

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**The British-Syrian
Relationship on the
Psychiatrist's Couch**

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April 2005

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Summary & Introduction

Both the British and the Syrians believe that there is potential for improvements in the co-operation between them, but don't know how to bring it about. There seems to be stagnation and a resignation to the status quo. Britain would like Syria to help stabilise Iraq, to fight Al Qaeda, to stop supporting terrorism, to make peace with Israel, to stop seeking weapons of mass destruction and to support democracy and economic development in itself and its neighbours. Syria would like Britain's help to ratify the EU-Syria Association agreement, to reduce US hostility and to offer development assistance. The Syrians would like Britain to take up a more just position on the Israeli-Arab conflict.

One way to unlock the situation is to look through the psychological lens at the relationship. International relations are fundamentally about the relationships between people and groups of people. This is implicit in the practice of Foreign Policy. By making it explicit, it is possible to see new ways forward.

International Relations have been traditionally understood through economics, geopolitics, sociology, law and military theory. While these models remain valid, they are failing to provide comprehensive solutions to emerging international challenges. Behind the abstract concepts and theories of international relations lie people. Foreign Policy is fundamentally about managing the relationships between people and groups of people. Relationships within the "global village" are becoming more like relationships within a real village - the whole world can see what is going on instantaneously and can participate to some degree.

Psychology provides a framework to assess and manage our relationships with other peoples. This includes insights into relationships, psychodynamics, thinking, behaviour, values, identity, communication, emotions, co-operation, conflict, power, influence, group dynamics, social psychology and change management.

Clinical psychiatry and psychotherapy offer insights into psychological analysis, diagnosis, hypothesis-testing, empathy, trust, engagement, facilitation of dialogue, clarification of thinking, strategy, conflict resolution, relationship management and facilitation of change.

This project is the result of a psychological analysis of the British-Syrian relationship by Dr Nicholas Beecroft, a Consultant Psychiatrist. He interviewed forty-nine people at the interface of the British-Syrian relationship including diplomats, politicians, journalists, businessmen, intelligence people, military people, religious leaders, academics, expatriates, NGO workers, professionals and

members of the public. He also studied the literature on the subject. The result is a psychological diagnosis of the relationship with recommendations for how it might be improved. The analysis looks from the British point of view and considers how Britain can relate to Syria in a better way for mutual benefit.

The contents reflect the analysis and conclusions of the author and do not reflect the views of either the British or Syrian Governments or any particular individuals who participated.

Where quotes are given without reference, they are derived from interviews and are non-attributable, according to the Chatham House Rule.

Key Findings

Feelings

- The British feel jaded, tired and frustrated with the Syrian government which they consider to be a paranoid, self-serving, ruthless and corrupt dictatorship. They feel anger at their support for the Iraqi insurgency.
- The Syrians feel disrespected, misrepresented and attacked. Their pride is hurt and they feel that their feelings are not acknowledged.
- The Syrian government is driven by fear and the desire to retain power. This overrides all other considerations.

Mutual perception

- Britain is respected but not trusted by the Syrians.
- Syrians are fond of the British; but they consider them to be pragmatic, rational, calculating, self-interested and Machiavellian.
- Syrians look positively upon the British public's opposition to the Iraq war.
- The good conduct of British soldiers in Iraq has earned respect.
- Britain is blamed for many of the region's problems.
- Britain is losing influence because it is perceived as the US's compliant poodle.
- The Syrians sense the ambivalence of the British towards dealing with their government. This feeds their paranoia and limits potential trust.
- People from both countries find it hard to step into the other's shoes. They tend to see the actions of the others through the lens of their own world-view, rather than getting inside the head and feelings of the other. Each projects its assumptions and imagination upon the other. They find it much easier to name the things which the other country should do to improve the relationship and struggle to think of what their own country might do.
- The British are particularly judgemental about the Syrians.

Strategies

- The Syrian government tries to control all Syrian dialogue with the British.
- The Syrians believe that antagonism, conflict and proxy groups bring them more influence than dialogue, politics and co-operation.
- British strategy is very short-term, media-driven, target-orientated and submissive to the Americans. The Syrians take a much longer perspective on history.

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- The carrot and stick approach to Syria is effective in gaining minimal compliance, but could be significantly improved. A deeper level of co-operation is not possible by this method. Often, the approach is counterproductive because of its emotional effects.

Identity

- Syrian identity is a fairly recent and artificial creation. Most Syrians identify with the historic Ottoman province of "Greater Syria". They aspire to a common Arab and partly Islamic identity. This draws them inevitably into the affairs of those spheres.
- Conflict with Israel and the West has become integral to the Syrian regime's identity.
- Syrians may disagree with their government on internal matters, but they are very patriotic and support many of its foreign policies.
- Playing a global role is integral to the British identity.

Mindsets

- Syria has taken on a paranoid, fatalistic, passive-aggressive position. This saves them from facing reality and makes the British see them as belligerent, uncooperative and irrational.
- The Syrians are more fatalistic, romantic, religious and overtly emotional than the British. They place a high, but selective, value upon respect, pride and justice
- Conspiracy theories are common in Syria, promoted by lack of information, past experience and a climate of fear.
- The British risk underestimating the Syrians due to their unconscious feeling of superiority
- The Syrians limit their own potential with an inferior, victim mindset.
- Polarised thinking on both sides is a barrier to dialogue.

Specific issues

- Syrians are upset and frustrated by their negative image in the West, which they blame on Jewish influence on the media and politics.
- Syrians are angry about the invasion of Iraq. They see it as an imperialist adventure to gain control of the oil, suppress the Arabs and secure the Israelis. They worry they might be next.
- Syrians would like more democracy. Most think it needs to develop at a cultural level as the country develops rather than being externally imposed.
- Most Syrians don't hate Jews or Israel. They do strongly identify with the Palestinians and would like British help in getting justice for them. They would like the Golan Heights back. They consider Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad to be pursuing a legitimate asymmetric campaign against a stronger occupying force. Syrians believe that for the time being, the Israelis have an insurmountable lead in terms of the military, public diplomacy, political lobbying and their alliance with the US. They believe that the current power dynamics will not last for ever. They have a fatalistic and religious belief that justice will come eventually and are prepared to wait.
- The Syrians believe that the British have a duty to help find justice for the Palestinians as the injustices began under British rule. They would like Britain to take an even-handed approach and publicly acknowledge those injustices.

- The British are aware of the injustice but, pragmatically, don't think that much can be done about it. They do not want to embolden the Palestinians to continue a conflict that they can't win. Many British people are afraid to say publicly what they honestly believe about Israel.
- Syrians have close historic, ethnic, political and cultural ties to Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine/Israel. They believe that they have legitimate interests in those countries which the West does not accept.

Recommendations

The British-Syrian relationship is very entrenched and there are many forces maintaining the status quo, however, there is huge room for improvement from a very low base. One cannot expect to improve a relationship like this very quickly, but, with patience, it can be done. There are many different ways in which Britain could improve its approach to Syria. Most of them involve thinking and acting differently as opposed to any specific intervention.

“Joined-up” foreign policy

- Psychologically-informed Foreign Policy should be led from the top, consistent, sustained and determined.
- The more of Britain's allies that can be drawn into such an approach, the more likely it would be to be effective.

Optimise the “carrot & stick” approach

- In order to maximise the efficacy of this behaviourist approach, the implementation needs to be quite precise.
- Identify the desired or undesired behaviour very precisely
- Identify the actors or decision makers
- Identify the potential rewards and punishments precisely
- Apply those with clarity, consistency, contingency and immediacy in the mind of the actors or decision makers
- Be aware of the potential for unforeseen rewards for third parties and knock-on systemic effects
- Maintain the new behaviours with ongoing rewards. This is best done with random, intermittent reinforcement.

We can change others by changing ourselves

- Each country needs to give a lot more thought about what they contribute to the relationship and how they can make it easier for the other to co-operate.
- Empathy: if each can get into the shoes of the other, feel what its like; understand their interests, needs, motives and situational constraints, then there would be increased potential for change.

Overcoming ambivalence

- The Syrians are much more likely to co-operate if they believe that the British are approaching them in good faith.
- Having decided that “regime change” in Damascus is not realistic, it is important to demonstrate a genuine commitment to working with the Syrian government as it is. The Syrians need genuine reassurance that they are not going to be tricked or undermined, particularly given the US position.

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Relate to other countries as people like ourselves, not as objects at a distance

- Foreign policy is about managing the relationships between people and groups of people. This requires all the social and emotional skills that we use in individual and small-group relationships.

Embrace Syria with a positive attitude

- Be more humble and magnanimous.
- Be proud and confident, but not arrogant or patronising.
- Show goodwill, sincerity, compassion and genuineness
- Warmth, compassion, encouragement and optimism get better results than hostility, paranoia, defensiveness and contempt.
- This doesn't mean being "nice" or "naïve". It means being aware that almost everyone has good parts which one can relate to and respect, whilst remaining aware of the not-so-nice parts.
- Syrian needs to be nurtured to mature from its weak, inferior and passive mentality into being an adult country which relates to others in a normal and effective way.

Empathy

- Acknowledge Syrian feelings and perceptions; this need not imply agreement.
- Try hard to imagine how one would think, feel and act in the other's shoes.
- Don't be blinded by judgement, prejudice, emotions or wishful thinking.

Strive for shared values; don't be too judgmental

- Don't judge people, judge behaviours.
- Promote values such as democracy, human rights, economic development, peace, justice, freedom of speech and the rule of law.
- Acknowledge one's own shortcomings and challenges.
- Make it seem like a joint endeavour rather than an external manipulation.
- Communication is much more persuasive if it is perceived as coming from an honest messenger who tells both sides of the story.

Building trust & reputation

- Actions speak louder than words.
- There is a limit to what PR management, posturing and statements can achieve.
- Anticipate the long-term impact of behaviour.
- Celebrate British successes and strengths.
- Acknowledge past mistakes and shortcomings.

Model the desired behaviours

- Leadership by example: improve and uphold democracy, the rule of law, free speech and human rights at home as well as championing them abroad.
- Avoid double standards.
- Behave according to consistent values.
- Sincerity and honesty pay dividends.
- Deliver on promises.

Build a common vision, or at least offer a positive vision

- Promote a positive vision of how Syria could relate to Britain, the EU and its region.
- Try to build upon common values, interests and challenges.
- Help the Syrians to develop a positive identity and vision that is compatible with their reality and to which inspires them to change for the better.
- Those who take on the risks of change need to have a new identity and ideology which underpins their new behaviours.

Tackling conspiracy theories

- Act consistently with integrity, sincerity and honesty.
- Provide timely, open, honest and balanced information.
- Challenge lies and misconceptions.

Increasing Syrian co-operation on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

- Publicly acknowledge that the Palestinians have suffered an injustice and that that needs to be properly addressed in any resolution of the dispute.
- Express support for the return of the Golan Heights to Syria.
- Acknowledge that events under British rule caused harm to the Palestinians.
- Persuade Israel and the US that, in order to be secure, Israel needs to address the issues of justice, identity and pride of the Arabs.
- Facilitate discreet dialogue between the hawks in Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Israel.

Promoting dialogue with Syria's neighbours, the US & Europe

- Facilitate a better dialogue between Syria and its neighbours so that, with patience, they can achieve their goals and meet their needs through politics rather than destabilisation and proxy groups.
- Provide Syria with training in public diplomacy and political lobbying to enable Syria to fight its battles through politics rather than conflict and to help it get a fairer hearing.

Fostering intra-Syria & intra-regime dialogue & development

- Foster a spirit of openness, dialogue, public debate and non-ideological problem-solving.
- The BBC Arabic service is listened to by many opinion formers and could be augmented to reach the mass population with a television service.
- There is potential to increase dialogue through assistance in non-political areas such as economics, finance, technology and academia. The Syrian military needs training, equipment and reform.
- Provide Syrians with the technology to use the internet freely without government interference.
- Helping to develop the economy will gradually provide more incentives to change and broaden the power bases which are more conducive to pluralism, democracy and peace.

The EU association agreement

- This can be used effectively as a lever for positive change.
- Keep the dialogue private to avoid shame and hurt pride.

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Engaging Syrian help in Iraq

- Genuinely assure Syria that it is not “next on the list”.
- Involve it in consultations.
- Facilitate dialogue between Syria and the new Iraqi government.
- Have a credible plan for allied military withdrawal within the not too distant future.

Weapons of mass destruction

- It is not realistic to try to persuade the Syrians not to seek the best weapons that it can afford and obtain.
- Physically prevent it getting the weapons.
- Offer something else more desirable in exchange.
- Make Syria feel more secure and, therefore, less in need of weapons.

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Part 1: Psychological Analysis of British-Syrian Relations

The current situation

Both the British and the Syrians are disappointed with the degree of co-operation which they receive from the other country. Each believes that there is a large potential for improvement but don't know how to bring it about. There seems to be stagnation and a resignation to the status quo. There is significant animosity between the governments but not between the peoples. Both Syria and the West treat each other more like an evil object than as a group of people with whom they would like to co-operate. In fact, on both sides the distinction is made between governments and people. Most people showed respect and warmth for the people of the other country. Their criticism was saved for the governments and vested interests on the other side. British-Syrian relations on issues not related to the Middle East are businesslike and tend towards pragmatic co-operation. The main disagreements arise over Iraq, the Arab-Israeli dispute, Syrian involvement in Lebanon, support for terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

What does Britain want from Syria?

Britain has quite a long shopping list of improved co-operation that it would like from Syria. It needs Syrian help or acquiescence in promoting stability and security in Iraq. At the very least, Britain would like Syria to stop supporting insurgents in Iraq. Britain would like Syria to become more proactive in its co-operation against Al Qaeda. It would like Syria to give up its support of terrorist and paramilitary proxies in Lebanon and Israel. Britain would like to persuade Syria that it doesn't need to improve its biological or chemical weapons capabilities. Britain would like Syria to become more democratic, open, capitalist and co-operative. Britain would prefer that Syria was a friendly source of stability and influence in the Middle East. In short, "Britain would prefer that Syria would become a normal country to deal with".

What does Syria want from Britain?

Syria would like Britain's help to get the EU-Syria Association agreement signed and ratified. Syria would like to harness British influence in Washington to reduce active US hostility and to get a more sympathetic hearing. Syria would like British practical assistance in economic, technical, educational and managerial capacity-building. The Syrians would prefer it if Britain took up a position on the Israeli-Arab conflict that they considered more even-handed and just. Syria would like British support for the return of the Golan Heights.

British feelings

The British feel quite jaded and tired with the Syrians. There is a sense of impotence, that nothing will change and that previous attempts at co-operation have been rebuffed.

They feel that they do listen and do understand what the Syrians say, but that the Syrians are unreasonable and pursuing an ineffective strategy. They often feel incomprehension because of the lack of adequate information on the Syrian regime. They are frustrated that it is so hard to get any co-operation from the Syrians. There is a feeling of contempt for the regime, which is seen as entirely self-serving and corrupt, acting against the interests of the people. There is anger at the Syrians' support for the Iraqi insurgency. The general public don't think too much about Syria but, when prompted, tend to have negative feelings vaguely related to them being anti-Western, terrorist-supporting and generally threatening.

Syrian feelings

Fear pervades Syrian psychology. The people are afraid of the regime. The regime is afraid of the people, other countries and itself.

The Syrians feel very hurt and misunderstood. They feel angry that they are not shown due respect and that they are unjustly denigrated. They feel frustrated that they are not listened to. They feel that their needs, rights and feelings are not acknowledged.

“Syria is pushed into a corner and told to do the right thing but it is never told what’s on offer and they never promise to listen to our frustrations, grievances and needs.” “Syria doesn’t deserve to be treated this way. Syria is treated with misunderstanding. This is partly ignorance and partly scapegoating.” “We are in pain. Pain because our pride is damaged and pain because we are cut off from our environment. It is unbearable.”

The Syrians identify with the Palestinians as a fellow Arab victim of the West and take pride in providing resistance to the overwhelming enemy. The Syrians permanently mourn for perceived losses - of Arab unity, of a glorious past, of their rights, of Lebanon, Jordan and of Palestine. They are vigilant for attempts to further attack them and determined to suffer no further losses.

The Syrians are quite tired of being stuck in a permanent state of conflict and resistance to change. “More and more people just want to get a life.” There is a strong feeling of disappointment in some that the new president did not cause more of a change for the better and that the conservative forces have prevailed.

Fearful paralysis & vested interests

The overriding motivation of the Syrian government is to retain power. The inherently unstable foundation of their power means that they have to be constantly vigilant for internal or external threats. As a result, they feel very insecure and are driven by fear - of change, of attack, of opposition, of openness, of dialogue and of conspiracies. To a degree their fear is probably justified, but it is magnified by the nature of the regime to a state of paranoia. Through the activities of the secret police, military and the all-pervasive bureaucracy, this fear reaches every corner of society.

This fear makes it very hard for Syria to relate to other countries in a secure, normal, friendly and co-operative way. When people are anxious and afraid, there is a loss of tolerance for ambivalence, uncertainty and complexity that makes simplistic and extreme positions more attractive, leading to polarisation. Fear distorts perceptions and causes a paralysis. No one dares take an initiative for fear of the consequences.

“The West needs to understand that the regime is paralysed by fear. Everything they do must include the calculation as to the effects that it will have on their power and security. This means that they’re inherently suspicious of change.”

Every external approach is perceived as potentially conspiratorial. “They prevent anyone interfacing with the outside world who is not one of the close and trusted members of the regime. They dare not allow any genuine discussion. Their aim is to prevent the outside world from finding out who is in charge, how the regime works and to stop anyone gaining any influence or leverage.” “They even do this to

their 'friends' the Iranians. They are friends with them solely with regard to Hezbollah. Otherwise, they are just as much in the dark as anyone else.”

Other causes of resistance to change are centralised control, lack of communication, risk aversion, lack of imagination, Soviet mindset, lack of skills and bureaucracy. The dilemma for the regime is how to reform economically and politically without losing power or harming vested interests.

To an extent the Syrians are whipped up into a false reality of the ever present conflict with Israel which prevents them from talking about their real, everyday internal concerns. This may be unconscious but certainly deflects criticism away from the regime.

“The country is in big trouble economically. It has one of the world’s highest population growth rates and no jobs for those people. That’s a recipe for trouble.” “They relied on cheap oil and smuggling into Iraq, so much of their income has dried up.” “There are a lot of vested interests in Lebanon. Certain people in the military and intelligence world have set up their own empires in Lebanon and are going to be very resistant to giving those up.”

“The regime is sclerotic. Nothing happens quickly. Everyone is afraid to do anything without clearing it with those above. It is always much easier to say no than to take a chance.”

Behaviour-control by mind-control

Syria is a dictatorship and policed state. The state tries to control people’s behaviour by controlling their beliefs and feelings. Syria has been psychologically isolated for many years by dictatorship, ideology and fear.

The regime promotes a carefully designed belief-system through the media and public channels. Public expressions of dissent are suppressed. The state has a tight control over many aspects of people’s lives. This includes influence over people’s jobs, bureaucracy, and travel. The secret police infiltrate the society widely and people have to be very careful about what they say about politics. The state has repeatedly used violence, torture, execution and intimidation to silence critical voices.

“They’re brainwashed and not even aware of the real world. The problem is that it has been impossible to discuss anything or be open to new things for 40 years. So everyone is naive and they don’t know what’s happening.”

Syrian power - intra-regime dynamics

The general consensus is that the President was chosen by the leadership coalition because he provides a low-risk figurehead for stability and continuity. Most people feel that he is keen on economic reform but only modestly interested in political liberalisation. “The President represents reform but is not infinitely powerful.” He is very much restricted by a coalition of people with their own power bases. Most of these are in the military-security complex. They have vested interests of power, control, social status, money, identity, stability and security.

“The President does not have enough confidence to overrule his father’s men. He doesn’t realise that if he would dissolve parliament and the Ba’ath party and have proper elections, the people would dance in the streets and make him King.”

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“Bashar is anxious about the slow pace of reform. He has admitted to reporters recently that he has not accomplished much. All the pundits have been claiming that the old guard really controls things and that the official government doesn't really count. It is the secret government of security chiefs and Ba'ath apparatchiks who really run things, they say. That is why the hundreds of new laws being passed change so little. Bashar pushes the buttons of government power, but nothing happens, is the standard complaint.” Others argue that this is a deliberate ploy to deflect pressure from the President onto unnamed people in the shadows and so serves the purpose of avoiding pressure for reform.

“There is a kind of mafia in the intelligence services which really rules the country and most of the Ministers and the president didn't really control them or know what they get up to. Even the ministers have to get the intelligence services to sign a piece of paper before they can do anything. They are a mafia who are solely interested in money and power.”

“Power: the regime has been described as a dictatorship without a dictator. A lot of people have to be carried along: the family of the President, the security establishment, the Party and public opinion all weigh heavily.”

The Syrian regime's political mindset

Syria has many minds; there are millions, but in practice there are several group minds. There is the regime mind. Obviously the key individuals all have their own views and positions. To some degree there is a cohesive group mind. This includes many false beliefs. Some hold the false beliefs with absolute certainty. Others consider them totally false, but pay them lip service. Most share the assumptions, paradigm, prejudices and emotional attachments but with some level of awareness of the limitations on the model and some awareness of alternative potential mindsets.

The official Syrian position is that it is a democracy ruled by President Assad and his Ministers, and held to account by a freely elected Parliament and independent judiciary. The ruling Ba'ath party ideology is nominally socialist and pan-Arab.

One of the psychological pillars of the regime is the patriotic belief that Syria is “the last Arab castle, holding out against the onslaught of Crusaders”. “They know that they cannot win in the short term, but that if they hold out until the power dynamics change, they will be the seed of the revival.” They intensely feel the humiliations of Arab defeat and occupation by the original Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British and French, the Israelis and now the Americans. They feel that their Arab brothers have either surrendered or betrayed them.

When people are anxious and afraid, there is a loss of tolerance for ambivalence, uncertainty and complexity that makes simplistic and extreme positions more attractive, leading to polarisation.

“It's no good just bringing in new laws and a free market.” “There are educational hurdles to reform. They are stuck in a kind of Eastern European Communist mindset. They have been socialist for so long that they just don't know how to think any other way.”

The Emperor has no clothes

Just like in the old Communist countries, the regime holds on to power through controlling the people. It is much easier to control people's behaviour by controlling their beliefs and emotions rather than using crude manipulation through money, violence and social rewards. It's obvious that the moral and political foundations of the regime are very shaky and couldn't stand up to genuine scrutiny through public debate or the little boy saying "the Emperor has no clothes".

"Now we can watch satellite TV, we know that the State media is ridiculously biased." "No one believes in ideology any more. They just believe in power. They don't know how to talk. They don't understand opposition. They are shocked and amazed when they are criticised and they don't know how to respond. They're not used to it. The trouble is that they have had 40 years of brainwashing and they even believe their own propaganda. They base their arguments on assumptions and beliefs that are non-negotiable and 90% wrong. It is treason to speak like this."

"Therefore it is necessary for them to maintain the fiction of a state of war with Israel (and the US), and the fear of an Iraqi-style anarchy or Iranian-style theocracy." The fear of these alternatives massively increases the emotional pain of even contemplating anything that could lead to a change in the status quo. "Anyone who challenges this must therefore be a traitor, stupid or an agent of the enemy." There are huge sanctions for openly challenging the regime.

"For the regime, it keeps them in power. They frighten everybody into thinking there's a much bigger threat than there is. This is the excuse for a large security apparatus and they are told that any changes risk collapse. It's a convenient enemy. There is a threat, but it's much exaggerated."

Potential for regime change

Some predict that a regime collapse could lead to anarchy, civil war, regional instability or a fundamentalist state and that that wouldn't be in British interests. The best-informed British opinions believe that the only serious threat to the Syrian regime in the medium term is an internally organised coup and this seems not to be desirable or likely from the British point of view. Different people seem to have wildly differing views on this. Those who are better connected seem to go with the following:

"They have so effectively crushed any opposition and prevented organisation of opposition that there is no chance of a revolution. People are well fed. If you just get on with your life, they don't interfere with you. Syria is not Iraq. 80% of the population supports the government. There is no opposition in waiting either at home or abroad. There is little chance of an Islamism take over as they are fairly moderate and believe in accommodation."

Syria's other political mindsets

Syrians hold private views that are as varied and complex as anywhere. The main strands of thinking are liberal, tribal and Islamic. However, outsiders should not make the same error as was made in Iraq. It is not a country of pro-Western, liberal democrats waiting to be liberated. The Syrian people are genuinely proud and patriotic. Many criticise their government but they do support its basic premises on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, on foreign neo-imperialism and on Iraq. Even the brutally repressed Muslim Brotherhood wrote to the government pledging its support in the event of a US attack from Iraq.

Syrian thinking

There are some real cultural differences in thinking. Syrians are much more religious, fatalistic and overtly emotional than the British. Coming from secular Britain, it's rather a shock to find that most people actually do believe in their religion. That's a barrier, as it represents a whole set of unshared assumptions. Syrians tend to have a strong sense of personal pride, leader worship, tribal feeling, high expressed emotion and courtesy. "This courtesy is hypocritical. An Arab will say you are his friend; he likes you and wants to help you. Up to a point, he sincerely means it, although at the same time he doesn't mean it as urban life is transient and there is a limit to the reality of such bonds. This means people love to come to Syria. By contrast, take a Bavarian. They will say that if I make you my friend, I will give you everything. Arabs don't believe that. They are less all or nothing, more realistic."

Westerners often have a prejudice about Arabs that they are always prepared to do a deal. Part of the British misunderstanding of the Syrians is that they really do have some red lines that they won't cross. On certain issues, they will not compromise on their pride, their identity or perceived justice. They are more prone to emotional and romantic statements that they take as fact. They can't necessarily understand why the British like to argue out the logic in fine detail. "For us, we like the statement 'we want the Golan back' or 'we want justice for the Palestinians' to stand on its own as an emotionally valid truth. But we don't know how to argue our case so they run rings around us. For us these words are as if they are from God. They are absolute and non-negotiable. But that makes it difficult to make our case." "This is where extremism comes from...it's black or white thinking. No argument or debate."

From the outside, this failure to provide adequate explanations makes Syrians look unreasonable while they think that they're just stating indisputable facts. The British see their relationship with Syria in a very rationalistic, materialistic, analytical way. The Syrians see it in a very emotional, spiritual way. Each would benefit from learning the other's language.

Both British and Syrians mention the "stuck record" of the regime rhetoric on specific issues. Mostly people are quite jaded by the feeling of "pressing the button and the old story comes out". They roll their eyes and switch off when the speech starts coming out. They feel that the monologue is not very genuine and prevents real relating.

When asked why the Syrians don't just make peace, develop their economy and have normal relations with its neighbours, the Syrian response is that "This is a Western way of thinking. Arabs don't think like that. We would rather wait until we get justice." "It cannot last for ever because in the end God makes everything just." "We will wait until the Americans are less powerful." The British view is that this is pointless struggle against a currently immovable object. "They would rather sit in a tent outside the house and throw stones in."

"We are not like Americans. We don't sell something and someone says 500 and one 1,000 so we agree on 750. For us it is an absolute. We will not accept giving up our rights for anything. It is a matter of justice. We [Arabs] have had 800 years of defeat. We lost half of Palestine and now the Israelis want us to accept the loss of another half. It's impossible. They can just implement the UN resolutions, and that's it. Peace for ever."

“They don’t think in a 'Getting to Yes,' 'How to win friends and influence people' or 'Win-win' style.” “They would rather lose everything or be alone in the desert for a thousand years than accept an injustice or a slight to their identity.” “When pushed into a corner, this makes them impossible to deal with except by raw power and the threat of violence.” However, “if they are respected, protected, embraced, they melt” and become warm, friendly, open and co-operative.

“Syria has a strong need for a leader and a sense of solidarity. You must be careful therefore to show respect to a Syrian and to acknowledge him. But you must not go over the top, or they consider you insincere.”

“Syria is a reaction type culture. People just survive; they don’t plan ahead with goals. I don’t think anyone in Syria has ever sat down and thought through the strategy in dealing with the UK because they have never done it for anywhere.”

“There is a lot of jealousy in Arab culture. People tend to live the same from generation to generation and resent those who make progress.”

“Syria is very tolerant of different religions. We are a secular society but respect people's freedom to be religious.”

“There is a lot of victim mentality here and the associated sense of self-righteousness. It enables the assertion of rights without any discussion. It encourages an appeal to emotional expectations and demands rather than opening a dialogue of reason.”

Conspiracy theories

“Conspiracy theories are endemic.” “Arabs tend to believe in conspiracy theories, like the Great Game, all the time.” Gossip develops where there is a lack of trustworthy information. Gossip becomes conspiracy theories in an atmosphere of fear. People’s beliefs about the world tend to reflect their past experiences. The Syrians have experienced a rather Machiavellian world.

The main themes regarding Britain are stories which show how devious and manipulative Britain is and stories which show Britain as a part or pawn in an Israeli-American plot. It can be frustrating for the British to be the subjects of conspiracy theories as they are hard to disprove, and where they are disproved, another twist in the story develops to fill the vacuum.

Syrian identity

Although Syrian identity is an accepted concept, it is not an identity to which the “Syrians” feel very emotionally attached. To most, it is an identity imposed by the French and British Mandates. The Syrians see themselves as an amalgam of many different influences brought through trade, migration and conquest.

Syrians identify with the former Ottoman Region of Bilad-U-Sham, comprising Syria, Lebanon, Mosul (Iraq), Palestine (including Israel) and Jordan. “The peoples of the Greater Syria share the same ideals, aspirations, values, hopes and home.” Syrians see themselves as the natural senior member of this region, with Damascus as the capital. No one could cite any serious support for this in any of the other countries noted. Syrians feel especially close to Lebanon culturally. Those close to the state orthodoxy stick to the line that it should be “two countries, one people” with the eventual aim of unification. Others have a strong affinity for the people but don’t think their regime should dominate the Lebanese.

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Syrians have a strong attachment to the idea of being an Arab - the Syrian part of the Arab world. They are mostly realistic enough to see that Arab unity is a nice idea but not currently practical. Nevertheless it has strong emotional appeal. It is especially powerful in dealings with the world beyond - so that the coalition attack on Iraq is felt as a personal attack upon the Syrians as brothers and fellow Muslims. "Syrians do not dream great dreams nowadays. Pan-Arab nationalism used to be an important component of Ba'athism but matters less today. Nobody these days talks of destroying the southern neighbour. Greater Syria still has some vestiges of emotional appeal but is not a rallying cry. More and more people just want to get a life."

Syrians are very proud and patriotic and have the mindset of a large, powerful people even though their reality doesn't fit this. Perhaps there are some parallels with England, which finds it hard to accept the small English identity in place of the British or Global Power identity.

"Syria sees itself as 'the last Arab castle', the beating heart of Arabism, the Arab country which has held out against Israel and its supporters in the West while all around it were backsliding. Many other Arabs have a real contempt for this and find it irritating." "Very few Syrians actually believe it, but it is a mantra and they are afraid that the system will collapse if they admit it." Antagonism to the West and conflict with Israel have become incorporated into Syrian identity and are psychological pillars of the regime. This acts as a disincentive to become more co-operative and friendly.

Many Syrians would like to be much closer to Europe. "We want to be taken into the EU region and build up slowly. Our people are very intelligent and will do well in the EU. They are white and 20% are Christians, unlike the 70 million Turks."

Syria's borders

Because Syrians identify with the "Greater Syria" of Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, they feel that, at least, they have legitimate interests in those countries and, maybe, a right to intervene. They say that the region is interdependent economically and culturally and that they need to have a special relationship with those countries. Members of the regime have benefited from controlling aspects of the Lebanese economy and are naturally reluctant to give that up. Nevertheless, the emotional and cultural attachment to those neighbours is very strong, if not well reciprocated. Simply accepting the current borders as semi-permanent is a very significant psychological hurdle for many and would remove another pillar of the regime's ideology and justification for its policies in neighbouring countries.

"We are told to stay within our borders ... But we don't accept those borders ... they were forced upon us by the British and French Mandates. The borders are artificial and drawn up for the benefit of the occupiers and not for the reality on the ground. There was always a Kingdom of Syria, which varied in size over the years. Take Amman. During the Mandate, it had only 1,000 people who were local. Most of the rest who grew it into a city came from Damascus and then the Palestinian refugees came and make up 60% of the population. So we are all mixed up. Families were divided. We don't recognise Syria, Lebanon, Palestine or Jordan as being real countries. We have had to accept it and they have become more real as we have been forced to stay in our box, but we still don't accept that we have no legitimate interest there. For example, we need Lebanon. It is our lung to breathe. They are the business people who do all our trade. Iraqis are like brothers, there

shouldn't be a barrier. Mosul is closer to Aleppo than Baghdad. There was a sense of illegality at the outset. It has lessened but it is still there."

Syria in the media

Syria has chronically been vilified in the British and US media. The general population's prejudice about Syria is that it is an enemy, evil dictatorship which supports terrorists and that it is a dangerous place. The Syrians know that their media image is very negative and prejudiced against them. They know that Israel has been incredibly effective at swaying Western political assumptions in its favour, in part, because of very effective media relations, public diplomacy and political lobbying. They are pretty much resigned to this and are not actively thinking about how to promote a more sympathetic representation of their country.

"We have a real problem with imbalance in the media. This is for several reasons. Firstly, the Syrians are not there to speak. There is a lack of knowledge about the region. And ignorance. We are incapable of making our case. We are so tired and frustrated that we become lazy. We have accepted that we can't beat the pro-Israeli media and given up. They have been at it for decades and are very effective. They have programmed the people. Even journalists are lazy. They want an easy story. They can't be bothered to ask challenging questions. When was the last time you heard Israel challenged [exchange of examples] ... but Robert Fisk of the Independent is the only one who is equally critical of Syria and Israel. The media here tend to follow the US lead. If the NYT says something, they all copy it. It is mostly laziness and fixed assumptions ... the Jews want to constantly remind the world of their plight but they deny the crimes that they have done themselves."

Syrian involvement with the Iraqi insurgency

"The Syrians feel very angry about the allied invasion of Iraq. They didn't like Saddam Hussein, but they don't believe that it was a benevolent action. They believe that it was done to gain control over the oil, to suppress Islam, to protect Israel, to maintain new military bases and to maintain US dominance." They are quite anxious about the situation in Iraq. They fear that civil war, Islamism, crime, tribalism, foreign influence or fragmentation would spread to Syria. However, they have sympathy for the insurgents. They identify with the desire to resist a foreign invader, especially a non-Muslim one. "They are afraid that an emboldened US will turn next on them. They want just enough insurgency to give the US a bloody nose in Iraq, but not too much which would give them the excuse to stay and might spill over into Syria." "Many of the 'Mercedes refugees' from the Iraqi regime brought a lot of money with them. There is a financial incentive to support or acquiesce in the Iraqi insurgency."

"They [the coalition] are having a very difficult time in Iraq and are looking for someone to blame. Whenever they are under pressure they stir up the stories about us inciting insurrection and sending arms. Of course a few do go, and why shouldn't they? But it's not organised. We're not helping them." "Everyone would be so much more co-operative if the Americans gave a timetable for leaving. We fear that they plan to stay for as long as they can and will attack us next."

Syrian beliefs about democracy

Most Syrians would like to have more democracy. "For those in power to give up power, they need to either have no choice, by removing their power, or they need to choose democracy because it offers them money, power and security." Those at the liberal end believe that democracy could be possible straight away, but most feel that it must evolve at a pace which the country can manage. "You see we have had

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centuries of occupation. That breeds a weak, poor and fearful people. Democracy grows in a healthy environment. It will take time.” “To be democratic, you must be democratic inside.” “Democracy can’t just be imposed suddenly. It has to develop in the hearts of the people. If we tried to do it suddenly, we would end up like Iraq. People prefer security to a vote.” Others fear that the society is not yet sophisticated enough for democracy and that it would quickly descend in to tribalism or Islamism. “Democracy in Britain is really anchored in the people. They really believe it. Not so true in America. They are puritans, extremists and intolerant.”

Syrian attitudes towards Israel & Palestine

The Syrians deny Israel as an entity to some extent. Both Israel and Syria harbour magical fantasies of total victory and destruction of the other, which is the mirror of the fear of total destruction by the totally evil other. Both sides dehumanise the other, vilify them and reduce the capacity for dialogue, respect, trust, liking and an empathic awareness of the other’s needs and motivations.

Most Syrians do not seem to hate Israel, hate Jews or even desire the destruction of Israel. They certainly feel aggrieved at having been defeated, lost the Golan Heights and having been isolated by successful Israeli coalition-building. They strongly identify with the perceived injustice done to the Palestinians in the original creation of Israel and in subsequent events. They feel a great deal of anger for what has happened. In the short term, they feel powerless and impotent to bring about justice.

They believe that Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad are engaging in asymmetric warfare in legitimate resistance to an oppressive occupier. They draw parallels to US support for the IRA and French resistance to the Nazis. They see it as Jewish imperialism, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. They believe that the Israelis have been successful in using internal influence in the West to harness Western foreign policy for their own ends. They feel they have little chance of reversing this.

They perceive that the Israelis and Western Jews have been effective in persuading the establishments, media and public of the West to see the situation from the Israeli point of view. They point to Jewish influence in the media, finance, business and politics as a cause of their vilification and weakness. They feel pretty powerless to stand up to this and are aware that by comparison, the Syrians and Arabs in general are very poor at getting their points across, being positively perceived and building support. They don’t know how to do it any better.

To a degree, they feel exhausted and are ready to negotiate to get the Golan back and leave the Palestinians to their own business. Part of them feels humiliated by this weakness. Partly they would prefer to remain weak, poor and vilified but feel that justice is on their side. In straight realpolitik terms they know that in the course of history, the dominance of the US is not likely to last and other players may tip the balance. They’re prepared to wait. Unlike Western governments which tend to be very short term thinking, they think in generations. “The Jews came back after 2000 years. Do they think that we will forget after 50 years?”

“Syria wants a lasting peace, not a temporary one forced upon Arabs at a time of weakness which will just be undone by future generations. Syrians and Arabs just don’t let things go like Europeans and Americans. They remember things and harbour grudges and resentments.”

“A successful Israel-Palestinian deal and the creation of a truly independent Palestinian state would rob Damascus of the valuable Palestinian card. Syria’s militancy toward Israel is the only asset it has in the Middle East. Were that pillar to be removed, Syria would be reduced to a third-rate power with far less influence in the Arab world.”

Syrian attitudes to Islamic fundamentalism & Al Qaeda

The Syrian regime believes that it has the internal threat from Al Qaeda under control. “They very effectively pacified the Muslim Brotherhood so that they are now a moderate pluralist group. They control the key Islamic figures in the country and there is no organised resistance.” Some Syrians believe that “Islamic fundamentalism is growing dangerously. We are afraid of it, but people turn to it because religion is the only certainty and the only channel available for people who are very frustrated with their lives and feel powerless.”

“The Syrians have lately started to rethink their position as a result of a terrorist attack against the UN headquarters in Damascus in April 2004 by local Syrians, who went to Iraq to fight the Americans and after a few months returned to Syria to continue their struggle against the West and against the enemies of Islam. The Syrian regime knows that in the future those dissidents may also attack other enemies of Islam, including the secular regime itself.”

“The natural history of these radical Islamic groups is to bring stability and over a long time to evolve into secular regimes. This is the process which occurred in Europe over centuries. The problem is that we expect the Middle Eastern people to do it at our pace. That sets us up as an easy bogeyman and reinforces the currency of the radical nationalist or Islamic identity.”

Syrian pursuit of WMD

Many believe that the Syrians have chemical and possibly biological weapons and that they are actively seeking to improve their rocket delivery systems. The Syrians believe that it is their right to arm themselves as best they can to protect against the many perceived threats in their region. The main limitations to developing WMD and delivery systems are believed to be economic and technological. It is not realistic to persuade Syria not to have the best weapons that it can afford and obtain. Syria’s interest and priority afforded to these efforts might be reduced if it felt more secure. Obtaining WMD would give the Syrians more power; more kudos, more machismo, a seat at the top table, more respect and an extra bargaining chip, and deter enemies.

Syrian feelings towards Britain

Syrians make a clear distinction in talking about the British government and the British people. They generally seem to have a genuine warmth and admiration for British people and culture. “The President and his wife love Britain.” She was brought up in the UK, her family live there and he spent two years there training to be an ophthalmologist.

The British tend to take a pragmatic approach to negotiations, looking for deals that can be done rather than sticking to fantasy or ideological positions. They seem to be highly rational in their approach, and are perceived as such by the Syrians. However, the Syrians perceive that the British lack a strong emotional sense of the importance of things which matter to them - such as pride, respect and identity. The British seem to hear what the Syrians say but don’t really acknowledge or respond in a way which makes the Syrians feel like they’ve made a connection.

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“The Foreign Office people are exceptionally intelligent in the rational dimension, but very lacking in emotional and social intelligence. They think they know all the answers and are blind to their Achilles’ heels.”

They make less distinction between the Britain of today and the Britain of the past. Britain’s historic role as an imperial power in the drawing of the modern borders, the divide and rule strategy, power games and the creation of Israel are still alive in the Syrian memory. They see modern British actions through this lens. “We all know that Britain is responsible for many of our troubles in the Middle East. They drew the maps with the false borders and the Balfour Declaration let the Zionists take over Israel. But the Americans have taken on that role in the last few decades.”

Syrians believe that the British are highly rational and very interests-driven. “Britain eats on the way up and eats on the way down. The dream of Empire never leaves.”

“Britain is respected but not trusted. Everyone in the Arab world will tell you that the British are polite and express friendliness but they always have a hidden agenda. Power games ... for resources, domination, control and influence. They play good cop, bad cop with the USA. This has developed over many decades from Balfour and Sykes-Picot into a conspiracy theory in the Arab folklore. I don’t think it’s often that true, but the perception is there. It’s useful to have as a scapegoat to blame all our troubles on the British in history.”

Many people do think that “Britain has a responsibility to help solve the problems of the Middle East because it helped to cause them”.

“Syrians have a respect for the British mind. They plan for years ahead, are very thoughtful, intelligent. They are not patronising like the French. They give their opinion and leave it to you to make your mind up. They’re not pushy like the Latins. But the French understand Arabs much better ... they laugh at the same jokes and drink together. That is why they have done better in the Middle East. The British take diplomacy seriously. They send their cream to the Empire or to a third world country, not low-level criminals like some countries.” “The relationship with Britain is very diplomatic [polite]. The French are excellent diplomats but the British are by far the best in the world. They are very intelligent and good at being respectful and keeping channels open.”

“But the British prefer the power game of manipulation and sowing division ... ethnic or religious ... They always think, 'How can I divide these people and make them weak?' For example, the British are behind the [ethnic] divisions in Iraq ... they want to have a whole Iraq dominated by the Shi'a but not too powerful. They're much cleverer than the Americans. They have people, like you, who do research and plan ahead for years on these things. They tell the naïve Americans what to do. The neocons aren’t intelligent enough to do that. The British are afraid of a Shi’a country uniting Iraq, Iran and Saudi.”

The Syrians look very favourably on the widespread opposition to the war in Britain which helps distinguish the government from the people. “The good conduct of the British soldiers in Iraq compared to the Americans has been widely reported in the region and will have bought us credibility and respect for a generation.”

Israel and the West are certainly responsible for genuine Syrian grievances. However, the intensity of this bad feeling is hugely magnified by the people's lack of freedom. When they cannot freely criticise their own governments or address issues of direct relevance to themselves, Israel and the West provide safe targets for the displaced anger, frustration and energy.

Syrian attitudes to the British-American relationship

Clearly Britain's relationship with the US (and EU) enhances its leverage in Syria. Many people think that this could be further improved upon if Britain showed more integrity and acted more clearly in its own interests.

"The UK behaves like the civilised representative of the US. They say, 'The US is capable of anything. You must do this or such and such will happen.' They offer no security, no promises or reassurances. They just say they'll put in a word for us with the big boss. But they never deliver."

"Britain could have a much bigger influence in Syria if it were perceived to be linked to the US but independent - not a stooge." To differing degrees, the majority of both Syrian and British interviewed were highly sceptical about the current balance of the "special relationship". The Syrians believe that the British have an accurate analysis of the situation in the Middle East and have clearly thought through the strategy. "The British are definitely not working to an Israeli agenda like the Americans. The Americans identify with Israel as similar people - in a new country with ideals who have similar manners and look like them."

The Syrians tend to take the view that Britain has shamed itself by changing from being a proud, powerful, independent people to being "America's poodle". "The UK apes the US monkey. This is discrediting you. You look ridiculous and weak. We never trust Britain." "Why should we bother talking to the monkey when we can speak to the organ-grinder?" They feel that Britain is being foolish by slavishly following the American script, which they perceive not to be in British interests, and getting nothing in return. "Britain needs more courage. The courage to call a spade a spade and to challenge America and Israel when they are wrong."

"The Americans don't listen to anyone, not even the British. You need to show that you are not like them."

"This may seem very romantic, but I feel that there is a great opportunity for Britain to help Syria now. They feel much attacked and need support. The Americans are ridiculous in their behaviour and the British could stand up to them and say it's not true."

Syrian communication with the British

The state exerts massive control over relationships between the Syrian and British people. Everyone allowed to meet Britons or travel overseas is vetted by the secret police for their security risk. Most members of the Syrian government are very reluctant to meet foreigners, including diplomats, politicians and journalists. Many intended meetings fall through. Many requests for meetings are ignored or denied. There are therefore many indirect channels of communication through third parties, through spying and through the media.

The official Syrian view is that this isn't true. However, most people believe that this is a very simple way for the regime to control dialogue and to prevent any

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relationships developing which could pose a threat to the stability of the regime – it's not good to talk.

The British government worries that their “messages are not getting through”. They do seem to be getting through, but the Syrians don't agree with them. They have different assumptions, different conclusions, and different motivations. The messages are not taken at face value and the source is not trusted.

“All we hear is threats, criticism and demands.” This can't feel particularly appealing. Such demands make people angry, indignant, offended, and insulted. People fight harder to avoid losses and resist change than they do to make new gains. They dig their heels in and co-operation is the last thing on their mind.

The Syrians are not aware of exactly what the British would like them to do. They are somewhat dazzled by a feeling of being lectured, hectored and criticised. They can't articulate exactly what the British would like from them, which in turn makes it less easy to negotiate or to co-operate.

Syrian strategy

Some argue that Syria doesn't actually have a strategy - that it is really fossilised in a particular position as a result of its internal and external parameters. To the degree to which there is a strategy, it is based on a belief that taking on an antagonistic position gives a better negotiating position. “If you are friendly to the Americans, they put you in their pocket [i.e. get taken for granted] but if you fight them, they have to take notice of your needs and demands. This opens up negotiation and negotiation is power.”

The Syrians place a very high value on pride, which can prevent them from pursuing a pragmatic strategy. They consider that the Libyans have sold out by doing a deal with the West, rather than perceiving that Libya has done a pragmatic deal. Some Syrians argue that the late President was unable to sign the potential peace deal with the Israelis because it fell short of that obtained by President Sadat of Egypt and that he could not have managed the loss of face entailed in that. In some ways he was a prisoner of the expectations set up by his own propaganda.

Syria clearly believes that the best way to punch above its weight in the region and beyond is to use proxy groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and Iraqi insurgents. They have felt the benefit of the direct and indirect power this gives them and the negotiating hand it offers. They got the US and Israel to withdraw from Lebanon and increased their power as a result.

The alternative of military power has not worked because they are weak in this regard and likely to remain so due to their size, economy, lack of resources and lack of alliances with stronger powers.

The alternative of politics and negotiation has not delivered them anything. On Iraq they are ignored. On Lebanon, their “legitimate interests” are denied and on Palestine and the Golan, the Israelis are far more effective operators.

In contrast to the majority of the British, the Syrians take a very long view of history and of the future. They are quite prepared to hold out for their objectives, waiting for conditions to change. They would rather have no deal than to compromise on pride, respect, trust and identity.

What the Syrians perceive as steadfast and principled, outsiders perceive as unreasonable obstinacy leading to the conclusion that power and force is the only way to deal with them. “My experience has been they knuckle under pretty easily in most cases and they respect those who are powerful if not brutal in their application of power. Mercy is only for those strong enough to grant it. If they are weak and merciful they are regarded as feminine.” “Force is all they understand. They consider concessions to be a Christian weakness. Concessions and flexibility simply emboldens them to hold out for more because it makes them think that their belligerent approach is working.”

The British strategy towards Syria

There is a judgement call to be made by British politicians on whether or not to try to work with the regime as it is, try to make it evolve in the direction they would like or try to encourage regime change. Current strategy appears to be a blend of the first two.

In practice, Britain is working to support positive evolution through capacity building and supporting the EU association agreement. Britain generally defers to American and French policy on Syria. This can lead to some inconsistency, as follows.

Squandered trust: example of the night goggles

Syria had been accused by the Coalition of allowing, possibly encouraging, foreign insurgents to enter Iraq. They had been shown evidence which made it clear that they were being monitored by the coalition. They said that the border is very difficult to police - 600km of mostly uninhabited areas. They noted that they had been unable to prevent terrorists sent by Saddam from entering the country in the 1980s. “If the Americans can’t stop the Mexicans getting in, with all their resources, how can we be expected to police the desert border?”

The British offered practical help in the way of technology and training to enable the Syrians to police the border more effectively. The Syrians responded very positively and opened up their military structure, organisation and processes to scrutiny by the British. This was unprecedented and showed the Syrians taking some very new steps. For some reason, the British government suddenly decided not to go ahead with the co-operation. The result on the ground was that those on both sides who had invested their reputations in building bridges would have been embarrassed. It is worse than never having started the co-operation as it would punish those who had held out their hands and strengthened those who opposed co-operation. It would feed into and strengthen the conspiracy theories.

Syria, Britain & Israel

Every Syrian seems to be aware of the Balfour Declaration, although they interpret it very narrowly. Most Syrians feel that the British should acknowledge that they made a mistake in allowing the Jews into Palestine and that an injustice occurred as a result. Many feel that the responsibility is incumbent upon the British to try to put right the perceived injustice. They underemphasise the second part of the declaration which said that the influx of Jews should not affect the rights of the existing inhabitants. “They don’t appreciate how Britain felt obliged to help the Jews during the persecutions of the 1930s nor of the feeling of moral responsibility after the Holocaust.” “They think that Britain was all powerful. After the war, Britain was bankrupt, its Empire was collapsing and the Americans put huge pressure on the British to allow unrestricted Jewish immigration into Palestine. Britain was not in a position to prevent it.”

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Most informed British people feel sympathy for the Palestinian position. They tend to accept that an injustice was done to the Palestinians, and that Britain had played a rather passive part in that, but recognise that, given the realities of power of Israel, the Jewish diaspora and the US, there is a real limit to the potential for undoing that injustice in a way which would be compatible with Israeli security.

“The British tend to focus more pragmatically on facilitating a deal that can be done rather than upon addressing the need for justice.” There is reluctance on the British side to be more even handed for several reasons. For one, they see that emboldening the Palestinians to be more assertive, whilst giving short term catharsis, would raise unrealistic expectations and further delay their acceptance of the realities of power on the ground. They also feel hemmed in by the “special relationship” with the US and do not wish to antagonise the US or Israel. There is a perception that although Britain may raise its reputation with the Arabs by supporting the Palestinian cause, this would be at the cost of the special relationship and would incur coordinated hostility from the Israelis. Many British people are afraid to openly criticise Israel because they fear incurring a hysterical reaction from the media. “Mossad has ended the career of more than one British politician.”

Syria's fatalistic, paranoid, passive-aggressive victim position

The Syrian government is stuck in a passive-aggressive, victim position. They prefer to sit back, arms folded, criticise and behave aggressively through being uncooperative. This passive position is not in their interests. It inhibits them from thinking more creatively about how to improve their situation. The aggressiveness prevents others from being more empathic and perceiving them as people who can be related to, dealt with and respected. What Syria considers to be steadfastness is perceived by the British as belligerent, uncooperative stupidity.

They can give many examples of how they have been wronged and how the West should put things right. Syria escaped direct imperial rule in 1946 but has not yet developed the mindset of a fully sovereign, independent people. Syria doesn't have the experience of being independent, successful and confident, so it's not surprising that they take a fatalistic, passive perspective.

It can be quite comfortable to assume a passive but steadfast mentality, whilst blaming others for one's problems. This saves the need to take responsibility, face difficult truths and take the risk of making mistakes. It may equally serve Western interests in the short term that Syria maintains this mentality as it avoids the risky prospect that they might become more effective at asserting their own interests. Dealing honestly with the legitimate rights and grievances of the Syrians could threaten the interests of other countries in the region. In other words, the passive-aggressive position helps to maintain the status quo.

Idealisation or denial of victim status

In general, when relating to a person or group who have been a victim, such as the Jews, Syrians or Palestinians, one is faced with uncomfortable feelings. It is painful to be exposed to the pain of the victim. However, sometimes victims are not pure victims, but are part of something more complex. Especially in an international setting, the relationship between two groups is much more complex. Rather than deal with this complexity, ambivalence and discomfort, one can choose an emotional short cut - a defence mechanism. Usually this is done unconsciously. In this situation, the common ones are denial, idealisation and identification. One can deny the victim's history by minimising it, blaming them for it, turning a blind eye

or washing our hands of responsibility and closing our eyes. One can idealise the victim by highlighting their bravery and saintly goodness while minimising their faults. One can take this one step further and identify with the victim as if their pain was our pain and their abuser was our abuser. While these defence mechanisms are comfortable for their user in the short term, in the long run, they obstruct the resolution of disputes and poor relationships.

All of these processes are prominent in the relations between Syria, Israel, Britain, America and the Palestinians. The Syrians' sense of being a victim is not really recognised by the British and this makes the Syrians angry. They, in turn, can't understand how their behaviour appears from the outside and how it generates new victims and maintains their own victimhood. The Syrians identify with the Palestinians' suffering while Israel and the US tend to deny it. The anger generated by that denial is a major driver of Syrian belligerence and passive aggression. To make progress, everyone needs to acknowledge the feelings of others, apologise and seek forgiveness where appropriate, but to let go of the competition to be the most hurt victim.

Judgmental attitudes cause lack of empathy

This primitive error runs through the thinking of both sides. The Syrians see Britain as a manipulative power acting in its self interest to gain dominance and control over the region. The British look at the Syrian regime as brutal, undemocratic, terrorist-supporting, torturing, repressive, thuggish and destabilising in the region. One only has to glance at the Amnesty International Report on Syrian treatment of the political opposition in order to feel very angry and to consider them to be inhuman, evil and impossible to deal with. The British tend to perceive Syria's international behaviour (supporting terrorism, insurgency and hostility to Israel, seeking WMD) through this judgemental lens.

An example of this is the British anger at the alleged Syrian support for the insurgency in Iraq. "The Syrians are deliberately helping the insurgency in Iraq. It is evil to help people to blow up innocent civilians. They are preventing the emergence of a stable and democratic Iraq. They should stop this at once and support stability in the country." This sees the Syrian behaviour through the British lens. The Syrians see it differently. By getting angry and judgemental, the British obscure their understanding of the Syrian behaviour and reduce their chances of changing it.

It is frequently stated on the British side, with a very derogatory tone, that the "Syrian regime is just looking to stay in power and retain control. They don't care about ideology. It's all about power." There is probably a large degree of truth in this. However, it would be more accurate to observe that this is a universal phenomenon - that all politicians expend energy to gain and retain power.

In a facilitated meeting of British and Syrians, each was asked to name one thing that Britain and one thing that Syria could do in order to improve the relationship. In almost every case, they found it easy to name a list of things the other country should do and struggled to think of anything that their own country should do. Where they could think of something their own country could do it was, more often than not, a vaguely positive response contingent upon the other country doing something first. Obviously, that is not fertile ground for better co-operation.

Ambivalence

The British are ambivalent in their attitudes to dealing with the Syrian regime. There is a tension, both within the minds of each individual and between differing groups, between the desire to co-operate more with the Syrian regime as it stands and the desire that the regime was replaced by something more desirable. In reality, one has to deal with people one doesn't like. One of the problems with this ambivalence is that the Syrians pick up on it and are aware that no matter how much they co-operate and show willing, the British will still hope for their displacement. This obviously makes it much harder to co-operate rather than offer minimum compliance which they do at present.

Dominant British mentality

Implicit in much British thinking is a feeling of superiority over the Syrians. Of course, Britain is more advanced in many ways and is more powerful. There is nothing wrong with being patriotic. Just as in individual psychology, it is healthy to have self-respect, self-esteem and measured self-confidence. Assertiveness, willingness to fight and a positive identity are all strengths, so long as they don't spill over into arrogance. Arrogance can lead to underestimating others, as Britain did the Japanese on their way to Malaya and Singapore in 1941. It would be wise for the British to respect the Syrians a little more.

Binary thinking

There is a tendency to binary thinking on both sides which increases polarisation and makes it hard to relate effectively: good-evil; democratic-dictatorship; trustworthy-untrustworthy; victim-oppressor. This binary thinking acts as a barrier to dialogue and solution-focussed engagement. It can be helpful to finding solutions to be non-judgemental and dispassionate. If one's ego is wrapped up in a position, then it is much harder to compromise or be open to new views.

The “carrot and stick” approach

Having failed to achieve their aims through dialogue, the Syrians have taken on a passive-aggressive posture. The West, especially the US, has responded by employing a “carrot and stick” strategy. They treat the Syrian regime as a black box upon which one exerts rewards and punishments to try to reinforce desired behaviours and extinguish undesired behaviours. In theory, this is straightforward psychology and really ought, if properly applied, to work. In reality it is effective in forcing the Syrian regime to comply to a minimal degree - such as in slightly improving co-operation on the Iraqi border, shutting down the official offices of Hamas and withdrawing its troops from Lebanon. These are all things the regime has been forced to do by external pressure, and to that degree the strategy is a success.

Compliance through coercion is effective up to a point, but at the cost of reducing co-operation based on mutual interest and trust. It works by extracting minimum grudging concessions from the Syrians, but is not capable of delivering a deeper level of peaceful co-operation. Also, it feeds the paranoid, fearful and negative assumptions of the Syrians and reinforces their passive-aggressive antagonism.

“Keeping them guessing”

The British are not seriously considering an attempt to provoke a “regime change” in Damascus. However, some Americans are thinking those thoughts, which even if they don't intend to act upon them, feed the Syrian regime's fears. The theory is that if they fear possible attack and realise that it is a possibility, and then they will listen much more carefully and respond more compliantly to US demands. As a

tactic, this has pros and cons. During this current dynamic phase following recent events in Lebanon, it does seem to intensify the momentum for change. In the static phase, which will probably re-emerge shortly, it serves as an extra force maintaining the status quo by preventing a more positive relationship developing and by freezing the Syrians due to anxiety.

Projection

People's world view is of course based upon their own experiences. Syrians' view of the world can be quite bleak - a Hobbesian world of power, corruption, conspiracy, intrigue and struggle. This may well have been the reality of life, especially politically, for Syrians and it is not surprising that they should project it upon their perceptions of the British. Plenty of people from taxi drivers to Chomsky might well share this cynical analysis. The British overestimate the degree to which their liberal, democratic, secular and capitalist assumptions are accepted elsewhere.

Institutional Foreign & Commonwealth Office factors

"The attention span of politicians is very short." They have to focus on the media, elections and imminent meetings, decisions and crises. This limits the capacity for serious long term or strategic thinking, or learning. It also increases the temptation for 'quick wins' in the short term at the expense of long term vision. "This puts Britain at a strong disadvantage to countries capable of thinking and acting with a long view such as Syria, China and so on."

Certain institutional changes in culture and process have compromised the FCO's ability to formulate, let alone achieve, medium to longer term strategy. "The emphasis upon task-based targets and 'deliverables' has devalued what ought to be the core FCO objectives of building relationships, building influence, promoting understanding, dialogue and trust." "Processes are reduced to box-ticking and simplistic performance targets." "They have killed off the institutional memory."

"Diplomats have always been too busy to spend much time learning from academics and specialists. Now, they have actually been instructed to cut this out as an activity." This prevents it from being a learning organisation and evolving, deploying skills and knowledge from other disciplines. This also makes it even more vulnerable to predatory consultants.

The public diplomacy model has focussed upon a marketing paradigm - getting positive messages through to target audiences. This is based upon a superficial view of human nature which explains its limited effectiveness.

Capacity building, exchanges, educational programmes, British Council

The feedback from the providers and participants of these programmes is very positive. They tend to say that it builds trust, understanding, respect and confidence. It seems that this probably does have a long term benefit, but it is hard to quantify.

What right has the UK to interfere?

Some people, particularly from third countries, question the right of Britain to interfere in Syrian affairs unless it has a direct interest. The British response to this question is that it is in Britain's self interest to do so as a result of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world.

Part 2: Recommendations

The British-Syrian relationship is very entrenched and there are many forces maintaining the status quo, however there is huge room for improvement from a very low base. With so much water under the bridge and pre-existing prejudices, one cannot expect to turn around a relationship like this very quickly, but, with patience, it can be done. There are many different ways in which Britain could improve its approach to Syria.

“Joined-up” foreign policy

As in other government policies, it makes sense that people co-ordinate effectively for maximum benefit. With foreign policy, this is even more crucial. A single negative action can undermine the effect of many positive actions. One thread that runs through all of the following recommendations is that it is essential that a psychologically informed foreign policy is led from the top, sustained and determined. The more of Britain’s allies that can be drawn into such an approach, the more likely it would be to be effective.

Optimise “carrot & stick” technique

Clearly it’s quite a challenge to apply this technique in the complex context of international relations. There are lots of pitfalls. We often reinforce behaviours unconsciously, for example by giving attention to someone who’s annoying us. Supposed punishments can actually reinforce other behaviours. The Israelis try to use reward and punishment of the Palestinians when there is a suicide bomb or a period of peace. They intend to reward them with progress in negotiations and punish them with ending the negotiations, bulldozing houses or bombing people. Unfortunately, these stimuli are, in fact, very rewarding to those who desire conflict and polarisation. These rewards given to the anti-peace people are much more powerful than the reward of negotiations given to the pro-peace people, and so are counter-productive. The traditional tools of economic sanctions or military threat are very blunt and can actually be rewarding to the intended targets.

In order to maximise the efficacy of this behaviourist approach, the implementation needs to be quite precise. Behaviours increase when they are rewarded and reduce when they are unrewarded or punished. A reinforcer is a contingent response to a behaviour which acts to increase the frequency of the behaviour.

- A positive reinforcer is a stimulus which is pleasant and increases the behaviour when applied. This might be praise, acknowledgement, physical pleasure, financial reward, being given attention, being listened to, etc.
- A negative reinforcer is an unpleasant stimulus whose removal increases the frequency of the behaviour. This might be removal of pain, removal of a tax, removal of shame, removal of hostility, etc.
- A punishment is a negative stimulus whose application causes the reduction in frequency of the behaviour. This might be physical pain, psychological pain, social punishment, cost, being ignored, not listened to, etc.

The challenge in applying the technique is in:

- identifying the desired or undesired behaviour very precisely
- identifying the actor(s) or decision maker(s)
- identifying the potential rewards and punishments precisely

- applying those with clarity, consistency, contingency and immediacy in the mind of the “target”
- being aware of the potential for unforeseen rewards for third parties and knock-on effects
- maintaining the new behaviours with ongoing rewards. This is best done with random, intermittent reinforcement.

Economic development to broaden the power base & diversify the voices

The regime hard-liners are already wealthy and powerful so can see nothing to tempt them to make any reform or change their behaviour on Iraq, WMD, terrorism, Israel or Lebanon. For the real hard core, this may never change. However, for their support base and the society at large, there is a lot of potential gain from change. The West needs to create an environment in which the champions of change for the better can gain the freedom to think, speak, organise and build a momentum for change of which the hard-liners don't feel terrified. This is likely to take time and be dependent upon broadening the base of power and interests of both the military-intelligence barons and the general population. Britain can help to facilitate a move from the current 12th century English-type power structure to an 18th century one more conducive to pluralism.

Build a common vision, or at least offer a positive vision

It would help if Britain could find a way to generate a positive identity of Syria that is congruent with the desired changes in behaviour and reform. Those who take on the risks of change need to have a new identity and ideology that underpins their new behaviours. The British could offer them a positive, credible vision of a future within their reach. For example, of a democratic, liberal, moderate Islamic, developed, stable, secure country with good, co-operative relations with its neighbours and a close economic association with the EU. This could be linked to a Marshall Aid type package linked to peace, democratisation and economic development.

If Syria were shown a genuine vision of a future partnership with the West, especially the EU, like Turkey, whilst respecting their Arab heritage and independence, there would be much more incentive for individuals and the country as a whole to open its mind to new thinking and alternative behaviours.

Celebrate British strengths; recognise past mistakes

Britain has a mixed history in the region. There is a powerful legacy of respect and admiration as well as cynicism and suspicion. Britain has moved on since Imperial days and should try to build upon past successes while acknowledging mistakes. The ideal would be to have a process of reconciliation in which grievances could be aired whilst celebrating the positives.

Symbolic acts such as ceremonies, visits, gifts and exchange of apologies could assist this process. Obviously, one needs to be careful about setting precedents and accepting liabilities. It's probably easier to do it now voluntarily while Britain is still in a position of relative power than leaving it until it is demanded in future by a resurgent India, China etc.

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Promote new thinking

Changes in Syrian thinking could enable better co-operation:

- Replace: Syria should act in the interests of the greater Arab cause.
With: Other Arabs look after their own interests, so Syria should do the same.
- Replace: The West inevitably supports Israel and is hostile to Syria.
With: Israel has been very effective in political lobbying and public relations. Syria should compete on that level.
- Replace: Socialism is a pillar of Syrian identity.
With: Syria's economy is a failure. It needs to reform.
- Replace: Britain is a manipulative imperial power looking to divide, rule and exploit.
With: Britain has moved on and is a beacon of positive, universal values.
- Replace: Supporting the Iraqi insurgents will deter the US from attacking Syria.
With: Helping to stabilise Iraq will let the coalition go home sooner.
- Replace: Withdrawing from Lebanon is a shameful loss of power and influence.
With: A democratic, prosperous Lebanon will bring wealth and opportunity.
- Replace: Syria needs WMD to defend itself and deter enemies.
With: Seeking WMD makes others fearful and makes them threaten us.
- Replace: Supporting freedom fighters enhances our power.
With: Nurturing terrorists causes blowback.
- Replace: Economic reform will loosen our grip on power.
With: Economic reform is an opportunity to get rich and improve Syria.
- Replace: Israel wants to dominate the Middle East.
With: Israel simply wants peace and security.
- Replace: Syrian identity requires the denial of Israeli identity.
With: Each could accept the identity of the other.
- Replace: The Arabs can eventually defeat Israel if they remain steadfast.
With: The Israelis cannot be militarily defeated, so it would be better to make peace and compete politically, culturally and economically.

We can change others by changing ourselves

When seeking to change the behaviour of others, it helps to examine our own role in their pattern of behaviour and to consider what contribution we need to make to improve things. In any relationship, it is very easy to describe the faults of the other party and to blame them for problems. In reality, things are interactive and it can be much easier to change the other by changing the way that we behave ourselves than by hectoring the other party. Introspection and humility are harder than judgement and prescription.

Each country needs to give a lot more thought to what it contributes to the relationship and how it can make it easier for the other to co-operate. If each can

get into the shoes of the other, feel what it's like; understand their interests, needs, motives and situational constraints, then there would be potential for change.

Overcoming ambivalence

It is a fact of life that we have to deal with all kinds of people we don't like. Unless you can avoid them, ignore them or remove them, you have to deal with them. If you have to deal with them, you're more likely to get what you want if you put aside your negative feelings and build a productive relationship. The calculation comes down to whether or not compliance, coercion or co-operation would get better results. Most of the time in most human relationships, co-operation is the most powerful and productive driver.

In approaching the Syrian regime, it would be better to come down firmly one way or the other. Either decide to invade, provoke a revolution or commit to building as good a friendly, co-operative relationship as possible. The last is hard to achieve if the other party in the relationship detects the desire for the first two. All the time that the Syrian regime believes that the West will exploit any chink in its armour to overthrow them, it is less likely to take any risks with political change or open itself to external influence.

Positively embrace & nurture Syria

Britain could help Syria to mature from its weak, inferior, passive mentality into being an adult country which relates to others in a normal and effective way. "The UK can work miracles with a change in attitude. Syria wants to be taken like a boy placed on a man's knee, loved and promised that his future will be looked after. If this were believed, it would make a huge difference. They should say, 'We will help you become somebody.'" To a Westerner this sounds very patronising but seems to hit the right spot for the Syrians. This would open up the potential for real dialogue and evolutionary change.

People respond much more positively to those who relate to them humbly and magnanimously with goodwill, sincerity, compassion and genuineness, not aggression, hatred, arrogance, judgement or machismo. If the British people interacting with Syria maintained this approach, it would bear fruit in the long term. If one has any doubts about this, simply look at the evidence from everyday life. Those people who are warm, compassionate, encouraging and optimistic have better relationships and are happier than those who are hostile, paranoid, defensive and contemptuous. This doesn't mean being "nice" or "naïve." It means being aware that everyone but the most extreme psychopaths (very rare) has good parts that we can empathise with, relate to and respect.

Relate to other countries as people like ourselves, not objects at a distance

Foreign policy is about managing the relationships between people and requires all the sincerity, sensitivity and skills that we use in our personal relationships. If the West wishes to persuade the current Syrian regime to move beyond grudging, minimal co-operation, it will need to relate to the Syrians as human beings rather than as new members of "the axis of evil." If Syria wants a more normal and helpful response from the British, they need to think much more about how they might behave differently to enable the British to respond differently to them. They need to ditch their passive victim mentality and think about how they can make change.

Empathy

There is nothing wrong with either country saying that one does not like a particular behaviour or position of the other. However, the problem with being overwhelmed with negative feelings is that it makes it harder to understand the regime, influence them, engage them or persuade them. It erects a barrier that prevents one from empathising with the other. This in turn makes it harder to really understand and influence the true drivers of the behaviour. The dialogue tends to become accusatory and judgmental. The other party will inevitably pick up on the contempt and hostility which will make it all the more likely that they take a similar stance, thus making co-operation less likely. The more negative the dialogue and mood, the less likely it is that each genuinely listens to the other - why bother if they are already certain of the truth?

When relating to someone, it is usually more effective to think in terms of desirable and undesirable behaviours. There is a basic cognitive error which all humans tend to make - the fundamental attribution error, in which we tend to see a behaviour which we don't like and attribute its cause to the badness of the person doing it. We say that they are bad and thus are committing a bad act. We tend to underplay situational factors in explaining behaviour. The result of this is that it prevents us from imagining ourselves in the shoes of the other and getting a handle on how to change their behaviour. It lends itself to polarisation of "them and us", good versus evil and conflict.

This wouldn't matter if one were planning a war against the other or conspiring to overthrow them. However, if the intention is to encourage co-operation and reform, the first step is in being empathic. One needs to imagine oneself in the other party's shoes and imagine how they think and feel. Only then can you get a handle on what's going on and work out what to do about it.

Talk about striving for shared values, don't be too judgmental

In order to encourage Syria to become more democratic; to respect human rights; to broaden the base of political participation; to develop the economy and to be more co-operative in international affairs, it would be helpful for Britain to be more humble. It is fine to say unambiguously that one believes in democracy, freedom, human rights and that one is against terrorism, torture and dictatorship. However, one is more likely to be successful in inspiring others to behave in that way if one is humble and honest about one's own limitations.

It is better to say that these are good values towards which we all should strive rather than saying "we're perfect, and you need to become like us". That just causes resentment and hostility. It is a challenge to the identity of the other. It makes it more difficult for the other to change because it asks them to accept your superiority and to be seen to submit. It is much easier to follow a role model if that role model accepts that they have faults which they strive to overcome - we are all fallible and can be better. That's much easier to swallow.

Model the desired behaviours

Britain can exert influence on Syria by leadership through example. Britain could be modelling the desired behaviours and showing that it too has to work to achieve these ideals. This would include modelling behavioural standards such as delivering on promises and keeping commitments. It would include actively striving to improve and uphold democracy, the rule of law, free speech and human rights at home as well as championing them abroad.

Avoid perceived double standards

If one tried to manage the relationship between friends and family by acting solely in self-interest and justifying it in other terms, it would quickly cause problems. Increasingly, this is true of international relations. In response to the judgmental approach, it is all too easy for Syria to point out the double standards and shortcomings of the West. America's media is very establishment-friendly. Finance and vested interests heavily influence American elections. Britain has some degree of democracy, but it is a very long way from perfect. There are restrictions on free speech in the UK. Anyone who steps outside of the politically correct pseudo-consensus on gender, the NHS, welfare, race and immigration risks vilification. The British state interferes hugely in British people's lives to a degree that Syrians find shocking.

Behave according to consistent values

People have long memories. While they can be forgiving and respond positively to new overtures, they tend to remember being attacked, cheated or let down for a very long time. The challenge for the UK government is to take a long term view of their relationships with the peoples of other countries. To build good relationships based upon trust, commitment and respect, the coalition need to do more than behave well once or to put a good PR spin on a particular action. They need to act consistently according to the values in which they say they believe.

Building trust & reputation

Actions speak louder than words. Reputations are based more upon what people do rather than what they say. So there is a limit to what PR management can achieve. With mass communication, people worldwide see how each country behaves on a global scale and experiences the effect of that behaviour locally. It is vital to consider the long-term impact of behaviour. To gain the respect of people, countries need to act consistently, honestly and sincerely. The tradition in international relations has been far from that. It is in a country's long term interests to be liked, respected, and trusted as well as to be strong.

Sincerity & honesty pay dividends

Communication is most persuasive if it comes from a credible source and acknowledges both sides of an argument. People are sufficiently sophisticated to realise that the UK will not act purely altruistically and that all actions have mixed motives. To deny something so obvious discredits the source of the message.

Dialogue, trust, understanding & respect

Both sides feel pretty tired of dialogue. They both feel that they've been listening and talking but have just not been able to make as much progress as they would like. We all like to think that we listen well, but it's very easy to listen, hear what you like and discount or ignore what you don't. Quite often, people just wait for their turn to speak. It is essential at the very least to acknowledge what the other party is saying. One of the most common causes of violence is that someone does not properly listen, acknowledge and respond to someone else's expression of fear, resentment, shame or anger. Effective dialogue offers the opportunity to build up rapport, trust and mutual understanding. One doesn't need to agree. Competitors and enemies can still respect one another.

Overcoming barriers to effective communication

Failure to handle emotions is the most powerful barrier to communication. Strong feelings interfere with perception, listening, talking and empathy. If someone is anxious or frightened they will see everything through that lens. Not accepting

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another's feelings can cause rage and disable the other party from engaging. Being judgmental frequently gets in the way of effective communication. The judgmental one feels superior, moralises, preaches, blames and passes judgement. This closes off their own motivation to listen or self-reflect as they already know the answers. It makes the recipient feel angry and closes down communication. Others include prejudice, aggression, patronising, dwelling on the past, unfinished business, and forced time pressures. All of these are present in British-Syrian dialogue and can be overcome.

Acknowledge Syrian feelings

Whatever Britain thinks, the fact is that the Syrians are very angry about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, fearful of external plots and resentful of the way in which they are treated. These feelings are major obstacles to progress. One does not have to agree with another's point of view. But one ought to acknowledge the other party's feelings. Denying the feelings of others is a very powerful cause of hostility, aggression and violence. Britain could move things on if it could persuade the Syrians that they really have taken on board and responded to their feelings.

Tackling conspiracy theories

The only way to reduce conspiracy theories is, firstly, to act consistently with integrity, sincerity and honesty and, secondly, to provide open, honest explanations and challenge the lies. There's no short cut. Until the people of the Middle East have a better experience of politics, they will be susceptible to conspiracy theories.

Overcoming the regime's fear

This is easier said than done, because the regime has good reason to be fearful. They are paranoid AND there are people out to get them. The British are not in a position to directly remove the threats to Syria from the Israelis, Americans nor internal threats. The British are in a position to offer more convincing reassurances about their own intentions and could demonstrate that both in words and in deeds. The British, if trusted by the Syrians, could offer advice on what they could do to reduce the threats to themselves. Co-operation and consultation over Iraq offers a concrete opportunity to put that into practice.

Increasing Syrian co-operation on the Arab-Israeli conflict

The majority of the vested interests maintaining the conflict are neither British nor Syrian. However, Britain's role would carry more weight with the Syrians if it publicly acknowledged that the Palestinians had suffered an injustice which needs to be properly addressed in any resolution of the dispute. British support for the return of the Golan Heights to Syria would buy a lot of good will. Britain might benefit by acknowledging that the Balfour Declaration and subsequent events under British rule caused harm to the Palestinians. Such acknowledgements simply require genuinely meant words and could do a lot to defuse the intense anger and sense of injustice and the double standards that the Syrians perceive on the issue.

One of the clear obstacles to peace in the region is that Israel (and the US) has not really understood that it can never have security by physical power alone. There is no doubt that Arabs feel very intensely that an injustice has been done and continues to be done to the Palestinian people. They feel angry and powerless and this is a powerful motivator for violence and hatred. Until justice is seen to be done, there will be no resolution of this problem. Israel needs to find a way to make the Palestinians, and their supporters, feel that they have redressed the perceived injustices done to the Palestinians during the creation and expansion of Israel.

That is hard for them to accept because it may require them to make unpalatable concessions. They say they understand it, but their actions suggest that they really still don't.

Notwithstanding vested interests on both sides that benefit from conflict, Britain could exert more effort to get that message understood. Even if the Israelis never agreed, that would carry favour with the Arabs and help redress Britain's own blame for its role in the original dispossession of the Palestinians.

Britain could also help to facilitate dialogue between Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Israelis. It is not realistic to expect Syria and the Palestinians to stop supporting them in the meantime, as they see them as legitimate forms of asymmetric warfare against an occupying force. However, Britain could play a part in helping the actors to communicate and increase the chances of meeting their objectives through politics rather than violence. The experience in Northern Ireland probably has some useful parallels from which they could benefit.

Promoting dialogue with Syria's neighbours

Syria feels that it has legitimate rights and interests relating to Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Iraq and Jordan and that the West disregards these rights. The Syrians feel that they are being asked "to get back in their box and shut up". While the UK and Syria may not agree on every aspect of this, it would defuse some tension by acknowledging that Syria needs to have a productive dialogue with its neighbours to ensure mutual security and prosperity. The UK could facilitate this dialogue and could consider creating some kind of intergovernmental structure, similar to the Iraq Neighbours Group, to institutionalise it. Britain could help the Syrians to have a better dialogue with their neighbours so that, over time, they can achieve their goals and meet their needs through politics rather than destabilisation and proxy groups.

Promoting Syria's dialogue with the US & Europe

Britain could provide Syria with training in public diplomacy and political lobbying to encourage Syria to fight its battles through politics rather than conflict. This might help Syria to get a more even-handed hearing in the US and Israel.

Fostering intra-Syria & intra-regime dialogue

A healthy democratic culture needs to tolerate difference, diversity, ambivalence, uncertainty, chaos, complexity. All of this is somewhat uncomfortable and requires maturity and containment. This can be avoided through defence mechanisms, especially under fear or stress.

The Syrian regime specifically tries to control dialogue between its own citizens. This helps them to retain power, but prevents the regime from learning and adapting. It holds Syria back from economic, social and political development. Therefore there are strict constraints upon what the British could do without incurring hostility.

Anything that the British can do to foster a spirit of openness, dialogue, public debate and non-ideological problem-solving could be helpful. The BBC Arabic service is listened to by many opinion formers and could be augmented to reach the mass population with a television service. There is potential to increase dialogue through providing assistance and training in non-political areas such as economics, finance, technology, academia and even the military.

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The internet is a vehicle for internal dialogue which is well used, in spite of state attempts to control it. Britain might be able to further facilitate its use by providing finance and technology to reputable websites and civil society groups. If this was done, it would be essential to be seen to be even handed and not supporting particular voices or positions. The process of dialogue is as important as the outcome in giving legitimacy to the outcome.

Engaging Syrian help in Iraq

Syria would be much more inclined to help the coalition to stabilise Iraq if it were genuinely assured that it were not “next on the list”, if it could imagine peaceful coexistence with the regime likely to emerge and if there was a credible plan for allied military withdrawal within the not too distant future.

Weapons of mass destruction

It isn't realistic to persuade the Syrians not to want these or to stop acquiring them unless they get something very concrete in return. The only options are to physically prevent them getting the weapons, to offer something else more desirable in exchange or to make them feel more secure and so less in need of weapons.

The EU association agreement

The unexpected delay in the EU agreement has a potential to be a lever for desired behaviours, but only if correctly used. The risk is to make them feel cheated, rejected and tricked. That would feed into the conspiracy theories and lend weight to the hawks.

If a delay in ratification is to be used effectively, the Syrians need to believe that it is genuinely going to happen if they carry out the actions demanded of them. These demands need to be made very specific. Such negotiation should be kept off the record to avoid humiliation.

Britain as a global beacon of universal values

Military power, intelligence services and a robust pursuit of self-interest remain necessary but are no longer sufficient to ensure the freedom, prosperity and security of countries. The changes in the realities of power mean that it is increasingly necessary to work on the “soft” side of relationships too, so as to build mutual trust, respect, and understanding. This is essential to make cooperation more likely than conflict. To be sustained and effective, this must go beyond media management and start with genuine dialogue.

Britain has the potential for huge moral and political authority through leadership around the common human values of democracy, freedom, justice, the rule of law, education, science and capitalism. Britain could enhance its credibility and authority by behaving consistently according to these values, being sincere, being honest, admitting mistakes, apologising where appropriate and laying down firm boundaries about what is and what is not acceptable. This would provide a basis for a much more profound kind of leadership based on common human values which Britain is uniquely placed to offer.

If people believed that in addition to self-interest, the UK genuinely supported freedom, democracy, self-determination, prosperity and justice for other peoples of the world, the British would receive more support and less antipathy. They could attract countries, individuals and groups worldwide to join an “axis of freedom” – a long-term coalition of those who share universal values rather than groups based upon race, religion or economic trading blocs. This is a good idea not because it is

“nice”, but because it is in the rational self interest of the people of the UK and elsewhere. It is essential for the UK to persuade the US and EU to co-operate to set such norms and structures whilst they still have the relative power to do so.

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UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-905058-20-9

Published By:

Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Haig Road
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone: (44) 1276 412995
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ISBN 1-905058-20-9