



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia “U.S. Policy and the Road to Damascus: Who’s Converting Whom?”

2172 Rayburn Building, 24 April 2008, 9:00 AM

The Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia in the House Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing on U.S. policy towards Syria. The hearing featured witnesses **The Honorable Martin S. Indyk**, Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution, **Mr. Ammar Abdul Hammid**, Director, The Tharwa Foundation, and **The Honorable Peter W. Rodman**, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution.

Subcommittee Chairman Gary Ackerman (D-NY) began his opening remarks by saying, “Peace can not be purchased by rewarding aggression. There will be no deal with the dictator in Damascus.” In a discussion of what the next U.S. administration should seek to achieve in U.S.-Syrian relations, Ackerman argued that the next President should decide on a “key” question, “**Can the marriage between Damascus and Tehran be broken up, or are these two parties too committed to a shared vision of Middle East reordered to their liking?**” Ackerman believes that just carrots and no sticks will not work with Syria, and urges **the reestablishment of a coherent Syria policy.**

Vice Chair Ron Klein (D-FL) discussed the **continued responsibility Syria has for arming Hezbollah** and that impact on Israel. Klein feels that “there doesn’t seem to be any check or balance of what rockets go into Lebanon.” He raised a few questions as to how Syria can possibly be isolated and what can and should be done by the U.S. in relation to its allies in the region.

Jim Costa (D-CA) argued for the need to continue to have dialogues with Syrians, and highlighted there still remains many questions about the Assad regime and what continues to keep it sustained.

Ambassador Martin S. Indyk began his remarks by noting that the issue of policy towards Syria hasn’t had a lot of attention for the past couple of years. Indyk argued that the results of U.S. sanctions on Syria are “mixed at best.” While he feels that Syria has been able to stymie Lebanese politics, he noted that for the time being, the **Assad regime has been cooperating with the United Nations tribunal and it seems to want to make peace with Israel.** Indyk feels that Assad has been very careful not to provoke Israel. Indyk argued that **Syria is a rogue regime and thus only offers the U.S. three options in terms of policy: regime change, containment and isolation and sanctions to reduce the regime’s negative influence, and policy engagement designed to drive negotiations to mix positive and negative options.** Indyk thinks that the next president

should follow the third option, and his argument for such policy is two drivers, Iran and Israel. Indyk feels that Iran has managed to raise itself to a level of a strategic adversary to the U.S. in the region, and thus it requires the U.S. to look to Syria to see what it can do. **“Syria is the conduit, the pipeline, for Iran to get to Palestinian issues, etc.”**

Mr. Ammar Abdul Hammid feels that change in Syria now is a matter of when and how. Abdul Hammid highlighted the current dynamics of Syria’s population: **issues like extreme poverty and high unemployment have exacerbated the agitation toward the regime to thus cause people to start activism.** He argued that there is a shift from a discussion of reform to a discussion of what is the better strategy. Abdul Hammid feels that decision-making in Syria continues to be a family affair and Assad continues to be entranced by Nasrallah. Abdul Hammid argued that the **next administration should give engagement a chance but should also initiate discussion on the many imprisoned political prisoners.** He argued for the **need for an external reconciliation process between Syria and Lebanon and also an internal reconciliation between the regime and its many dissatisfied citizens.** He implored the U.S. to not shy from actively supporting Syria’s opposition groups and dissidents. Abdul Hammid feels that the U.S. **“needs to communicate a message of hope and change not hope and the status quo.”**

Dr. Peter W. Rodman feels Syria is in the news for 2 reasons: nuclear issues and a wave of Syrian-Israeli diplomatic contacts. His main point was that the U.S. and Israel should not forget Syria’s regional importance. Rodman noted that there are good arguments for eagerly pursuing Syrian negotiations but he has some concerns, like if there was a deal, what would that mean for Lebanon? He feels the bottom line is that **U.S. & Israel need to coordinate closely in terms of the possibility of Syrian diplomacy.** While Syria demands the Golan back, the U.S. needs assurance on what it wants out of Syria.

Subcommittee Chairman Ackerman continued with Dr. Rodman’s line of discussion of the possibility of negotiations, asking, “If Syria’s big asset is Golan, what is the trade, what is it that the U.S. can reasonably expect?” Ambassador Indyk answered with his argument that the ask also includes Lebanon, but Lebanon cannot be part of this deal. Indyk argued that as a result of negotiations, the U.S. can get Lebanon off the table if Israel withdraws fully from Golan. He also sees this as the ability to ask Syria to shut down terrorist organizations that it hosts, like Hamas & Islamic Jihad. He doesn’t think these negotiations would require breaking relations with Iran.

Mr. Abdulhamid answered with an outline of processes for national reconciliation: Syria & Lebanon discussing the investigation of Hariri assassination, addressing the issue of human rights and internal trouble in Syria, specifically the economic unrest causing people to listen to activists for the first time.

Dr. Rodman feels Syria will not give up its spoiler role because without this role, it’s a weak country. He argues that Syria’s motive now is to use the U.S. and Israel to break out of isolation. He is very skeptical of pursuing a Golan negotiation.