

**Written Testimony of Emile El-Hokayem
Research Fellow
The Henry L. Stimson Center**

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Syria: Options and Implications for Lebanon and the Region

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

First, let me express my appreciation for the opportunity to testify today on the pressing matter of Syria.

1. Overview of the Syrian challenge

The challenge posed by Syria to regional stability in the Middle East is complex and multifaceted. Until a few years ago Syria was a partner of the United States in the search for peace. Now, thanks to its policy choices, alliances, geographic location and spoiler capacity, Syria is enmeshed in all the current and potential conflicts in the Middle East: Lebanon, Israel-Palestine, Iraq and Iran. Syria is not the ultimate threat to either the region or US interests, nor does it pose the kind of ideological, strategic and political challenge that Iran does. But it has proven intransigent and belligerent on a number of issues of great importance to the international community.

Nowhere has Syrian influence been as visible and disruptive as in Lebanon. After occupying (and stabilizing) Lebanon for 15 years with an international cover, Syrian heavy-handedness and mismanagement of Lebanese politics has created deep resentment against Syria which cuts across sectarian lines. Lebanon's transition from Syrian domination to full independence, sovereignty and stability has been strenuous for its society and politics. Since 2005, Lebanon has experienced political paralysis, economic regression, a devastating war with Israel, various grave security incidents, including a campaign of political assassination and intimidation and a 3.5 month-long mini-war against Sunni jihadists. Syria's contribution to this instability is difficult to overstate, even if it is often murky.

The upcoming Lebanese presidential elections will be a momentous test for the future of Syrian-Lebanese relations. Depending on Syrian behavior (i.e. whether Syria will recognize a president acceptable to all Lebanese factions who also upholds Lebanon's responsibilities toward the international community and protects its full sovereignty or even a president who enjoys the support of a majority of parliamentarians), these elections could open a new phase not only in bilateral relations between Syria and Lebanon but also between Syria and the rest of the world. But the prospects for such a

positive outcome are dim, partly because of Syria, which perceives these elections as an opportunity to defeat its Lebanese and foreign opponents with the support of its Lebanese allies and which fears that a victory of its foes will further weaken its hand.

2. Assessing US policy toward Syria and Syria's regional role

Critics of the current policy of isolation argue that it hasn't worked, that US interests with regards to Syria go beyond Lebanon and that sidelining Syria invites more interference and destabilization on Syria's part. The problems with this argument are manifold: high-level delegations from the US and Europe engaged Syria for many years, without reciprocation from Damascus on any of the issues raised; Syria was allowed to set Lebanon's foreign and domestic policies for 15 years, ultimately overplaying its hand; Syria was given many opportunities to shape more favorable outcomes for itself, but, feeling besieged, chose instead to provoke an escalation in Lebanon that eventually backfired. It is not a lack of engagement but Syria's maximalist and unresponsive posture that has precipitated the current crisis, driving the US administration and other countries to even consider, then wisely reject regime change as an option.

Critics must also acknowledge that US policy toward Syria is not unilateral or even controversial with America's allies. It is a mainstream, multilateral policy endorsed by the European Union and key Arab states, and formalized through UN Security Council resolutions.

Critics, however, are right to stress that US interests regarding Syria are not limited to Lebanon. Iraq is the most prominent issue to come to mind. If the United States decides to stabilize Iraq through serious regional cooperation, it will need the help of all of Iraq's neighbors, including Syria. But if one were to gather all of Iraq's neighbors around a table, it would be Syria that would have the least to offer in terms of positive incentives. Indeed, Syria's supposedly good relations with Iraqi factions don't translate into constructive leverage. In terms of tribal, political or financial power, Syria is not part of the major league. Although it does not have the capacity to deliver what the US needs most in Iraq, it does and will maintain the capacity to derail any domestic or regional consensus it deems contrary to its interests. Syria's hosting of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees must be commended and that burden acknowledged and shared, but Syria should not be allowed to leverage this crisis to promote more mischief in Iraq. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that Syria is attempting to organize proxies in Iraq, essentially former regime elements who found a base in Syria since 2003. The Iraqi government's repeated pleas for the extradition of many of these figures have been rejected. But given the fragmented nature of the Iraqi insurgency and its autonomous political calculations, Syria has been less successful than it hoped in determining the political agenda of any of the Iraqi factions and will find it difficult to position itself as a key power broker.

The other set of interests pertains to the perennial Syrian support and hosting of rejectionist Palestinian factions. Little was obtained from Damascus at the height of the peace process in the 1990s, so it is difficult to imagine a dramatic reversal when Syria is

under so much pressure. Palestinian politics and progress in the peace process will be the determining factors, not unlikely Syrian cooperation.

Finally, there is Iran, whose alliance with Syria (and Hezbollah) makes it a key player in Levantine politics. The declared hope of many, including Israeli officials, is to drive a wedge between the two countries by restarting the peace process. But the nature and strength of the Syrian-Iranian alliance prevent such a scenario from unfolding. In fact, Syria is not likely to give up an alliance that brings everyone to its doorstep.

In these circumstances, what to obtain from Syria in return for unconditional engagement is unclear. It will take a long and arduous process of dialogue to start seeing the benefits, if any, of such a strategy. A main concern is that all the progress made on the Lebanese front since 2005 could be reversed in the meantime. This will not happen unless a dual process of US engagement of Syria and of Israel-Syria peace talks becomes more important to Washington and Tel Aviv than to Damascus. Even modest Syrian cooperation on Iraq and Israel could then become reason enough not to challenge Syrian behavior in Lebanon.

3. Syrian calculations regarding Lebanon

Is Syria's interest in Lebanon uniquely motivated by the desire to recover the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights? Or is there a more complex calculation driving Syria's attempts to reassert its role in Lebanon? While there is no doubt that Syria is legitimately adamant in its desire to recover the Golan, it is my judgment that it also wants a dominant say in all matters Lebanese, which amounts to serious breaches to Lebanon's sovereignty and a de facto veto right on Lebanese affairs. So long as Syria refuses to normalize relations with Lebanon by delineating the border, exchanging embassies and ending its interference in Lebanese affairs, it will be difficult to overcome Lebanese fears and suspicions over Syria's real intentions and the substance of a bilateral US-Syrian dialogue. There is still a vivid memory in Lebanon of US acquiescence to Syrian rule that resulted from Syria's support of the United States against Saddam Hussein in 1990.

The continued importance of Lebanon to Syria has many dimensions. Let's be clear that much of the daily interaction between Syria and Lebanon is legitimate, the product of strong and old societal ties, and that both countries are bound to have privileged relations in the future. But Syria's current approach to Lebanon is dictated by regime interests in Damascus rather than a healthy long-term vision of the relationship. Lebanon needs not be a threat to Syria's stability, but this is Damascus' call.

Syria sees Lebanon as a convenient battlefield for its conflict with a number of foes, including the United States, France, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Lebanon is also seen as a source of threat to Syria's regime because it is no longer in Syria's orbit, now has an autonomous foreign policy, is solidifying relations with Syria's foes, allows the airing of anti-Syrian views, and has allowed the international community to pose, through the international tribunal looking into the Hariri assassination, a possibly existential threat to the regime. In Lebanon, Syria sees a lost source of economic benefits, critical strategic

depth that needs to be regained and secured at all costs, and an important negotiating asset.

Bashar al-Assad repeats to his foreign visitors that Syria is not a charity—should Syria cooperate with the US, he expects full US engagement. But this route could lead to sacrificing a number of important processes: the international tribunal and the Hariri investigation could halt, UN resolution 1701 could be transformed into a conflict management mechanism in which Syria will have a major say, and the UN-led process to normalize relations between the two countries would likely fail, among other casualties of engagement.

In examining whether the US should engage Syria, the Senate should consider why Syria has failed to cooperate with every attempt to obtain Syrian cooperation on Lebanon—some of which have offered attractive incentives. Saudi Arabia and other Arab states offered Syria reintegration into the Arab fold and much-needed investments; France has promised “spectacular returns” in exchange for a hands-off approach to Lebanon; the European Union has offered economic assistance and cooperation; and countless European officials have promised to support re-launching the peace process with Israel. Damascus has rebuffed all offers because it is still hoping for a complete reversal of fortunes in Lebanon. One needs only to look at the delighted reaction of the Syrian leadership following the visits of American congressional delegations and European foreign ministers over the last year, or invitations to participate in Arab League meetings, and the utter lack of Syrian responsiveness afterwards.

Syria continues to await renewed international recognition of or at least acquiescence to its central role in Lebanese affairs. Syria calculates that in due time, international fatigue with the Lebanese crisis, new leaderships in the US and Europe, necessity over Iraq, the capacity of its allies to sustain pressure on the Lebanese government and sheer steadfastness will reward its obstinacy. In the short term, it means that a power vacuum and even instability in Lebanon are seen as more harmful to the governing coalition and its foreign allies than to Syria and its allies in Lebanon.

The logic of unconditional reengagement carries other risks and costs that its proponents dismiss too easily. US engagement without Syrian concessions on Lebanon will hurt further US credibility in the region, jeopardize multilateral processes, alienate Arab allies worried about Syria’s alignment with Iran, and comfort Syria’s image as a tough resister that can force the United States to come to terms on Syrian terms.

Unconditionally reengaging Syria is tantamount to subordinating the sovereignty and future of Lebanon to the fortunes of the peace process, Syria’s cooperation on Iraq, or the fluctuations in the Persian Gulf, and this is after more than a million people turned out in the center of Beirut on March 14, 2005 to peacefully demand and obtain the end of Syria’s hegemony over Lebanon.

4. A way forward

Keeping Syria in the cold is not a long-term solution to Lebanon's or the region's problems, nor is the threat of further coercion. If Syria still considers peace with Israel and normalization with the West strategic choices because of the tangible political and economic benefits that would then flow, then it could demonstrate its seriousness by putting an end to its disruptive role in Lebanon.

There is a path ahead that involves restarting the peace process between Syria and Israel, and it will require US diplomatic leadership after the Annapolis conference. Simultaneously with a US-Israeli initiative to restart peace negotiations with Israel, Syria should commit to the Quartet to demarcate its border with Lebanon, exchange embassies, and abide by UN resolutions 1559 and 1701. In exchange, the Quartet would endorse the resumption of peace talks, the United States would agree to suspend sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act and send back its ambassador to Damascus, and the European Union would commit to press ahead with economic and trade discussions. Syria's refusal to do so would only be construed as a desire to continue using Lebanon as a negotiating card with Israel, even as Syria today can no longer guarantee the disarmament of Hezbollah as it could in the 1990s. More worryingly, Syrian obstruction could simply reflect a continued desire for hegemony in Lebanon, validating the worst fears of a deeply insecure Lebanese population. This is why dissociating Syria's foreign affairs from its obligations towards Lebanon is a serious mistake. It is ironic but only fair for Lebanon to constrain Syria's policy options after Syria did so for so long.