

The Honorable  
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United States

# A Syrian Perspective on U.S.-Syrian Relations

**T**oday Syria faces political challenges. I would categorize these challenges into three major categories: What's happening today in Iraq, the situation between us and Lebanon, and most importantly, what we call in the Middle East "the Middle East question," which is the Arab-Israeli conflict. I will try to give you a brief presentation of how we regard these three issues, our perspective. I understand that you might agree or disagree with me on certain issues and I, of course, do respect any disagreement and this is why I'm here—to engage in a dialogue and to explain to you who we are, what we believe and where we stand.

Let me first start with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Today, of course, all of you are probably looking at the political scene in Israel. We are not failing to realize that there are some dramatic changes. New parties are emerging, new alliances are taking place, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has quit the Likud party that he was the leader of, and formed a new party with another leader who also quit his party, the Labour Party-Shimon Peres. This is on one hand. On the other hand, the Labour Party in Israel is reemerging as a political force that should be taken into account, particularly after electing a new, supposedly vibrant and popular new leader. Regardless of the results of the forthcoming elections in Israel, we in Syria are watching what's happening, and I can tell you that we are reservedly and cautiously optimistic. We have to be cautiously optimistic because our hopes for peace have been dashed three times in the past 15 years. If you don't mind I want to remind you of what has happened between us and Israel in the past 15 years.

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Originally, it was the late Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, who believed in what we considered in Syria a fair principle, the principle of land for peace. Rabin initiated political contact with Syria for the first time ever between both countries and we started a peace process. This peace process almost reached its conclusive end and we thought at that time that in the very near future Syria and Israel would sign a comprehensive peace treaty. However, tragically, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli right-wing extremist. At that point we thought that the whole peace process had collapsed, but Shimon Peres who became the prime minister of Israel, immediately sent us a message telling us that he was not only interested in continuing what Rabin had started but actually wanted to accelerate the peace process. So we engaged in intensive negotiations, and there we reached what we might call a draft peace treaty with Israel and it only needed to be signed and ratified by both countries. That was an historic moment, and we all believed that a new chapter in the history of the Middle East was starting. However, Shimon Peres, at

that time wanted to capitalize on the sympathy the Labour Party had won because of the assassination of Rabin, and he decided to call for early elections. We worried in Syria. We told him, let's sign first the peace treaty and then you can call for new elections. He refused. He called for the elections. He lost, and Benjamin Netanyahu became the prime minister of Israel. The first thing Benjamin Netanyahu did was to say that he did not believe in the principle of land for peace, which meant not giving back to Syria occupied Golan and in return getting comprehensive peace and normalized relations. Netanyahu said he believed in the principle of peace for peace, which means that if Syria wants peace, Syria gets peace but never gets back its occupied Golan. Of course, the whole peace process stalled and for three years and a half there was no exchange whatsoever between Syria and Israel.

At the end of that period Netanyahu lost elections, and Barak became the prime minister of Israel. Barak sent us a message telling us that, of course, he was the leader of the Labour Party, and that he was interested in resuming the peace talks. But he didn't want to continue from the point it stalled. He wanted a new approach to the peace negotiations. He wanted bilateral Syrian-Israeli committees working on every separate issue. So, there was a bilateral committee on discussing water resources, a bilateral committee discussing borders, a bilateral committee discussing mutual security arrangements, and on every other subject. Each bilateral committee ended its work and ended up with a partial draft peace agreement.

What I will tell you now is not the Syrian version; what I'm telling you is taken from the book written by Dennis Ross. Dennis Ross was the United States' Special Envoy to the Middle East for 14 years and he was the one who was mediating between Syria and Israel and

clear reason. He said on the record "I know the price Syria wants for this peace and I'm not willing to give Syria back its Golan."

That was a brief historic description of what has happened between us and Israel in the past. However, we in Syria still believe that the only path forward is for us and Israel to reach a peaceful settlement of this conflict and we do understand that yesterday the political leadership in Israel was not willing to proceed on this peace process; however, things change and nations and political movements evolve. I remember that the late Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meier, wrote in her memoirs that there's no such thing as the Palestinian people—it's a myth, but Israel has evolved from this situation.

malization of relations and recognition in exchange for allowing the Palestinians to have their own free, viable, independent state, and giving Syria back its occupied Golan.

What I'm trying to say is that we are optimistic about what might happen in Israel, but we are also very cautious. We don't want to raise expectations more than we should. The history of Ariel Sharon does not reflect a man who is willing to make bold decisions, from his perspective, or offer some sacrifices and some compromises in order to reach peace; however, having said this, we understand that Ariel Sharon is a pragmatic politician. He was, up until very recently the leader of the Likud Party, which is usually on the hard-line, on the right-wing, of Israeli politics. Now he's not the leader of the Likud Party any more. He is the leader of a new party. His partner is Shimon Peres, and most probably he will end up in a coalition with the Labour Party, which historically has been in favor of reaching a peace agreement with the Arabs.

As a human being, deep in my heart I'm an optimist. I believe that at one point in history we will reach a peace treaty with Israel because, despite the fact that Israel today enjoys incredible military superiority as compared to its Arab neighbors, the Israelis do realize and that their only hope for their grandchildren to live in peace with our grandchildren, with their neighbors, is to have a comprehensive peace agreement, to allow the Palestinians to have their independent state just like every other nation under the sun and to give back to the Syrians their occupied Golan. This is what, as a human being—I'm not talking now as the Ambassador of Syria—I believe. There is only one future for us, and that is a future in which all neighboring countries will accept each other.

I will move now to Iraq. It is well known to everybody that today Syria is

brokering the peace process. In his book *The Missing Peace*, he wrote that when almost everything started to reach an end, when the new peace treaty between Syria and Israel started to materialize, Barak became worried and concerned because he was getting negative polls in the Israeli public opinion surveys. Then Barak said to Ross that he was worried that he might either lose the elections or lose the peace with Syria, and he decided that he did not want to lose the elections so he did not proceed or sign the peace treaty with Syria. The elections took place, Barak lost and thus he lost peace and the election and Ariel Sharon became the prime minister of Israel. Ariel Sharon declared publicly that he was not interested in resuming peace talks with Syria for a very

between Israelis and Palestinians, but no Israeli would say today that Palestinians do not exist. They negotiate with them, they make deals with them, sometimes the deals collapse, sometimes the deals succeed, but at least the whole Middle East has evolved. I can't deny, just to be candid and honest, that the Arabs at one point in their history used to say we do not recognize Israel, we want to throw them back into the sea. Nobody says this any more. Actually, the whole Arab League, in which all countries without a single exception, made Israel an historical offer—it was an historic initiative—that was repeated twice, once in Beirut and once in Algeria. All the Arab leaders at the Arab Summit met, and proposed to Israel a complete nor-



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facing tremendous political problems with the administration of the United States because of the situation in Iraq. Let me go back a little bit with you and remind you of the following fact: Syria was not always regarded in such a negative perspective by the U.S. Actually, every single American president starting with Richard Nixon visited Damascus,

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ending with Bill Clinton, and they all met with Syrian leaders. But things have changed. After the tragic events of September 11 every nation in the world sent to the United States and its people letters of condolence. Of course, Syria did the same, but we did something more important. We immediately initiated contact with the American security agencies and we told them Syria had been fighting against those extremist terrorist groups for the past 30 years and it had a wealth of information about them. We immediately started providing our American friends with this information and helping them in their fight against terrorism. According to Seymour Hersh, who published a story in the *New Yorker*, Syria provided the United States in that period of time with what he called “actionable information” that helped abort two planned operations against American interests. One was in Canada and one was in Bahrain. This ended up with a thank you letter from Secretary Powell, who was then the Secretary of State of the United States, to Syria “thanking Syria for helping save American lives.”

I told this story once to Andrea Koppel from CNN when the crisis was there between us and America and she wouldn’t believe it so I provided her with a copy of this letter and she put it on the screen of CNN. But this is not the issue; the issue is the following: once we realized that America was planning to invade and occupy Iraq, Syria worried a lot.

What I’m telling you now is something I lived through personally, because I was a member of the Syrian team that was discussing the issue of Iraq with the American counterparts at that time. I remember that we were meeting with our American counterparts and telling them, “please don’t make this mistake. We think that you do not understand the situation in Iraq. We believe that if you invade and occupy Iraq you will be unleashing forces that you will never be able to reconrol.” I remember what we told them at that time exactly, exactly, we said this: “We believe that your invasion of Iraq will be equivalent to opening a Pandora’s box of foes and evils. Be careful with what you might be doing.” And I remember very well that we told them that their occupation of Iraq would only fuel extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism throughout the Middle East. We were not the only ones who said this. I remember President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt said to the Americans, “if you invade Iraq you will end up with a thousand Osama bin Ladens”.

At that point, when we were saying this to our American counterparts they were actually ridiculing what we were saying and mocking us. They were telling us, “You probably don’t understand anything about Iraq. Our information is that we will be met with rice and roses, and two weeks after our invasion Iraq will become a model that will inspire the whole Middle East. Iraq will become a model of democracy and of welfare and prosperity and every country in the Middle East will be looking at Iraq and

saying we wish we could be like them.”

That was a rhetorical discussion; it belongs to the past. What has happened, has happened. Today, the United States of America is in Iraq and in Syria we have a new neighbor—the United States of America. Now we are, of course, between two neighbors—on one side Israel, on one side the United States of America. We are caught between the hammer and a hard place, and believe me it’s not easy for any country in the world to be the neighbor of the United States of America. I usually say this and I remind my audience if you don’t believe me, invite the Ambassador of Mexico and let him tell you about how difficult it is to be the neighbor of the United States of America.

Immediately after the invasion and occupation of Iraq, we started worrying about what was happening in Iraq. The level of violence started escalating, but the thing that worried us more was that suddenly we, in Syria, started hearing through the media channels through the news channels, the satellite TV stations, that what’s happening in Iraq was happening because Syria was allowing terrorists and insurgents to infiltrate through the Syrian-Iraqi borders into Iraq. We worried a lot about this for two reasons, which I have to be very clear about. I’m not talking about principles or friendship; it’s against our interests to do this for two reasons. One, those so-called mujahedin extremists, fundamentalist terrorists, call them what you want, are our own sworn enemies and we understand the situation. If they go and fight in Iraq to kill and get killed and they survive, they will come back and continue their fight in Syria, because we have a secular system and they do not like secular systems. So, those are our enemies; we would not play games with them. Actually, we were very critical of the United States’ policy towards those mujahedin when the United States was financing, training and arming them and

sending them to Afghanistan, because after they finished what they called their “holy war” in Afghanistan they came back to our countries—to Saudi Arabia, to Egypt, to Syria—and they continued their holy war in our countries against our governments and our societies. So we don’t play games with such groups. This is on one hand.

On the other hand, we in Syria suddenly noticed a huge military presence next door of the world’s unique superpower. Syria is a very small, and let me be honest with you, a militarily weak country. It would be foolish from our viewpoint to bring on ourselves the wrath of the United States by allowing who we consider our enemies, not only to our government but to our societies, to roam freely across those borders. We’re not going to provoke the United States, because if you are going to kick the tiger in its back then you must be willing to deal with its teeth. To us the United States is a tiger and no small country in the world can afford to provoke it.

At that point I was instructed by my government to contact the United States administration. I went to the Pentagon, I met with the secretary of defense and I told him that on the one hand these accusations are untrue, but on the other hand we’re not going to refute them and end the story. We offered to engage with you on securing the Syrian-Iraqi borders. Whatever you want we are willing to do because we think it’s in our national interests and the national interest of the Iraqi people that we do not allow a single infiltrator to cross these borders. We offered the U.S. administration what we thought would be a good start, like trilateral patrolling of the borders, exchanging information, sharing intelligence, holding meetings between field officers on both sides, whatever might be useful and might help we were willing to do. You might not imagine or not believe this but the Pentagon was adamant and categorically and absolutely refused any engage-

ment or any cooperation with Syria on the border issue.

They kept on the rhetoric against us. They kept on appearing on TV screens saying that what’s happening in Iraq is happening not because the Iraqi people are fighting against us or because they are unhappy with us; they actually adore us. It is Syria, the rogue country, which is allowing infiltrators to cross these borders into Iraq.

Luckily enough this rhetoric is losing credibility nowadays and I will give you a very recent example. Five weeks ago, the United States military executed, a military operation entitled “Steel Shield” in the western part of Iraq in the villages that are adjacent to the Syrian borders of the Iraqi side. After they finished this operation the top military officer in charge of the Steel Shield operation appeared in a press conference and he said the following: so I’m quoting a top American military man, and you can check this for yourselves. He said, “We have managed to kill 200 insurgents and captured 1,000 insurgents, that is 1,200 insurgents, all of them in the villages of western Iraq.” This is the closest area to the Syrian-Iraqi borders, “out of which not a single individual was not an Iraqi.” All of these insurgents—200 killed, 1,000 captured—were Iraqis.

This is one thing that was important. Another important thing that happened was here in the media everybody would say, you know the suicide bombers in Iraq, they’re not Iraqis. They come from other Arab countries to implement suicide bomb attacks in Iraq itself.

A tragic incident happened in Amman, Jordan three weeks ago. Three people went to a number of Jordanian hotels and set off explosives and killed lots of civilians. This was a horrible tragic incident. One of the three was caught—a lady—and they investigated her and they discovered that all three were Iraqis. The

gist of this story is that those Iraqis were going to Jordan and elsewhere to set off explosives. So the idea that they need people from outside Iraq to do these suicide attacks in Iraq itself is preposterous and is not convincing anybody. This is why in the recent two months, the rhetoric about Syria as causing the trouble in Iraq has subdued to a considerable degree. However, we continue to repeat our message and we have repeatedly said it to every high ranking official in the U.S. administration and also to members of the Congress, Senators and Congressmen, that Syria is not an enemy to the United States. We are willing to engage with you because we believe that the ongoing level of violence in Iraq is causing terrible, terrible damage to the Iraqi people and to Iraq itself. Those are our brothers and we worry about them a lot and this continuing bloodshed in Iraq is causing great alarm in Syria. We will continue to repeat this same message until it

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is heeded somewhere in Washington, D.C., and they consider engaging with Syria because we believe that even if you have someone you disagree with you can still engage with this party and you can reach results.

Finally, I will move to the Lebanese issue and then I will stop. Of course, Syria is facing another international crisis vis-à-vis the situation in Lebanon. Once more you might disagree with me on things, but I will tell you now the Syr-

ian perspective. As you all know, the whole issue today is about the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. We, in Syria consider this a heinous crime that has caused incredible damage to Syria itself. From day one of this assassination we realized that the sinister plot behind the assassination of Hariri was not merely about assassinating this Lebanese national figure but also about causing the maximum possible damage to Syria itself and to relations between the Syrian and the Lebanese people, and this has actually happened.

Today, there is great bitterness between both countries, which has not been the case for centuries because we are almost one people in two different independent sovereign countries. As you know, the United Nations has formed a commission assigned to the task of investigating the assassination of Rafik Hariri. To make it brief, this commission was headed by a German investigator, Detlev Mehlis. At the beginning, the Syrians had some misgivings about how Mehlis was approaching the investigation, but we were committed and we wanted to cooperate with this investigation because we thought that the only way to vindicate and exonerate Syria is full cooperation with Detlev Mehlis and his commission to reveal the truth about the assassination of Hariri.

At that point we thought that there were only three possible outcomes of the investigation of the death of Hariri and we would call them the “white outcome,” the “black outcome,” and the “gray outcome.” This is the Syrian approach. When we say a “white outcome” we mean that Detlev Mehlis has successfully completed his investigation. He would know who the culprits were and who committed this crime, and Syria is not involved—end of story. Of course, we are very comfortable with the “white scenario.” What we call the “black scenario” is the following: Detlev Mehlis success-

fully reveals the truth about the assassination and some Syrian individuals might be implicated and involved in this crime. We are comfortable with this outcome because we believe that if there were any Syrian individuals, whoever they might be and in whatever position in the government, who might be implicated and who might have participated in this crime, they have committed high treason and they have caused unprecedented damage to Syria. These guys, if they were implicated, should be punished. Whether by a Syrian court of justice or by an international court of justice, it doesn't matter. For us, if there is any individual from Syria who was involved in this crime, then he or she must be severely punished. So, even if Mehlis ends up with what we call the “black result,” a conclusive result that says those guys are the guys who killed Hariri and some of them, all of them, or one of them, might be Syrian, that's good for us. We don't mind this because the Syrian government, the Syrian leadership, was not involved and categorically has nothing to do with this.

However, the third scenario, the “gray scenario,” is the scenario that troubles us a lot. The gray scenario is a scenario in which the investigation commission will say, we really don't know who killed Hariri. We failed to reveal the truth about this crime, but we think it was probably Syria, and they will leave. This will cause Syria incredible political damage.

In the past month, dramatic things happened concerning this investigation. First, Detlev Mehlis came out with the report. The report was very damaging to Syria. At least from our perspective, we thought it was an unfair report. But Syria is a small country, a weak country, and nobody hears Syria. Detlev Mehlis rushed to the United Nations Security Council. He based his report on two key testimonials—two key witnesses who both said that they happened to know that Syria was involved in the assassi-

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nation of Hariri. He sent in his report to the United Nations Security Council, and within a week the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that was very damaging to Syria.

Mehlis was very careful in his report, and he said on page one that he does not have conclusive evidence about anything and he might need months to years before he can build a file that can be submitted to a court of justice. Yet he said, “I have those two witnesses who claim that Syria was involved in the assassination of Hariri,” and then he lists both testimonials in full detail.

He submits this report to the United Nations Security Council, a resolution passes, which is very damaging to Syria, and then guess what happened? First, France arrests and incarcerates the first witness and accuses him of perjury and of spreading misinformation. One key witness was eliminated from the Mehlis report. Second, within two weeks the other witness recanted his whole testimony. He appeared on TV—anyone can listen to his testimony and see that this is a disturbed, psychotic person—and suddenly he did not only recant all his testimony but he also came up with a new story about a different sort of accusation, this time not accusing Syria but accusing Lebanese leaders.

I'm not telling you that when he was accusing Syria he was telling the truth and now that he is accusing the Lebanese leaders he is lying. I'm not telling you that he was lying when he accused Syria and now he is telling the truth that he is accusing the Lebanese leaders. What I'm telling you is that this is a dubious, shady character with a perturbed mentality. Anyone who saw him at his press conference on TV can easily see that it was so unfair and so unjust for Detlev Mehlis to use those two dubious persons and base his report on them, rush this report to the United Nations

Security Council, get the Security Council resolution and then, guess what? Both witnesses today are absolutely and completely undermined.

By the way, you probably already know that Detlev Mehlis has resigned, he's not the head of the investigation committee anymore, and all questions are still open.

Once more I repeat, and I will end here, that it is in our national interests in Syria for the investigation to reach a conclusive result about this crime, because

this is the only way that will prevent our political enemies from pointing fingers at Syria, claiming that Syria was involved in this crime. And we will continue to cooperate with this investigation and we will do whatever is within our capacity to help the United Nations reach an answer to the mystery of the assassination of Rafik Hariri.

Thank you very much.

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