

Syria First? US Peace Policy in the Middle East

The Middle East peace process does not focus on finding a solution. As the name suggests, it's all about the 'process'. The settlement-driven [hold-up](#) in the current round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations illustrates how diplomatic efforts focus not on final status issues but on the process of empowering the protagonists with the political space to take risks for peace.

We already know what a two-state solution would [look like](#): Israel will withdraw from 92 percent of the West Bank and keep around 650km², where 80 percent of the settlements are. There will be a bridge or tunnel connecting the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Jerusalem will be divided, and a satisfactory (financial) solution will be found for the Palestinian refugees.

To reach this destination, western policymakers should remember that the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is only one 'track' of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The changing dynamics of the region mean that Syria, like Egypt and Jordan in the past, now holds the key to making progress on the path to peace. Commitment to the Israeli-Syrian track has been stop-start from all sides since the first efforts were made in the 1990s; it is now imperative that the Obama administration pursues greater engagement – if not 'first' – then at least concurrently with the negotiations in the Palestinian arena.

A 'multi-track' approach

In relative terms, the settlement of Syrian grievances is immeasurably more straightforward than the epic obstacles facing Israeli-Palestinian negotiators. The crux of the dispute is a ten-metre ring of land in the Golan Heights on the Sea of Galilee's north-eastern shore. This forms part of the Syrian 'bottom line' in negotiations – namely an Israeli withdrawal from land occupied in the 1967 war – and is the only aspect consistently opposed by Israel because of concerns about giving Syria access to its national reservoir.

The issue has not been overcome in any of the substantive negotiations of 1993, 2000, 2007 or the most recent [mediation](#) efforts by Turkey in 2008. Yet, resolutions of the differences are possible and increasingly likely because of Israel's [growing](#) use of water desalination plants, and the promulgation of [draft treaties and proposals](#). Furthermore, despite Syria's greater [strategic orientation](#) towards Iran, it has consistently said that full peace is possible – with all other bilateral issues being negotiable (water, security arrangements, normalization) – as long as its basic demands are met.

Thus the Israeli-Syrian track continues to offer the most likely hope of a breakthrough. It would also enable mediators to limit the destructive capacity of traditional obstacles to progress in the Palestinian arena. Namely, by [diluting](#) the power of Palestinian spoilers, [tempering](#) intra-Palestinian divisions through Damascus' influence over Hamas, and empowering Palestinian representatives by providing greater Arab legitimacy for talks. Yet, the only real attempt at reviving the Syrian track

occurred when US peace envoy George Mitchell visited Damascus in July 2009 - which led to a [short-lived](#) US-Syrian initiative aimed at stemming the flow of insurgents to Iraq. Since then Washington has only floated the [prospect](#) of a US-led 'comprehensive peace', and reportedly only to encourage Syrian President Assad to constrain the Palestinian spoilers – rather than as part of a decisive engagement strategy.

Regional reality

An approach that only utilizes US allies is predicated on regional conditions that are no longer realistic. US policy in the Bush years encouraged a shift in influence by weakening the authority of its traditional peace partners in the 'southern tier' – Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, it [mobilized](#) actors in the 'northern tier' around new shared interests and removed key impediments to Tehran's ability to project power and influence – Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. This realignment has empowered Turkey and crucially facilitated the rise of a self-described 'axis of resistance' comprising Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah which, today, through its significant combined conventional military arsenal, acts as an unprecedented deterrent to Israeli military action.

By threatening Israeli security and US authority, the 'axis' fundamentally undermines the principle of 'land for peace' which underpins the entire peace process. This concept has underwritten all peace efforts since Israel's return of the Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt in 1979, and has been a central tenet of Israeli policy since Rabin's premiership. Yet the continuing threat which followed Israeli withdrawals from south Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005 has [discredited](#) the belief that the return of occupied land can enhance Israel's security.

In popular terms, this new regional context has dire consequences for the Israeli peace narrative. This was [illustrated](#) by every party in the last parliamentary election standing on a platform of 'security for Israel' (rather than 'peace with Palestinians'); while the number of Israelis in favour of withdrawal from the Golan Heights – in return for peace with Syria – has dropped from 45.4 percent to 19 percent in the last [ten](#) years. The impact on Israeli policy, as [articulated](#) by Alastair Crooke, is likely an increasing reversion to a "fortress posture" whereby it maintains security through preventing or subverting any regional threat – by force if necessary – to 'engineer' a docile region. The potential for a [regional conflict](#) - that would suspend peace efforts indefinitely – is exacerbated by Hezbollah's new [position](#) in the Lebanese coalition government and by the possibility that an attack on one axis member would provoke a retaliation from another. Furthermore, as Dr Ahron Bregman [points out](#), Iran 'going nuclear' would spell the end of any peace process because no Israeli PM (left or right) would be able to convince his or her people to give up land in the Middle East. Time is therefore of the essence.

The position of the Syrian regime is frequently opaque and unpredictable: it has, on the one hand, exacerbated tensions by [supplying](#) Scud missiles to Hezbollah militants on Israel's border; while on the other, acted in the face of Iranian warnings by [attending](#) the 2007 US-sponsored Annapolis peace conference. Yet, unlike the other axis members, Syria does not fit a traditional extremist template. It is a secular and highly pragmatic country; it has Shiite partners while supporting the Sunni insurgency in Iraq at the same time. As Syrian expert Itamar Rabinovich [argues](#): it is a "cold blooded dictatorship" that can be indifferent to zeal and ideology and so can pull off sudden

reversals of policy. The Iranian-Syrian alliance is founded on [shared interests](#) rather than cultural or religious affinities – and a [war](#) involving Syria would undoubtedly be against the regime’s interests.

But, as Rabinovich warns, under the “less dextrous” Assad junior, the alliance increasingly resembles a “patron-client relationship”. Therefore, without engagement, Syria will continue to hedge its bets as a spoiler. For the US, there seems little choice but to move beyond the time-consuming (and elusive) settlement issue to seemingly the only regional actor with the ability and inclination to alter the region’s current trajectory.

Diplomatic developments

The Obama administration has undoubtedly taken substantive steps away from the ‘with us or against us’ philosophy that pushed Syria further into Iran’s orbit. Obama has [sought](#) to reach out to the Assad government by nominating the first Ambassador to Damascus since 2005, removing the US block on Syria’s entry to the WTO, and easing certain export licenses. Yet by maintaining [stringent sanctions](#) rather than cultivating trade links towards a country mired in economic stagnation, Syria is pushed into even closer cooperation with Iran.

The weakness of the US approach is encapsulated by its approach to Lebanese-Syrian relations. The Assad regime’s primary policy priority is to control Lebanon either directly or indirectly due to their perceived historical and political connections. Syria has turned to Hezbollah as its primary means to influence Lebanese politics and has seen tangible results, with a steady stream of moderate politicians making the [pilgrimage](#) to Damascus - which only two years ago would have been inconceivable.

Yet Washington remains hamstrung by those who decry engagement as “appeasement” and make the [old argument](#) that a ‘Syria-First’ strategy undermines moderate Arab allies. The only way to reorient Syria away from its militant proxy is to propose a more official connection to the Lebanese establishment or to settle a peace treaty which returns the Golan Heights and so redefines Syrian interests.

The [policy](#) serves as a microcosm of a Cold War paradigm that US policymakers continue to apply – by judging regional actors solely in terms of ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’. This approach gives credence to the notion of a clearly defined ‘axis of resistance’ – when the reality is that the members differ notably in terms of ideology, interests, constraints and sectarian identity.

As a result the US handicaps its own peace process by missing the opportunity to mend Israel-Turkey ties – an invaluable channel to Hamas and Syria on peace talks – and not being able to take advantage of a time when Syria is likely to be more amenable to international engagement due to the [looming prospect](#) of an IAEA investigation and the [fallout](#) from the report) into the assassination of former Lebanese President Hariri. Ultimately, it dilutes efforts to resume and conclude negotiations on the Israel-Syria track which would likely do more to affect Tehran’s calculations than multiple rounds of UN sanctions.

In economic and military terms, Syria is a weak state. Yet, its active support of Palestinian and Lebanese militants combined with the new ‘northern’ center of gravity gives it a disproportionate regional role in the trajectory of the peace process. The current attitude of Syrian President Assad

seems to echo his father's response to Clinton's failed overtures in 2000: namely, that "Syria can wait." Thus the onus is on those advocating peace to take action; the context of the current peace process suggests the region cannot wait much longer.

Sincerely

Joel Bubbers

Joel has recently completed his Masters degree in International Peace & Security from King's College London, and is currently an ISN intern. During his studies he worked at the International Centre for Security Analysis on nuclear developments in the Middle East and has also had work experience in the Palestinian Territories, Rwanda and Washington DC.

Research & Academia

[Center for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies \(CEMOC\)](#)

The Center for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies/Centro de Estudios del Medio Oriente Contemporáneo (CEMOC) is a private think tank devoted to the study of the modern Middle East. CEMOC is the first institution in Latin America working on these issues. It conducts research, publishes a newsletter and a journal, maintains blogs and teaches Middle Eastern languages.

[Peres Center for Peace](#)

The Peres Center for Peace located in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Israel, is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization founded in 1996 by Nobel Peace Laureate and current President of Israel Shimon Peres, with the aim of furthering his vision in which people of the Middle East region work together to build peace through socio-economic cooperation and development, and people-to-people interaction.

[International Crisis Group Syria](#)

The International Crisis Group is an independent, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, with about 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, Crisis Group produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision makers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a 12-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.

[The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the US. The Carnegie Endowment is a global think tank and runs operations in Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, Brussels and Washington.

[United Nations Disengagement Observer Force \(UNDOF\)](#)

The UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was established following the agreed

disengagement of the Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights. UNDOF continues to supervise the implementation of the agreement and maintain ceasefire.

NGOs & Media

[Syrian Arab News Agency](#)

This website provides political, economic, cultural and miscellaneous media services in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Turkish, as well as photo

[Haaretz](#)

Haaretz.com is the world's leading English-language website for real-time news and analysis of Israel and the Middle East.

[Syria Today](#)

Monthly magazine covering Syria's current affairs, politics and culture including economic and social development.

[FW Magazine](#)

Syrian magazine about politics, business, art and culture, society, media and youth.

Please see also our special keywords on [Syria](#) or the [Occupied Territories](#).
