A NEW U.S. POLICY FOR SYRIA: FOSTERING POLITICAL CHANGE IN A DIVIDED STATE

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The American foreign-policy establishment seems deeply divided over how to deal with Syria. No one in Washington doubts that Damascus plays a pivotal role in the Middle East, helping to shape events in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine while influencing calculations in Jerusalem, the capital of its principal foe, and Tehran, the capital of its principal ally. But there is considerable disagreement within Washington on how to approach Damascus. Should Syria be isolated until its economy and its leadership crack under the strain, as the Bush administration has long favored? Should it, to use fashionable parlance, be forced into a "hard landing" — bullied into abandoning its disruptive behavior on the regional stage and softening its internal political complexion? Or should the United States help Syria achieve a soft landing, as many commentators outside the White House now propose? Should engagement with President Bashar al-Asad's authoritarian regime be the order of the day, with carrots as well as sticks employed to persuade Syria of the benefits of a more cooperative relationship with its neighbors and the West and of more democracy at home?

This debate seems set to run indefinitely, with each of the two main presidential candidates lining up behind a different option. But there is one thing that both schools of thought, and both McCain and Obama, can agree on: Syria needs to change, and, ideally, to change not only its policies but also its political system.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this recognition of the need for some sort of change is shared by many Syrians. More surprisingly, this realization extends even to Bashar al-Asad. As Bashar is well aware, a weakening economic base, a deteriorating system of social control, and an awakening of identity conflicts in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq could threaten his hold on power. Recent episodes of religious and ethnic discord suggest that the government's time to reform is running short.

But how should it reform? The changes with which Bashar has tinkered since he succeeded his father as president in 2000 are far too modest to address the multifarious problems confronting the country. Meanwhile, the Iraq experience has vividly shown that attempts to introduce sweeping political and economic reform can easily awaken savage identity conflicts, conflicts that haunt almost every Arab state. Like Iraq (and many other Middle East states), Syria is a divided polity with weak formal institutions that have little history behind them and that are stable only to the degree that they are backed by a formidable security apparatus. If Syria does experience a hard landing, social unrest is a certainty and sectarian violence a high probability.

Is there, however, a middle path between Bashar's piecemeal reforms and Bush's preference for abrupt political transformations, a third way that can satisfy powerbrokers in both Washington and Damascus? This essay argues that there is. Moreover, it contends that a middle path may well be the *only* realistic option if Syria is to overcome its worsening economic and sociopolitical situation, maintain long-term stability, and move towards a more open and accountable system of governance. Effecting a program of significant reform, however, will demand three things: the patience to introduce change gradually, incrementally and cautiously, so as to avoid instability; the flexibility to alter Western-style democracy and development to fit Syrian conditions; and the readiness to work with, not against, Bashar or some other leading figures within the regime.

A FRAGMENTED SOCIETY

Syria is a state both young and old, divided by conflicting interpretations of its past. The modern state — an artificial creation that dates only to the Anglo-French partition of the region following World War I — has inherited a unique blend of geographical, ethnic, religious and ideological heterogeneity that complicates all efforts to construct a cohesive whole from its disparate parts.

A brief recital of the history of what "Syria" has been illustrates the diversity of the modern state's inheritance. Syria has been the home of historic pan-Arab nationalism,[1] where the first short-lived modern Arab state was based; of Greater Syria, the ancient *bilad al-sham* (literally, "the land of the left hand"[2]) that encompassed the whole Levant for centuries; of some of the world's oldest cities, with longstanding ties to international trade routes but little connection to nearby rural economies; of peoples conquered and converted by the great monotheistic religions, then abandoned and left to fracture into an ungodly number of sects; of a complex mosaic of almost two dozen distinct religious and ethnic groups that were traditionally so highly autonomous and self-administering that the government of the Ottoman Empire was limited to simple tax collecting. So rich and varied a history is not an unalloyed blessing. The state's very diversity dominates its political dynamics, limiting policy options, inhibiting risk-taking, and making any government highly defensive. Decades of stability have only partly compensated for the sectarian handicaps that hinder its capacity to develop a lasting identity.

Syria's 19 million people are divided into Sunni Arabs (65 percent), Alawis (12

percent), Christians (10 percent), Kurds (9 percent), Druze (3 percent),[3] Bedouin, Ismailis, Turcomans, Circassians and Assyrians. This demographic mosaic is further complicated by divisions within many of these groups. The Christians, for example, are divided into eleven main sects, including the Greek Orthodox, Melkite, Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean, Armenian and Catholic denominations. The Sunni Arabs range from the highly pious to the very secular and are divided between an urban elite and the rural masses that traditionally have had diverging political loyalties. Of all the groups, the Kurds and the Sunni Islamists are the greatest threats to the Syrian state. Their political movements have the cohesion, established agendas, outside support and sense of grievance to drive them to challenge central authority. The country's dearth of Shiites, however, makes the situation potentially less explosive than that in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq.

Conscious of their country's history as the center of a closely knit region of commanding size and stature, many Syrians have also repeatedly sought an identity in pan-Arab, Greater Syrian or Islamic causes, further impeding any attempt to construct a nation-state on Syrian territory. Loyalty to Arab nationalism — which continues to be an article of faith for many Syrians even though it has long since fallen out of favor with Arabs elsewhere — is enshrined in the first article of the country's constitution and explains Syria's generosity to other Arabs whenever a crisis creates a new wave of refugees. The desire to reconstitute itself as some version of Greater Syria (today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel) helps explain the country's preoccupation with

Lebanon and historical unwillingness to recognize a number of the borders that separate the state from its neighbors. The weakness of Syria's sense of national identity makes at least some Syrians receptive to the self-confident call of Islamic fundamentalism; in fact, between 1976 and 1982 the country experienced the region's first modern Islamist uprising. Fears over the ability of outsiders to stir domestic religious discontent are part of the reason for the regime's longstanding alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas.

The Hafez al-Asad Legacy

Syria struggled mightily after its independence in 1946 to overcome its difficult heritage. It had 20 different cabinets and four separate constitutions during its first ten years. It merged with Egypt in 1958, only to withdraw from that union less than four years later. It lost the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 war. In all, it suffered 20 military-backed coups or coup attempts between 1949 and 1970 and was arguably the most unstable state in the Middle East.[4] All this changed after Hafez al-Asad seized power in 1970.

Although founded on a narrow communal basis (the most sensitive intelligence and military positions were held by members of Hafez's Alawi Qalbiyya tribe),[5] the Asad regime systematically broadened its base of support by judiciously using the powers and spoils of government to co-opt important factions when possible and to crack down on them when necessary. One of Hafez's greatest political achievements was the construction of a quasi-corporatist system that aligned the interests of most social groups with his government, effectively buying their loyalty with state employment, education, and various social

benefits in a "containment system," as one Damascus analyst puts it.[6] The socialist Baath ideology — the party had been in power since 1963 and Hafez was one of its leaders before he took control — was well suited to this program. Its populist economic agenda provided the ideological underpinning for the establishment of a vast patronage network that promoted key non-Alawi constituencies, co-opting them into supporting the regime and making them dependent on it for their well-being. That network has gradually expanded to encompass almost all of Syrian economic life. Today close to two million people, whose incomes support perhaps half the entire Syrian population, receive wages or pensions from the state.[7]

From the outset of his rule, Hafez worked hard to bring many Sunni leaders into his government. Eventually, "approximately 60 percent of the cabinet ministers, the members of the People's Assembly and the deputies to the Party Congress"[8] came from the Alawites' main rival for control. He co-opted the powerful Sunni merchant class that had historically dominated the region by offering them business opportunities in partnership with the state, fostering a system of economic dependence and corruption that further cemented his control over key players.

The secular, pan-Arabist ideology espoused by the Baath party helped play down communal identities. Sectarian differences blurred to some degree as the socialist system flattened out the disparities and rifts that divided the country, uniformly dispersing social benefits to all groups. Although many Syrians complain of the leadership's corruption, few accuse the government of being dominated by any single group, instead seeing it as a con-

glomeration of the elites of most, if not all, of Syria's communal groups. Increasing intermarriage within the elites over the past generation reinforces these views; two of Hafez's sons, including Bashar, have married Sunnis.

Hafez's economic policies were accompanied by the harsh repression of dissent and the tight control of Syria's multiple and heavily staffed intelligence services. (According to one recent estimate, there is one secret-service member for every 153 Syrians over the age of 15, a ratio that in the United States would require 1.5 million secret-service members.)[9] These sticks made the carrots offered by the state's huge patronage network doubly effective. The one major challenge to Hafez's rule, that posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, was met with brute force, culminating in the 1982 massacre of some 20,000 and the destruction of most of the old city in Hama, the country's fourth-largest urban area.

Although the Hafez model brought stability to the country, provided the population with significant social benefits and reduced intercommunal tensions, it never fostered the accountable institutions and productive economic activity necessary to ensure long-term financial self-sufficiency. Much like Cuba and some other socialist client states, Syria became reliant on foreign money for a significant part of its national budget. It was Soviet money in the 1970s and 1980s, Arab money at times of war with Israel and during the first Persian Gulf conflict, and Iraqi money in the early 2000s. Only the growth of a domestic oil industry in the 1990s gave the country some respite from its financial woes. Today, Syria's gross domestic product per capita is $3,300 a

year, measured at purchasing-power parity, lower than that of most other states in the region, including Egypt ($4,000), Jordan ($4,300) and Tunisia ($6,900), and nowhere near that of the major Gulf states.[10]

Bashar's Hesitant Reforms

Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, this transition from father to son marking Syria as the first Arab republican hereditary regime. It was an especially unpropitious time. Not only was Bashar confronted with an international environment in flux in ways that his father could not have prepared him for, but the domestic patronage system, on which his power and the country's stability partly depended, was in danger of breaking down.

Although the steep rise in oil prices after 2003 has given Bashar some economic breathing space (as has the influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis with their bank accounts), declining production levels directly threaten the state's already weak fiscal position. The petroleum sector accounted for about one-half of government revenue and two-thirds of export earnings at the end of the 1990s,[11] but output has been dropping for years, and the country now spends considerably more on petroleum imports and on royalties to foreign operators than it earns from crude-oil exports, which are likely to cease altogether within the near future.[12] The picture has been further darkened by two consecutive weak harvests, the depletion of refugees' savings, and meager foreign investment due to bad relations with both the West and much of the rest of the Arab world.[13] Meanwhile, Syria's rapidly expanding population continues to overtax the state's ability to create new jobs, leaving legions of young men unemployed

and disaffected. One government agency puts the unemployment rate at 17 percent; independent estimates run as high as 30 percent.[14]

This financial breakdown is matched by a more serious systemic breakdown typical of multigenerational socialist regimes. As happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in Syria the "aging of the system," as one Damascus-based commentator puts it, has weakened its tools of control and spread corruption throughout its parts.[15] Graft pervades almost every official institution, from the courts to the universities to the police, corroding the government's ability to provide many basic public services; some reports even suggest that the state is receding from the country's hinterlands.[16] The Baath party, which permeates all state bodies, has become nothing more than "a favored and convenient track to social, economic and political advancement," with membership skyrocketing to 1.8 million, about 10 percent of the population.[17]

Although some significant reform measures have been implemented since Bashar came to power, the overall process of reform has been fragmentary and sluggish. New investment laws, a renewed emphasis on the agricultural sector, and a slew of banking, tax and currency reforms have attracted an inflow of money from Syrian overseas bank accounts as well as from the Gulf and Iraq. But Bashar's unwillingness — or inability, for fear of the consequences — to break up trade monopolies controlled by leading families or to tackle the institutional weaknesses of the elephantine bureaucracy severely stymies a more ambitious agenda. A shortage of competent technocrats, in addition to ineffective courts and widespread corrup-

tion, continue to limit the country's attractiveness to investors.

Meanwhile, despite much speculation when Bashar first came to power that he was a closet reformer, the fragility of his power base has made him extremely reluctant to introduce any substantial measure of *political* reform. Although he initially encouraged "constructive criticism, reform and modernization,"[18] released most of the regime's political prisoners, and allowed the emergence of the country's first opposition groups in decades in what came to be known as the Damascus Spring, Bashar subsequently cracked down on these groups and has repeatedly deferred introducing even those reforms that he himself has proposed. Recent years have seen growing use of intimidation, imprisonment, and exile as tools to squelch some of the same opposition figures he had previously encouraged. Bashar's weak power base has, if anything, made him draw closer to a small clique of family members at the expense of the broader coalition his father built, concentrating more wealth and power in the hands of the Asads and their immediate relatives.

Rising Sectarian Tensions

The fraying of the Asad system, combined with the increase in communal identification spawned by the conflict in Iraq, has brought a noticeable increase in intergroup tensions within Syria, highlighting the dangers of a hard landing.

The Kurds have longstanding grievances and are potentially the most explosive minority group. The continuing denial by the Syrian state of citizenship for 200,000 to 300,000 Kurds, restrictions on the use of their language, and widespread bureaucratic discrimination have made the Kurds, now inspired by the freedoms won by their brethren across the border in Iraq, Syria's unhappiest minority. In March 2004, Kurdish demonstrators rioted in many cities, setting fire to cars and battling with the security police.[19] Demonstrators held banners proclaiming "Liberation," "Free Kurdistan," "Kick Out the Arab Settlers," and "Intifada until the Occupation Ends."[20] Some 40 people were killed, including members of the police. Kurdish schools and institutions were burned in retaliation, and thousands of Kurds were detained by the security services. Since then, there have been reports of clashes between Christians and Muslims in fall 2004 and between Alawites and Ismailis in central Syria in March 2005.[21]

Although not nearly as well organized nationally as the Kurds, the growing number of Islamists, both radicals and terrorists, also poses a threat to stability. In April 2004, the government foiled an attack on a former UN building in Damascus. Since mid-2005, a growing number of terrorist cells have been uncovered and broken up by security forces in cities across the country. In one operation, eight people died; in another, an explosives factory was discovered. In June 2006, the security forces fought ten militants behind the state television complex in Damascus, killing four and capturing the rest.[22]

Adopting a similar strategy to that employed during the Hafez years, Bashar's government has responded to both the Kurdish and the Islamist threats with a mixture of compromise, co-option and force. As well as cracking down on violence and organized activities that might pose a danger to the regime, the government has also reached out to both groups. Bashar has promised to resolve the

Kurdish citizenship question. Many of those jailed in 2004 have been released. Officials have said that they will establish a Kurdish council to represent the community's interests in the future.[23] The regime increasingly emphasizes its religious credentials, now calling Islam a unifying force, where previously it would have characterized secularism in that fashion. Bashar is shown in the media accompanying Islamic clerics during public functions, even during meetings with Christian leaders. New mosques are being built throughout the country, and some activities that were previously forbidden, such as soldiers praying, are now permitted. The regime's close ties with extremist groups such as Hezbollah and its indirect support for some anti-American forces in Iraq can also be partly explained as an attempt to reduce Islamist opposition to the regime.

ENSURING UNITY, FOSTERING CHANGE

As many Syrians, including Bashar, recognize, the country needs to reform its system of governance. Any transition to a new system, however, will be fraught with danger for the Syrian people. Although some Western governments and analysts and some opposition figures argue for a rapid transition to a Western-style capitalist and democratic system, Syria's sectarian cleavages underscore the importance of moving gradually. Any rapid dismantling of the regime and its welfare and security policies is likely to disturb the carefully constructed mechanisms that hold Syrian society together, unleashing forces that could inundate any compensating measures designed to maintain the peace among competing groups.

Divided polities such as Syria and most other Arab countries face fundamentally different challenges in modernizing than did the nation-states of the West. They therefore need different standards and models to guide their evolution. Preserving security and the unity of the state, rather than promoting Western-style personal freedoms and elections, should be paramount when formulating policies to develop the country. The importance of security and unity in a fissiparous polity can be easily gleaned from the dismal record of U.S. efforts to bring Western-style democracy to Iraq. In the absence of security and unity, efforts to introduce even the most basic economic, social and political reforms are paralyzed. Such a change in priorities would shape how many other problems are addressed. Dismantling army, police and intelligence units, for example, without providing adequate replacements would lead in Syria, as it has in Iraq, to chaos. Releasing large numbers of people from government employment in the name of "reform" would create legions of dissatisfied people who bitterly oppose change. Allowing unrestrained freedom of speech would let some religious and political leaders espouse divisive and extremist causes and encourage violence.

The Turkish Example: A National Security Council

If Syria had a unifying figure such as a universally accepted monarch, there might be less chance that the country would splinter. Although considered by many in the West to be an anachronism, a royal family with some historical legitimacy is one of the few proven ways of fostering robust institutions in Arab countries. Eight of the 23 states in the Arab League,

including some of the most stable and economically dynamic, are monarchies. Unifying national figures do not, of course, have to be kings — the example of Kamal Atatürk in Turkey springs to mind — and Hafez and Bashar have both tried to present themselves as champions of Syrian unity. The Asads, however, do not command nearly the level of respect Atatürk does, and their membership in a minority group, the Alawis, earns them no affection from Syria's Sunni majority, some of whom even consider the Alawites to be heretics.

But if Syria has no individual able to play the role of national unifier, it does have the opportunity to create an institution to fill much the same role, an institution composed of members accepted by the great majority of its citizens and entrusted with the task of guiding the country's economic and political transition while protecting its stability and unity. Syrians have only to look across their northern border to find an example of just such a body, Turkey's National Security Council (NSC, known within Turkey by the acronym MGK). Indeed, reformers in Syria have often pointed to the NSC as an exemplar for their own country.[24] Ziad Haidar, a Damascus-based analyst, for example, commented to me in an interview that this "non-liberal democratic model" (meaning that it prioritizes societal security over personal freedom) could both keep a "tight control on sectarianism" and allow a significant increase in the "freedom of elections and speech."[25] Another analyst in the country believes that this model is the only way to make the transition to a pluralistic environment without empowering religious radicals who would threaten the unity of the state.[26]

The Turkish NSC, originally established

after the 1960 coup d'état and later defined within the 1982 constitution as the entity to which the government must always "give priority consideration," was until recently a military-run organ that policed Turkish politics, schools, and the media to ensure that no separatist, overly religious, communist or "anti-democratic" behavior would undermine national unity or divert Turkey from its secular, modernizing course. The army intervened when democracy was threatened by political violence in the 1960s and 1970s and when Islamists came close to taking power in 1997. Until recently, officers sat on the civilian education and broadcasting boards. The army and NSC have also repeatedly taken a strict line on any challenge to the unity of the state, most notably during the Kurdish secessionist challenge of the 1980s and '90s.

Although many of these activities may be inimical to Westerners steeped in liberal ideas of governance, in polities plagued by divided populations, religious extremists and weak national institutions, a body like Turkey's NSC can play a major role as a protective "umbrella"[27] shielding the reform process from disruption. (The international community saw the need for a somewhat similar entity, the Office of the High Representative, in Bosnia and Herzegovina to supervise national institutions in the aftermath of civil war.) In such states, the courts, corrupted by money and clannism, are unlikely to be impartial arbiters of political disputes, and local politicians are prone to use inflammatory rhetoric to garner support from their own identity group in any political campaign. (In the face of such problems in Bosnia, the High Representative has imposed over 820 laws and decrees over twelve years and removed officials from their posts.[28])

A Syrian National Security Council (SNSC) could function much like an all-powerful judicial body and be charged with preserving the unity and secular nature of the state. Its membership could be determined through a process of extended negotiation and compromise to ensure that representatives with the legitimacy and authority to act for each of the country's five major communal groups were included, making it more likely that the SNSC's decisions would be accepted and implemented by all sides.

Articulating a clear set of principles regarding the conduct of political parties, the media, schools and religious bodies, something the Turkish NSC has never done, would increase the SNSC's effectiveness and reduce the scope for conflict later on. It could, for example, insist that no political party be created on an ethnic or religious basis; order the arrest of any religious figure who preaches hatred, violence or intolerance; and close any school that strays from the permitted curriculum. Such policies, however, would not mean denying individual communal groups the freedom to teach in their own language, celebrate holidays in their own style or pray according to their own rites.

As this system became embedded in Syrian society, many previously unimaginable reforms, eventually including substantial political change, would become more amenable to the elite in Damascus, whose concerns could be addressed within the

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structure of the SNSC. The SNSC would actually intervene only in exceptional cases. Once it established itself and gained a reputation for acting forcefully, the mere threat of action would do much to deter any disruptive behavior. As the state became more cohesive (i.e., less sectarian) and its institutions more robust, the SNSC would become, like Turkey's NSC, increasingly irrelevant until eventually it could be dissolved.

The main dangers of this system are that the SNSC might subvert a democratically elected government or become entirely unaccountable and profoundly corrupt. The best way to minimize these possibilities would be to establish and publicize clear guidelines as to its mandate and to make clear that its members are by no means above the law. Engaging a larger group of leaders, possibly through a national conference or through the existing parliament, in the formulation of these guidelines would contribute to their wide acceptance. Measures that improved the rule of law in general (see below) would also help keep the SNSC in check.

Institutionalizing intergroup cooperation would enable national leaders to initiate reforms confident that sectarian strife would not endanger the country's stability or widen divisions within society. Growing institutional stability over time would encourage a more intrepid approach by the authorities, leading to a bolder economic reform agenda and greater impetus for

political change. In time, this would lead to free elections at both the local and the national levels, a freer press, and greater administrative and judicial reforms as pressure mounts for better governance. While change might be gradual at first, it would gain momentum as both elites and the general population acquired a greater stake in, and a greater comfort level with, an increasingly open system.

The Iraqi Example: Self-Government for the Kurds

The significant degree of self-government that Iraqi Kurds enjoy has naturally stirred hopes among their Syrian kin of attaining a similar level of independence. Syria would do well to harness these feelings instead of seeking to repress them. Although any arrangement that smacks of federalism is likely to be fiercely resisted by the Arab majority, offering the Kurds significant cultural and social autonomy, a fairer allocation of state resources, and the ability to link up economically with their Kurdish neighbors across the Iraqi and Turkish borders is essential to defuse the growing tensions.

The Baath Example: A Secular, Tolerant State

Although Baathism is seen in Washington as a particularly odious form of authoritarianism, decades of Baath government have fostered a sense of peaceful coexistence and even mutual tolerance among Syria's diverse population. The country has long fought sectarianism and Islamism within its borders (to such a degree that in different circumstances it would be considered a natural ally of the United States in the "Global War on Terror"). Decades of stern secular rule

have given individuals, especially women, more personal freedom than is common in the Muslim world. The country has absorbed as many as one million refugees from Iraq, many of them Christian, without engendering any protest from its own people.

In introducing change to the country, it is critical that these advantages be built upon, not squandered. Indeed, Syria will be much better placed to embrace political reform if its strict secularism and high degree of intercommunal harmony can be maintained throughout any transition, a task for which the SNSC would be ideally suited.

The Economy: The Necessity of Gradualism

Any modernization of Syria will also have to include significant restructuring of its decrepit state bureaucracy and state-run companies and the introduction of a slew of reforms designed to animate a potentially vibrant private sector. However, unlike many ex-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe that suffered from similar economic ailments, but where the unity of the state was never in question, drastic reform measures in Syria could lead to factionalism that threaten the State's very existence. Hence, popular support for the modernization program will depend upon the state ensuring that all citizens continue to enjoy a decent standard of living. Measures to encourage the equitable distribution of the benefits generated by new investment would help garner wider support for the necessary reforms and limit the scope for intercommunal resentment. Increasing the transparency of budgeting and improving the judicial system would similarly help to minimize the potential for conflict — as well as laying the groundwork for greater administrative and political change.

THE DANGERS OF A HARD LANDING

As noted at the outset of this article, there is a deep division inside Washington over the best policy toward Damascus. For most of its time in office, the Bush administration has refrained from direct contact with Syria, imposing new sanctions in 2004, withdrawing the American ambassador in 2005, and seeking at various times to isolate, overthrow or simply bully a regime that has repeatedly opposed U.S. interests in the region. Although the administration has pursued a more ambiguous approach since 2007, it still has sought to isolate the country and to pressure it to change its behavior. Invitations to participate in the Israeli-Palestinian discussions held in Annapolis in late November 2007 and periodic high-level meetings on Iraq were more than offset by expanding financial sanctions in November 2007 and February 2008, inviting Syrian opposition figures to meet President Bush at the White House in early December, and putting the country on the port-security advisory list in March.

Outside of the White House, most foreign policy commentators and actors argue that Bush's approach has yielded few, if any, of the desired results and contend that some kind of engagement is called for.[29] The bipartisan Iraq Study Group, for example, recommended direct talks with Syria in its report issued in December 2006, and more than a dozen U.S. senators and congressional representatives (including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in March 2007) of both major parties visited the country in the months that followed, emphasizing dialogue as a means to reform the country's behavior.

The two sides of the argument are unlikely to reach consensus any time soon. The two presidential candidates are clearly on opposite sides of the policy divide. Democrat Barack Obama advocates "direct bilateral talks" with Syria so as to "directly present the Syrian regime with a clear choice: fundamentally alter its policies and enjoy the political and economic benefits of closer integration into the world community or face greater isolation and tougher sanctions." Republican John McCain, by contrast, embraces the Bush administration's policy: "The international community must . . . do more to hold Syria accountable for its past and current actions in Lebanon, including its support for Hezbollah, which seeks Israel's destruction. . . . . The U.S. and the international community must face Syria from a position of strength and apply real pressure on the Assad regime to change its dangerous behavior in the region."[30]

Many Americans both inside and outside Washington share McCain's distaste for the idea of talking to Asad, and for good reason, given the Syrian president's record of suppressing political dissent at home and fomenting violence and unrest abroad. Skeptics of engagement also point out that past dialogue with Syria failed to prompt policy changes in Damascus and see no reason that engagement would have a different outcome today. But, in fact, there are two good reasons to give some form of engagement another chance. In the first place, Damascus may be somewhat more receptive today. It recognizes that Syria's social cohesion and economic stability are weakening and threatening the regime's hold on power. Second, those same social and economic trends are increasing the dangers of a hard landing for Syria. The United States and its

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allies could, in fact, find themselves with more leverage over the Syrian regime than in the past if they offered the right mix of carrots and sticks. France, for example, has recently been trying to use a combination of threats and incentives to change Syria's behavior in Lebanon.

At best, a hard landing would shake the fragile bonds that hold Syrian society together, producing the kind of political turbulence seen in the pre-Asad era. At worst, a hard landing would ignite the sociopolitical tensions that lie beneath Syrian society, fueling a protracted civil war along Lebanese lines or propelling Syria into a rapid downward spiral toward sectarian bloodshed along the lines Iraq experienced in 2006-07, after the United States dismantled that country's own Baath regime.

These scenarios would be disastrous for the Syrian people, but they would be profoundly damaging, too, for American interests in the region. Instability in Syria would endanger the progress made in recent months in Iraq and threaten to destabilize Lebanon and possibly even Jordan and southern Turkey, two of the most pro-Western countries in the region. It might also offer extremists another base to expand their operations and another pressure point on the already spiraling energy markets.

Recent events have underlined the Syrian government's ability to significantly shape the regional climate, for both good and ill. The revelation that Syria may have been pursuing a nuclear-weapons program, together with its longstanding ties to Iran and its leading role as a conduit for weapons to Hezbollah and for terrorists to Iraq, show the dangers of completely isolating Syria from the West. On the other side of

the coin, the news that Syria is participating (albeit half-heartedly) in Turkish-mediated indirect peace talks with Israel highlights Syria's potential to contribute positively toward Middle East peace, while underscoring the likelihood that a Syria beset by sectarian divisions would be either unwilling to participate in peace talks or unable to deliver on any agreements it might make. Both sides of the coin are shown in Syria's recent role in Lebanon, where it first blocked and then facilitated the election of a new Lebanese president.

If the United States has powerful reasons to help Syria avoid the dangers of a hard landing, how should it do so while also encouraging significant political change within the country? One alternative, overthrowing the existing government by military force, can presumably be discounted in light of Bush's Iraqi adventure. Another possible strategy, engineering Asad's overthrow by Syrian opposition forces, is unrealistic, given the multifaceted weaknesses of the opposition. This leaves just one option: some sort of tactical engagement that seeks to change the existing regime's behavior.

American policy makers need to face up to the fact that their hopes of seeing Syria enact reform (and avoid a hard landing) are likely to be realized only if the West can convince the existing regime, or a substantial part of it, to undertake that reform itself. This is not all bad news. After all, if the security forces and a significant proportion of the elite were to support rather than oppose the changes, then the stabilizing elements of the Baath regime, such as its social-welfare programs and strong security apparatuses, could be used as a basis of a new, transition-minded government.

How such a transformation takes place will matter almost as much as what kind of transformation it is. The best scenario would see a gradual process whereby the existing, interlocking relationships between the elites of Syria's identity groups evolve through negotiations that generate a broad consensus on how the country can introduce a more pluralistic and accountable system of government. The Asad regime, partly out of weakness, actually has encouraged an environment in which such cooperation and compromise have taken place for many years. If Bashar or a successor regime were to formalize these relationships by bringing them within the framework of an SNSC while avoiding actions likely to promote friction between elites (such as favoring one group over another), many of the troubles experienced by transitioning regimes elsewhere in the region might be avoided. In contrast, the hasty introduction in Syria of a completely open democratic system in which elites jockey through the media for position and compete for a handful of top government jobs — the system that is practiced in Lebanon and, since the U.S. invasion, in Iraq — would only undermine existing relationships and inflame animosities among both the elites and the groups they represent.

What, though, are the chances that the current regime will support reform rather than doggedly oppose it? Bashar has repeatedly promised to introduce substantial change, but he seems to favor an Egyptian model of instituting only limited reforms that leave the political system dominated by the ruling party and the president's cronies, with a toothless opposition in parliament acting as window dressing. Therefore, while the United States and its European allies should offer Bashar substantial incentives to launch a serious campaign of reform, including access to foreign markets, large dollops of aid and all sorts of technical assistance, it should also proclaim its willingness to offer the same deal to any regime that comes to power in Damascus, irrespective of the new group's previous level of involvement with the Asad government. Indeed, the West might well find potential allies among those who were previously powerful figures within the regime but whose personal authority has diminished in recent years as Bashar has narrowed his father's power base, alienating many of the non-Alawite elite. Considering Syria's lack of natural resources, weak economy and history of dependence on external benefactors, the marginalized members of the elite may prove particularly receptive to Western financial incentives.

Furthermore, the concept of a SNSC should help the West persuade at least some members of Syria's elite to support a program of reform. The SNSC format offers representatives of the elite a special role during the extended process of transition, thereby reassuring them that they will continue to enjoy at least some measure of power and influence for the foreseeable future.

Washington has tended to focus only on *political* tools with which to push and prod Syria. However, if Washington were to work with the European Union, it would also have some useful economic, financial and technical means at its disposal to convince whatever government rules in Damascus to embrace political and economic reform.[31] For example, Washington in cooperation with the EU could offer Syria technical assistance in introducing

institutional reforms and access to foreign markets and aid in return for Syria's adherence to a strict timetable for progress. Even Bashar recognized that Syria needs Western carrots to buy off domestic resistance to change, and he sought to use "international economic agreements, particularly an association agreement with the EU, as a lever for impelling greater transparency and spurring policy reform."[32]

The United States should encourage the European Union to reopen discussion on this agreement (which was put to one side when relations worsened over the issue of Lebanon) as part of a larger effort to effect change. The agreement offered free trade and help in "defining and starting the implementation of an economic modernization strategy" and "formulating and implementing an institutional modernization strategy and action plan" in return for a specific set of reforms.[33] Such a program would fit nicely into a comprehensive package from the West that would include asking Damascus to introduce the SNSC and a timeline for some preliminary moves toward a more open political and more effective judicial system, so as to lay a firmer base for the gradual transformation of the state. As certain milestones were reached, the West could also include membership in the World Trade Organization (Syria applied for membership in 2001) as part of a broader package of incentives in return for more reform.

Opening up the country economically would force Syrian companies to compete internationally, thus encouraging businessmen to force the pace of administrative and judicial change to improve their own competitiveness. Similarly, Western financial and technical assistance in the formation of more NGOs and a more robust opposition would help push change from below.

These steps would be but a start on the long path to genuine political reform, but, as governing bodies became more accountable and more Syrians gained direct experience with modern systems of governance, outsiders could steadily raise the bar on what they expected of the regime.

EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

Nurturing a national identity where none exists is essential to any process of democratization and institutional reform. Where groups are more loyal to their subnational or supranational communal identities, they are likely to corrupt or emasculate the independence of national governing bodies such as courts and state ministries and to use election campaigns to stir up intercommunal tensions in ways that endanger the unity of the state. The poisonous environment that often results from such competing loyalties hobbles any attempt to upgrade the state's governing bodies, limiting development prospects and threatening to trap the country in a vicious circle of sectarian competition for control of the state and its resources.

In such countries, enduring democracy can be constructed only in a gradual and piecemeal fashion. Limiting the kinds of freedoms that are introduced at any one time and establishing an NSC to oversee the process of reform may offend the sensibilities of democratic purists, but there may be no other way to foster change, including the embrace of democratic norms, in an environment where institutions are weak and poorly rooted.

[1] Damascus holds this special role in Arab mythology because it was the center of the greatest Arab empire, the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyad mosque in Damascus's old city is still considered to have a special significance in Islam, ranking fourth among religious sites after those in Arabia and Jerusalem.

[2] "The land of the left hand," is the Arabic name for the land north of the Hejaz (it was leftward as one looked east), and traditionally encompassed what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. The term can also refer to the area dominated by Damascus, and the word *al-sham* in Arabic standing alone can refer to the city itself.

[3] See http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm.

[4] Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Brookings Institution, 2005), p. 23.

[5] See International Crisis Group (ICG), *Syria under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, Middle East Report No. 24 (Brussels: ICG, February 11, 2004), p. 2; and Eyal Zisser, "Appearance and Reality: Syria's Decision-making Structure," *Middle East Review of International Affairs,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1998).

[6] Interview with Samir Altaqi in Damascus, January 10, 2007.

[7] Nimrod Raphaeli, *The Syrian Economy under Bashar al-Assad,* Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 259 (Middle East Media Research Institute, January 13, 2006).

[8] Zisser, "Appearance and Reality," p. 36.

[9] Carsten Wieland, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant* (Cune Press, 2006), p. 38.

[10] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook, 2004* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2004); available at https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html.

[11] Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 34.

[12] "Upbeat in Syria: Why President Bashar Assad Is Feeling Cock-a-Hoop," Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) *ViewsWire*, June 6, 2008.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Wieland, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets?* p. 63.

[15] Interview with Altaqi.

[16] Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, *Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations*, Council Special Report No. 33 (Council on Foreign Relations, June 2008), p. 10.

[17] Eyal Zisser, "What Does the Future Hold for Syria?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Herzliya, Israel), Vol. 10, No. 2, June 2006, p. 16.

[18] Joshua Landis and Joe Pace, "The Syrian Opposition," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Winter 2006-7), p. 45.

[19] Wieland, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets?*, p. 53.

[20] Ibrahim Hamidi, "Syria's Stability May Well Be in Kurdish Hands," *Daily Star* (Beirut), May 6, 2005.

[21] Interview with Ibrahim Hamidi in Damascus, January 10, 2007.

[22] Wieland, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets?*, p. 193.

[23] Hamidi, "Syria's Stability May Well Be in Kurdish Hands."

[24] Damascus-based analysts such as Samir Altaqi, Ziad Haidar, and Samir Seifan all suggested this would be the best future scenario for Syria, though they differed over how likely the current regime would want to or be able to bring it about.

[25] Interview with Ziad Haidar, January 17, 2007.

[26] Interview with Samir Seifan, January 18, 2007.

[27] A metaphor used by Altaqi during his interview with the author.

[28] Neil MacDonald, "Bosnia-Herzegovina 2007: Seeking a Formula for Co-existence," *Financial Times*, December 11, 2007.

[29] See Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, *Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations*, Council Special Report No. 33 (Council on Foreign Relations, June 2008), pp. 2-3.

[30] See http://time-blog.com/middle_east/2008/06/middle_east_mccain_vs_obama.html?xid=rss-mideast.

[31] Washington tends to focus only on the political tools it has available, notably, exerting U.S. diplomatic and political power to help Syria regain the Golan Heights from Israel and win international acceptance of Syria's special role in Lebanon.

[32] Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 84-85.

[33] See http://www.delsyr.cec.eu.int/en/eu_and_syria/projects/10.htm.