage them to proceed down the same road. Only if they are willing to genuinely redress those mistakes can our talks be productive.¹⁵⁷

Another senior official summed up the prevailing mindset:

We've taken positive steps. We didn't interfere in the [May 2009] Lebanese elections or challenge their results. In Iraq, building ties with a government born out of the U.S. occupation was no trivial matter. In Palestine, we have worked to restore ties to Mahmoud Abbas. Our relations with Saudi Arabia are improving. Even in the case of Egypt, we are trying to calm things down. But in politics, nothing is for free. Everything has a price. If we look at the region as a whole, we've received nothing that can entice us to do more.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ A U.S. official conceded: "Some of us are pushing to do more. But there is resistance within the administration, and those of us focusing on Syria are only a handful". Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2009.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, May and June 2009. A U.S. official conceded that "it's a reasonable criticism. The bureaucracy isn't changing its approach quickly. Eight years is a long time. And some people have been working with the same mindset for the length of their careers. Finally, things have been bad for so long we don't really know how to talk to each other. We've really just started that process". Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2009.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Baath official, Damascus, June 2009. "The U.S. knows we have adopted a positive stance on a number of files; they should also know that we will not concede anything before seeing the bigger picture, before de-

B. WHAT DOES THE U.S. WANT?

Almost a year into the new administration's tenure, its vision for the region is confusing to Syrian officials. Although Obama still is viewed positively, he is believed to have been largely absent from Middle East policy-making. Along with other countries, Syria wonders who has the lead, what precise roles different figures play and where that leaves U.S. policy. As one official put it, "we can identify various satellites around Obama. But, honestly, we wonder where the centre of gravity is".¹⁵⁹ A senior policymaker offered this description:

Bush senior was a statesman surrounded by statesmen; Clinton was a statesman surrounded by employees; Bush junior wasn't a statesman, and he was surrounded by a gang. Obama, for his part, definitely is a statesman. We have an interest in seeing him succeed based on what we have heard from him up to now. But questions remain regarding his team.¹⁶⁰

Mixed signals also have gotten in the way. Statements calling for a comprehensive peace notwithstanding, Washington has projected apparent disinterest in or indifference toward the Israeli-Syrian track. The president's peace envoy, George Mitchell, although widely appreciated in Damascus, so far has focused almost exclusively on seeking to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.¹⁶¹ Whether a function of Washington's sense of priorities, concern that Israel could not handle two tracks at once or assessment of Prime Minister Netanyahu's own preference, the undeniable downgrading of the Syrian track went over poorly. Even as far as the Palestinian track is concerned, Syrian officials charge they cannot read U.S. intentions. As they see it, they are being asked to "pressure" Hamas in the absence of any intelligible context or framework within which, they argue, such pressure might make sense.¹⁶²

Official disenchantment deepened beginning in September 2009, when a series of U.S. decisions – to pressure Abbas, first to attend a three-way meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Obama in New York and, sec-

ciphering where all this will lead". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, September 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, adviser to President Assad, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁶¹ This was made clear by the sequence of his travels and the decision to postpone a visit to Damascus until after he had visited countries such as Morocco. That trip, which Mitchell took in April, three months before his first visit to Syria, allegedly incensed Damascus. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Damascus, May 2009.

¹⁶² See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards (I)*, op. cit.

only, to postpone consideration of the Goldstone report on the Gaza war by the UN Human Rights Council, all amid continued U.S. inability to obtain an Israeli settlement freeze – confirmed Syrian fears.¹⁶³ Even though the U.S. began discussing the Golan with Damascus – both to assess results of the Turkish-mediated process and determine how to move in the future – the handling of the Palestinian file raised fresh questions about Washington's ability to pressure or “deliver” Israel.¹⁶⁴

U.S. policy toward Lebanon was another purported source of Syrian puzzlement. The administration's early focus on that country and its parliamentary elections – and the de facto subordination of its Syrian agenda to a Lebanese one – irked regime officials. In their eyes, it meant giving priority to an issue that inevitably put U.S. and Syrian interests at odds. To an extent, that was true: anxiety among members of the pro-Western March 14 coalition that the Obama team would move quickly to improve relations with Syria at their expense led the U.S. to take extra steps to reassure them. That meant, in effect, postponing genuine engagement until after the June 2009 elections were over.¹⁶⁵

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, the U.S. displayed eagerness to bolster its Lebanese allies,¹⁶⁶ dispatch-

ing senior officials to Beirut in a show of support even as it cautioned Syria not to interfere. After the pro-Western alliance won, the U.S. solicited Syria's help in taming opposition demands – akin, as Syria saw it, to requesting that Damascus help firm up its own loss. Nor do officials feel they received any credit after a new government was formed, even though they earlier had been blamed for obstructing it.

Syrian officials likewise claim to have questions about Iraq. At the outset, they complained that the U.S. approach was exclusively security-driven; as Damascus viewed it, Syria was being asked to help secure Iraq and facilitate the ongoing U.S. military withdrawal instead of becoming part of a wider and longer-term political effort aimed at stabilising it through internal reconciliation and normalisation of ties with its neighbours. An official said:

The question is how to tackle security cooperation when all issues are linked. We must address all matters comprehensively, including Iraq's territorial integrity, national reconciliation, relations with its neighbours, including Syria and the mechanism of a U.S. withdrawal. You can't isolate security from all of those issues.¹⁶⁷

On the security front itself, even as the administration was seeking to open a channel for U.S.-Syrian talks focused on the border, it levied public accusations against Damascus in May 2009.¹⁶⁸ In August, following deadly attacks in the heart of Baghdad, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki pointed an angry finger at Syria, and the U.S. suspended efforts to set up a three-way mechanism on border security. Privately, U.S. officials (with some exceptions) dismissed the claim, generally attributing the prime minister's stance to an attempt to deflect blame in the run-up to critical parliamentary elections.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ A senior official said, “I'm disappointed in Obama. Things aren't very different from Bush. The crucial issue from our perspective was the summit with Netanyahu and Abbas; the administration proved it exercised no influence whatsoever over Netanyahu”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, October 2009.

¹⁶⁴ In the words of an official, “when it comes to U.S. policy toward Syria, much ultimately will hinge on how the Obama administration defines its relationship with Netanyahu. At this stage, things don't look good”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, September 2009. Syrian officials emphasised that, for them, the most important U.S. role is, precisely, to get Israel to do what it otherwise would not. “In our view, the U.S. role in the peace process is essential. On other files, the U.S. is just one player among others, nothing more”. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, October 2009.

¹⁶⁵ Reflecting on this tension, a U.S. official said, “personally, I think we should try to find a way to accommodate U.S. and Syrian interests in Lebanon. However, there is extreme sensitivity, especially among March 14, to any indication that we might be asking for Syrian help in Lebanon”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2009.

¹⁶⁶ “Why does the U.S. claim it wants fair elections and no interference and then sends [Vice President Joe] Biden to meet with March 14 personalities? If you send a vice president to Beirut and a junior official to Damascus, it means Syria is unimportant; and if you think Syria is unimportant, then there is no need to talk to us”. Crisis Group interview, senior decision-maker, Damascus, June 2009. A U.S. official dismissed the accusation, claiming Syrian interference and pressure in Lebanon was widespread. Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Various U.S. military officials, including Petraeus, were quoted as claiming the Syrian “jihadi pipeline” into Iraq had been “reactivated”. See Karen DeYoung, “Terrorist traffic via Syria again inching up: pipeline to Iraq back in business after lull”, *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2009. U.S. statements on this matter have tended to fluctuate. A month later, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, said, “we have seen a significant decrease in the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq in the last eight to ten months. For the most part, it has just been a trickle.... We have seen some fighters coming through Syria, but Syria has been taking some action over the last few weeks”. Reuters, 15 June 2009.

¹⁶⁹ A U.S. official explained: “Our view is that some attacks have been planned by Iraqis in Damascus. We also know that high-level Baathists are there, with ties to the insurgency. Finally, we agree that Syria at times is involved in cross bor-

Still, both out of concern about alienating Maliki and in the hope that the episode could serve as useful leverage to press Syria to further curb insurgent activities, Washington did nothing to counter the accusation. An official said that "Syria continues to act in ways detrimental to Iraqi security. Even if they were not guilty in this case, they are in others, and perhaps the pressure will spur them into action".¹⁷⁰ In November, the senior U.S. commander in Iraq suggested a series of deadly attacks in Baghdad the previous month had received logistical support originating from Syrian territory.¹⁷¹

The few in Washington who focus on Syrian affairs simply confessed: "The bureaucracy and administration are heavily weighted in favour of those working on Iraq. There are so many more of them than there are of us – and, ultimately, the concerns of Iraq-watchers will trump those of Syria-watchers".¹⁷² A U.S. official stressed that the U.S. at least had shown restraint. "Had this taken place during the Bush administration, there would have been a tremendous U.S. campaign against Syria. That's not happening this time".¹⁷³

Whatever the administration's motivation, this approach inevitably hampered its ability to cooperate with Syria on border security. Referring to the U.S. unwillingness

der insurgent infiltration. That said, we have no evidence the 19 August attacks were planned by people with whom the Syrian regime was cooperating and have seen no evidence of such a link, despite Maliki's assertions". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, August 2009. Several weeks after the attacks, U.S. officials claimed the administration still had seen no evidence implicating Syria. Crisis Group interview, Washington, September, October 2009. Some in the defence establishment took a different view. Said one U.S. defence official, "the strategic epicentre of the Iraqi insurgency lies in Damascus. The next day were the bombings. One of the August 19 suicide bombers was an Iraqi not coming from Syria, but for the others, Syria was their main entry point". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 20 November 2009. He added: "Is Syria the godfather of the Iraqi insurgency? If so, this would make the U.S.-Syrian dialogue problematic. We haven't reached a conclusion. The absence of evidence means we simply have to be cautious".

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Washington, August 2009. A senior U.S. official based in Iraq insisted that Syria ought not simply be pressured to secure the border, but also to deport several former Iraqi regime figures it hosts. Crisis Group interview, September 2009.

¹⁷¹ Reuters, 18 November 2009.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, November 2009. This has led some Syrian officials to believe that elements within the administration were seeking to undermine a possible Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, in conjunction with Iraqi figures equally hostile to such an evolution. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, May 2009.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, October 2009.

to proceed on the proposed border security mechanism after Iraq retracted its acceptance in the wake of the August bombings, an American official said:

At that point, many in the U.S. government who work on Iraq felt we could not turn around and agree to two-way security talks given our relations with Maliki; they also felt that even if Syria was not involved in that particular attack, its record remained troubling with regard to facilitating foreign fighters. So we ended that particular effort even if we are not giving up the attempt as a whole.¹⁷⁴

On the merits, the delay in setting up the security mechanism was hard to justify. A frustrated U.S. official remarked: "My personal view is that we need dialogue precisely because we have problems with Syria. We can't ask them to preemptively resolve the problems as a condition for dialogue".¹⁷⁵

U.S. officials initially had expressed the wish to replicate the Turkish "Adana protocol", a process established in the wake of Syria's expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to address similar issues, at a time when Syrian territory served as a rear base for the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey.¹⁷⁶ Yet this reflected a misunderstanding of that precedent. Ankara established the mechanism as a continuous channel of communication, whose effectiveness was to be measured over time and that was intended to be insulated from wider political considerations.¹⁷⁷ The Iraqi-Syrian spat was a missed opportunity for the U.S. to begin to build the trust needed for such a mechanism.

An alternative course would have been to reschedule the first meeting in deference to the prevailing climate;

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2009. He added: "Ironically, Syria initially had insisted on involving the Iraqis in security discussions and now is saying: let's do it without them!" In effect, Syria was reluctant at the outset to engage in border security talks, at least before progress was made in the bilateral relationship. A Syrian official put it bluntly: "First the Americans should watch their tongues. Then they should send an ambassador. Then they must engage in high-level dialogue. And they must do something about sanctions. Once the political umbrella is in place, we can discuss more tangibly security cooperation in Iraq". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009. Within less than a month, however, Syria had agreed to host a U.S. military delegation and discuss a possible framework for talks.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2009.

¹⁷⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards (I)*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁷ Commenting on the UK's own efforts, a British official remarked: "In raising such issues with the Syrians, one should seek two things: getting them to take action against specific targets but also gradually building trust". Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

maintain the agreed-upon mechanism on the grounds that it was defined precisely to reinforce Iraqi stability and put Syrian goodwill to the test; and, finally, be more assertive in seeking to bring Iraq to the table.¹⁷⁸

Beyond specific issues, Syrian officials raise a broader point. They resent the U.S. asking for help to improve its own regional situation while, as they see it, refusing to consider Syria as a major regional player, whose views and interests merit genuine attention. "Obama often mentions Iran", commented one official, "and we understand that. But why does he only refer to Syria when prodded by journalists?"¹⁷⁹

There are reasons behind Washington's approach: it has more urgent issues to address – Iran's nuclear program, Afghanistan and Pakistan, to mention but a few; feels that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more central, has more regional resonance and could suffer from high attention devoted to Syria; must reassure its Lebanese allies, anxious about any sign of a tilt toward Syria at their expense;¹⁸⁰ is careful not to move too rapidly given disbelief about Syrian intentions at home and among some Arab countries; and senses, based on experience, that there is danger in feeding Syria's sense of self-importance.

Washington's early outreach, which focused on narrow issues, arguably reflected another rationale. The U.S. anticipated that, in response, Syria would lay down its own series of demands, thereby defining the other half of the agenda; it was hoping to produce quick, practical avenues for constructive cooperation, which in turn, it was argued, would generate positive momentum and help a move to the next phase. But the consequence is a persistent sentiment in Damascus that it is being asked to help promote immediate U.S. interests without being offered a concomitant longer-term vision or partnership.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Asked whether the U.S. had sought to persuade Maliki to lower the temperature, a U.S. official said, "some Iraqis and other countries already are doing that. We certainly will not add fuel to the fire, but we think it best to remain on the sidelines". Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2009.

¹⁸⁰ In September, George Mitchell travelled to the region but skipped Syria, even as he stopped in Lebanon. Said an adviser to President Assad, "the administration called to explain that he would not stop in Damascus because the current priorities were elsewhere. So be it. As I see things, the trip to Beirut had no other purpose than to reassure the U.S.'s Lebanese allies". Crisis Group interview, September 2009.

¹⁸¹ A presidential adviser complained: "The U.S. has the wrong approach. For the time being, they are asking Syria to help wherever they need help, instead of engaging in a strategic

C. THE BILATERAL CONUNDRUM

The relative gridlock in relations between Washington and Damascus and inability to meet some of the loftier, Obama-related expectations have many causes. Some, as seen, relate to mutual missteps and tactical mistakes. But, at its core, they reflect a Catch-22: without progress in resolving the Israeli-Syrian conflict, there is little to no chance that Damascus will alter its policies regarding Hamas or Hizbollah. Without such progress, Washington's hands largely are tied in terms of what it can do to improve bilateral relations, notably in regards to the bulk of sanctions. And without the prospect of such improvement, Syria has little incentive to act. A U.S. official said:

When push comes to shove, there are real limits to what we can do on the bilateral front if we don't tackle the Israeli question. If we leave aside the issue of foreign fighters slipping into Iraq, some Syrian steps to further respect Lebanon's sovereignty and cooperation on the IAEA investigation into Syria's nuclear program, we quickly bump up against issues that can only be addressed in the context of Israeli-Syrian progress – namely Hizbollah and Hamas. These will not go away through moves on the U.S.-Syrian front, and yet they are at the root of virtually all sanctions.¹⁸²

Syria regularly complains that it is asked to provide help on Iraqi security (or other issues) even as the U.S. paints – and treats – it as a supporter of terrorism and refuses to consider a more wide-ranging partnership. When the Obama administration first renewed sanctions and used the same language as had its predecessor to justify them, an official said:

How can they speak of engagement and claim they want to improve relations if at the same time they tell Congress we are a threat to U.S. national security? If they think we are a threat, fine – but let them forget us. We can live with that.¹⁸³

dialogue that would aim at defining areas of disagreement and areas of convergence". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2009. This did not come as a surprise to Syrian officials. As one of them put it, "an Israeli government pushing a peace agenda would definitely have been better for both Syria and the U.S. and would have facilitated a much faster bilateral rapprochement". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, May 2009. "The administration describes us as sponsors of terrorism, while sending its envoys to ask for our help. Do you ask a thief to guard your house?"

The end result is that while the U.S. seeks concrete Syrian action to put the relationship on firmer footing, Syria is inclined to hold back until it gains confidence about where the relationship as a whole is headed. From its standpoint, what is missing is a broader agenda that would both acknowledge its wider role and provide a strategic context to (and justification for) the steps it is being asked to take.¹⁸⁴ In a senior official's words, "we are concerned with strategy, not tactics. We can't solve anything – and we would get nothing – by cutting the relationship into small pieces".¹⁸⁵ In June 2009, with disappointment mounting, a key Syrian decision-maker made this plain:

In principle, we are saying "yes" to dialogue. But, in practice we are saying "no". The U.S. wants something concrete, but so do we. Our view is you cannot talk about the subtitles without talking about the titles. Until now they've raised two subtitles: Hamas and the Iraqi border. Our view is that if Hamas is a problem in relation to the Palestinian issue, let's discuss the Palestinian issue. If it's a problem related to the peace process, let's discuss the peace process. It makes no sense to discuss Hamas in isolation. When it comes to the border, this is but one of Iraq's many dimensions. I have my own worries: the risk of disintegration, the Kurds, the fact that the U.S. historically has worked against better relations between Syria and Iraq and so forth. We need a working plan for our relationship with the U.S.¹⁸⁶

D. BREAKING THE LOGJAM?

Theoretically, the most straightforward and logical way forward would be to restart Israeli-Syrian peace talks. Halted just as they were reaching a critical stage as a

Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁸⁴ The demand for a more substantial agenda had a tactical dimension as well, the goal being to force the U.S. to elevate the level of discussions. They partly achieved this objective when, after voicing their frustration to Senator John Kerry – former U.S. presidential candidate and present chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – he brokered a telephone conversation between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Muallim. This was followed by a meeting between George Mitchell and Assad, in which the U.S. envoy was mandated to discuss the full range of bilateral issues. Although the Syrian regime expressed satisfaction at the outcome (Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Syrian officials, Washington, Damascus, June 2009), there appears to have been little follow-up to date.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

result of Israel's attack on Gaza,¹⁸⁷ their resumption has been further complicated by the election of a new Israeli prime minister who – for now – appears loath to renew Turkish mediation after Ankara's vehement, at times vitriolic¹⁸⁸ denunciations of the Gaza war and to reiterate Israel's commitment to full withdrawal from the Golan, let alone restart talks from where his predecessor left them off.¹⁸⁹

That could change. During his first premiership in the 1990s, Netanyahu had flirted with the Syrian track and reportedly agreed to full withdrawal; now, as then, he could be tempted to shift toward Damascus in hopes of evading politically costly final status negotiations with the Palestinians. U.S. diplomats have been patiently labouring to persuade him to accept that a peace deal of necessity would entail a withdrawal to the 1967 lines; shrouded in enough secrecy or ambiguity, Netanyahu at some point could relent.¹⁹⁰ Israel might even be prepared to acquiesce in a renewed Turkish role, assuming Ankara took some preliminary steps to mend fences. Certainly, there are signs that Turkey once again is being active, exchanging messages with Israel, Syria and the U.S. and publicly stating its willingness to resume to its former activity. An Israeli cabinet member explained:

¹⁸⁷ A Turkish official involved in the talks claimed they were down to "a few words" before being able to transition to direct talks when the attack occurred. As he put it, "we spent years constructing an elaborate castle, and Israel's decision brought the whole thing down". Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2009.

¹⁸⁸ At a panel in Davos in January 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Israel of committing barbaric acts against the Palestinians in Gaza, and remarked that his co-panellist, Israeli President Shimon Peres, knew well "how to kill people". In October he said, in an allusion to Israel, "Turkey has never, in its history, been on the side of persecutors. It has always defended the oppressed". Agence France-Presse, 18 October 2009.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli and U.S. officials, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Washington, November-December 2009. Although Syrian pronouncements have varied slightly, their position appears to be that they would resume indirect talks once Netanyahu committed to full withdrawal and would only commence direct talks once the two sides completed the process initiated with Turkey – ie, reached greater clarity concerning the 1967 line. As noted above, Damascus was awaiting Olmert's response on six geographic points presented by Syria as a means of delineating that line.

¹⁹⁰ Some U.S. and even Syrian officials seem convinced that he will. Crisis Group interviews, September-December 2009. However, the makeup of Israel's ruling coalition and the uproar such an upfront commitment inevitably would generate give pause. Moreover, given Washington's insistence that the Syrian track not move at the detriment of the Palestinian, Netanyahu might not be able to play one against the other – depriving him of an incentive to resume talks with Damascus.

Turkey is a vital strategic partner and we cannot afford to have bad ties. Politically, it is difficult to choose as a mediator someone who said what happened in Darfur was less serious than what happened in Gaza. But we need to work at it. Besides, we think that having Turkey at the table could constrain Bashar, who cannot afford to alienate Prime Minister Erdoğan. That too serves our interests.¹⁹¹

That certainly is the view among U.S. officials, who have made the very same arguments.¹⁹² Other options might be possible: Israel has raised the idea of indirect talks mediated by France – which President Sarkozy clearly would be eager to undertake, possibly in conjunction with Turkey;¹⁹³ President Obama also could enter the field and seek to convene a trilateral meeting with convincing assurances to Syria about the ultimate territorial dispensation.

However, such outcomes probably are unlikely in the near future. Netanyahu already is facing problems with his coalition over his settlements moratorium and will hesitate before opening up a second controversial political front so soon; also, while some senior coalition members (the defence minister in particular) and large segments of the military-intelligence establishment favour a deal with Syria, there is no indication that, at this point, he is

prepared to pay the necessary price. Washington too is ambivalent, highly reluctant to restart Israeli-Syrian talks as long as Israeli-Palestinian talks remain stuck. As an official said, “we are determined to avoid the impression we are trading one for the other”.¹⁹⁴

Finally, Damascus itself harbours doubts; unlike in the 1990s when it could invoke the Palestinians’ decision to “go it alone” at Oslo as cover for its own negotiations, the political cost today for seemingly betraying Palestinians, their Islamist allies included, would be high. For reasons more fully explored in the companion report, the regional and domestic situations also arguably are not ripe for Syria to seek a deal.¹⁹⁵

This need not necessarily mean keeping U.S.-Syrian relations at a standstill. Several ideas are worthy of consideration. First, modalities of dialogue could be improved. On the Syrian side, decision-making – particularly on this issue – revolves around Bashar. So far, however, the U.S. has been unable to establish regular access to the president. In part, this is due to Washington’s reluctance to elevate the level of engagement to the most senior levels, Mitchell excluded. But with the special envoy understandably focused on Israeli-Palestinian affairs, that has left a void.

True or not (and at least some U.S. officials strongly suggest it is),¹⁹⁶ the conviction in Damascus that Obama is more open-minded and creative than his advisers has led the regime to await his direct involvement. As many now see it, nothing short of a direct channel of communication between the two presidents is liable to deliver concrete results.¹⁹⁷ At a minimum, the administration should identify a senior official as point person for a sustained, strategic dialogue with Bashar. The U.S. embassy has been unable to fill the gap. Syria refuses to deal with it in a meaningful manner, pending appointment of an ambassador; the administration’s failure to do so in turn has deprived it of an important tool for effective diplomacy and blinded it to internal Syrian dynamics.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, November 2009. An Israeli official echoed this view, arguing that, given Ankara’s strategic importance, “if Israeli-Syrian negotiations with Turkish mediation are the key to maintaining our relationship with Turkey, then this should be done”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, November 2009.

¹⁹² A U.S. official said, “Syria wants to resume talks with Israel through Turkey, which we are happy to support. In many ways, it is best for us, because it keeps in reserve our own role, which we can deploy later. The problem is that, while Israel would be happy to resume negotiations right away, it is not yet prepared to make any commitment regarding the return of the Golan”. Crisis Group interview, April 2009. Another said, “Erdoğan went too far. But in some ways, his proximity to Bashar and credibility among Arabs could end up being useful to this process, making it hard for Syria to wiggle itself out should it wish to”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2009. An observer speculated that Turkey might resume the talks without specifically demanding that Netanyahu reiterate the commitment to full withdrawal; Ankara’s role, under this view, would reassure Syria about the framework of the discussions and implicitly suggest continuation from where things were left off. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2009.

¹⁹³ A French official said, “there are several possible combinations: Turkish-mediated talks held in France, a French role in Turkey, a sequential approach with one taking over from the other; all are doable if and when Paris and Ankara decide to work hand in hand on this file”. Crisis Group interview, December 2009.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards (I)*, op. cit.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, September-November 2009.

¹⁹⁷ A senior official said, “there are several Washingtons, thus the need to engage in a form of dialogue with Obama himself. Besides, 80 per cent of those around him have nothing positive to say about Syria”. Crisis Group interview, September 2009.

¹⁹⁸ There are persistent rumours at present that an ambassador is on the verge of being named. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, December 2009.

Secondly, there is a need and potential for greater clarity on the substance of the dialogue. On both sides, the vision for the region remains unclear and unfocused, marked by vague, rhetorical commitments to peace on the one hand and a more immediate focus on retaining and strengthening their respective alliances on the other. Instead, Syria and the U.S. should flesh out their understandings of the regional end state to which they aspire and, working backwards, describe the contributions they are willing to make toward achieving that goal.¹⁹⁹ As described in the companion report, there exists potential overlap on certain important issues – containing Iran's growing regional influence in Iraq and Yemen; promoting national reconciliation in Iraq; and avoiding renewed conflict in Lebanon.

Syria, in particular, ought to be more proactive in terms of what it proposes to do (rather than simply wait for the U.S. to lay out its concept) and what it expects from the U.S. on the full range of regional files (rather than simply focus on bilateral issues such as the removal of sanctions).

Thirdly, and most concretely, the Iraq-related security mechanism should be put back on track as soon as possible – ideally now, at the latest in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi elections – and ought to cover the above-described broader discussion. Indeed, cooperation on Iraqi security remains the most promising avenue for bottom-up engagement and its absence the most pressing threat to U.S.-Syrian relations. In the words of a U.S. official:

The launching pad should be Iraq, and Syrians don't seem to object. This is all at once the most concrete, arguably the easiest and certainly the most important issue in terms of U.S. public opinion. Nothing will harm Syria and the prospect of improved relations more than the perception that Damascus is serving as conduit for fighters coming into Iraq.²⁰⁰

Unlike what happened in the wake of the 19 August attacks, any such mechanism must be viewed as a patient, long-term investment, whose results will be judged over a period of six months to a year based on precise, mutually accepted criteria.

¹⁹⁹ A senior Syrian official acknowledged his side's difficulty in clarifying its position: "Our problem is that the U.S. does not really know what we want. We want peace on one side and play the resistance card on the other. They can't determine our 'colour'. Why don't we define it? It will take time. Our entire system must evolve. Assuming our current colour is red, and we aspire to becoming blue, we nonetheless would need to transition through a dirty, ill-defined shade". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2008.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2009.

The principal challenge in this regard will be to move from discussions on border security to real intelligence-sharing. Syria has shown extreme reluctance, a function in part of its experience during the Bush administration (when it felt the U.S. recklessly used the information, thereby compromising its efforts to infiltrate the insurgency),²⁰¹ as well as of its broader unwillingness to cooperate fully before its political or economic interests in Iraq have been addressed.²⁰² On the U.S. side, too, are unpleasant memories:

We had a liaison mechanism until 2005, when the Syrians put an end to it in the context of the Lebanese crisis and the escalating Iraqi insurgency. Now it will take someone like Petraeus to restore it. We can't just share intelligence at this stage. There is stubborn resistance within the bureaucracy. They say "Syria won't do anything with it or, worse, will use it to cover up its own actions". Also, we hear from the French and British that they are frustrated, because they provide intelligence and then little happens. That has been our experience for years: we provided very specific information and nothing happened. People remember that.²⁰³

All this means that any security mechanism ought to begin modestly, with moderate initial objectives; only gradually would it build momentum and trust. The individuals on whom the U.S. chooses to focus will matter: rather than prominent former regime officials based in Syria (who should be engaged in the context of national reconciliation), jihadi elements unknown to the public yet effective in Iraq would present a more realistic test of Syrian goodwill.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian security official, Damascus, March 2008. According to a British official, "around 2003-2004, the U.S. received information provided by Syria and took immediate action against individuals. Instead, they should have monitored activities, further infiltrated the networks and only stepped in when they were certain not to compromise the original sources. The impact of U.S. actions was minimal relative to the extent of the problem, but the political fallout was not. Syria felt exposed and its confidence in the U.S. significantly eroded". Crisis Group interview, June 2009.

²⁰² A senior official said, "we enjoyed cooperation in the past. But it ended because there was no political dimension to the relationship. We won't repeat that mistake. Security cooperation cannot precede a real dialogue about shared political goals". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2009.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, October 2009.

V. CONCLUSION

Normalisation of U.S.-Syrian relations always was going to take time, so some of the above problems are hardly surprising. What is most disappointing is the failure to set the relationship on a sound enough basis so that both can see benefit in regional cooperation. Instead, frustration continues to build in the two capitals, with the risk that the governments will lose interest in an effort that has barely begun. U.S. scepticism about Syrian intentions remains high and present in high places. As an official put it:

As time goes by without notable steps from Syria, something damaging could happen – evidence that insurgent infiltration from Syria is connected to violent attacks; information on Syria's WMD program; more arms transfers to Lebanon – that would not only prevent moving forward but make the climate much worse.²⁰⁴

One hears similar echoes in Damascus: “We are disappointed in the United States. We never carried excessively high hopes, we remained lucid. But the administration's balance sheet is even worse than anticipated. Most of the signs point in the wrong direction”.²⁰⁵

The U.S.-Syrian relationship needs a boost, and there are realistic ways to get one. The level of diplomatic engagement should be elevated, the scope of discussions broadened. And Iraq – critical for both sides – should rapidly be used as a productive test case of what can be achieved.

**Damascus/Washington/Brussels,
16 December 2009**

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, May 2009.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, October 2009.

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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December 2009

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APPENDIX D

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