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**BRINGING SYRIA IN FROM THE COLD:
A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR CANADA**

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ABSTRACT

The stability of the Middle East is increasingly in question, as rising tensions between Israel and Iran and their respective proxies threaten to ignite a war which may have global consequences. In the middle of it all is Syria, a nation that can arguably play an important, perhaps decisive role in the region's future. Isolated by sanctions led by the United States (US), Syria's social and economic development has been stunted, and recent events have brought Syria towards greater instability and mounting crisis. Despite the latter, the aforementioned sanctions have failed to coerce Syria into surrendering its strategic alliances or changing its domestic and foreign policies. What changes are realistically possible can only come from within, and will only occur when the tangible benefits of change are revealed to outweigh those of the status quo, leveraging Syria's historic pragmatism against the inertia of its authoritarian regime. There is no quick solution or 'silver bullet' that will bring Syria in line with Western policies or resolve the region's security issues.

Canada with its legacy of 'soft power' multilateralism, impartiality and peacekeeping in the region, is ideally placed to intercede. By leveraging its strengths in key areas of defence, diplomacy and development, Canada could play an important, perhaps major role in forging an expanded relationship with Syria, one that might influence Syria towards greater cooperation with the West and reduce tensions in the region. However, demonstrating Canada's seriousness to work with Syria would require the same ministerial-level involvement used with Israel, accompanied by an even-handed approach to regional issues and an acceptance of the need to negotiate on the basis of legitimate concerns of parties on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

INTRODUCTION

> Engagement is not a concession; nor is it an end. Rather, engagement should be considered a means, a tool for achieving certain foreign policy goals. Just as engagement with Libya and North Korea brought certain benefits – both directly and in terms of alliance management – engagement with Syria also holds potential for gain.[1]
>
> Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, "Dealing With Damascus."

The stability of the Middle East is increasingly in doubt, as rising tensions between Israel and Iran and their respective proxies threaten to ignite a war which may have global consequences. In the middle of it all is Syria, a nation that can arguably play an important, perhaps decisive role in the region's future. Isolated from the West by United States (US)-led sanctions, Syria's social and economic development has been stunted, and recent events have pushed Syria towards greater instability and mounting crisis. Although US President Obama appears ready to initiate a new dialogue with Syria, his diplomatic efforts will continue to be hampered by his predecessor's legacy of punitive legislation and "arrogant, ineffective diplomacy" in the Middle Eastern region.[2]

With its legacy of impartiality and peacekeeping in the region, Canada is ideally placed to intercede at this critical juncture. By taking a strong leadership role in bringing Syria 'in from the cold', Canada could make a major contribution towards peace in the Middle East whilst furthering its own national values and interests.

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[1] Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Special Report No. 33, The Center for Preventative Action (June 2008), 2.

[2] Statement made by Presidential candidate John Kerry, as cited by Andrew Gumbel, "Kerry attacks Bush's 'arrogant' diplomacy," *The Independent*, 19 April 2004, http://www.independent.co.uk/

Demonstrating how past attempts to coerce Syria have failed, I will contend that Syria should be encouraged to play a decisive role in stabilizing the region, and that the time is right for the West to engage Syria in a new, cooperative manner. Given the obstacles that restrict the ability of the United States to lead this effort, I will propose that Canada can, and should, take a greater role in engaging Syria. I will conclude by suggesting some possible options of how it should proceed.

BACKGROUND

Events over the past 18 months have brought Middle East to the brink of renewed conflict, one that could very well result in a global conflict. During this period, high-ranking Israeli officials have unequivocally stated that Israel will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran, and that whoever supports Iran in a fight against Israel will also suffer the consequences. Israel considers its immediate security threat to emanate from Iran and its four inter-related proxies: Syria, Lebanon (in the form of Hezbollah), Gaza (in the form of Hamas), and other disparate Palestinian-related extremist groups. Considering Hezbollah and Hamas as an integral (albeit unconventional) part of Syria's military forces, IDF officials have warned that any major attack on Israel by either organization would be seen, by extension, as an attack by Syria. As a consequence, Israel would

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news/world/americas/kerry-attacks-bushs-arrogant-diplomacy-560443.html, Internet; accessed on 22 April 2009.

retaliate by striking "not just at the arm, but at the head itself", which would undoubtedly lead to further escalation.[3]

Several regional observers agree that there is cause for grave concern. Predicting that Iran may soon produce enough low-enriched uranium to produce a nuclear weapon, David Albright warns that "Israel will see it as a major threat" because "an Iranian nuclear breakout capability brings up existential questions."[4] Mahdi Nazemroaya concurs, stating that the region may be on the cusp of a major international conflict "with global ramifications... which could quickly spin out of control."[5]

Worryingly, former US ambassador John Bolton has suggested that Israel's recent attack on Gaza could be the first step towards a "multi-front war" with Iran.[6] Indeed, there is a rising consensus amongst regional observers that the conditions for a major war in the Middle East are now present, and that "a relatively minor clash could quickly and dangerously escalate by engulfing the whole region and perhaps even beyond."[7] Another Israeli attempt to eliminate Hezbollah in Lebanon could have the same disastrous

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[3] A brief unclassified account of the meeting can be found in Task Force Golan Heights SITREP 003/2008, "MONTHLY SITREP FOR OP GLADIUS – MARCH 2008," Report to CEFCOM HQ, April 2008.

[4] Bernard Gwertzman, "Iran May Achieve Capability to Produce a Nuclear Weapon in 2009," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 February 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/18570/iran_may_achieve_capability_to_make_a_nuclear_weapon_in_2009.html?breadcrumb=%2Fregion%2F404%2Firan, Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

[5] Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, "Beating the Drums of a Broader Middle East War: Israel, Syria, and Lebanon Prepare the "Home Fronts"," *Global Research*, 07 May 2008, http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=8733, Internet; accessed on 17 February 2009.

[6] Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, "The Target is Iran: Israel's Latest Gamble May Backfire," *Global Research*, 12 January 2009, http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=11747, Internet; accessed on 13 January 2009, 3.

[7] José Miguel Alonso Trabanco, "The Middle East Powder Keg Can Explode at Anytime," *Global Research*, 13 January 2009, http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=11762, Internet; accessed on 13 January 2009, 3.

escalatory effect as a direct attack on Iran, given Lebanon's defence agreement with

Syria, Syria's agreements with Russia and Iran, and Iran's arrangements with China.

Any major hostilities against Israel would inevitably draw in the United States and

NATO, further broadening the conflict.[8]

At first blush, Israeli fears over a nuclear-armed Iran seem implausible, given the

catastrophic response that Iran would likely suffer if it dared to launch a nuclear attack

against Israel. It is not inconceivable though that Israel might feel so threatened by Iran

that it may be inevitably compelled to act pre-emptively, regardless of the possible

outcomes. Given its central relationship with Iran, Lebanon, Hamas and Hezbollah, Syria

is well-placed to play a decisive role in defusing this dangerous situation. The task of

bringing Syria on-board to date has primarily fallen to the United States; however, the US

has a dismal track record of failure over the past decade in this regard.

THE FAILURE OF US POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA

The United States has long been the key peacemaker in the Middle East, having

played the central role in sponsoring Israeli peace accords with Egypt and Jordan.[9] Its

steadfast political, military, and financial support to Israel though has cast the US in the

curious position of encouraging peace and reconciliation on the one hand, while

championing the cause of its principle protagonist on the other. Despite these mixed

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[8] 'NATO' is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, "Israel's Next War: Today the Gaza Strip, Tomorrow Lebanon?," *Global Research*, 17 January 2009, http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=11800, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009, 6.

[9] Israel made peace with Egypt in 1979, and with Jordan in 1994. See http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/peace%20process/reference%20documents/ for details.

messages, the United States has managed to overlook the imperfections and questionable

policies of Israel's Arab neighbours in order to broker peace deals – with the exception of

Syria.

Syria's foreign policies since 1948 have largely been defined by its competition

with Israel over territory and its search for alliances that will permit it to pursue its

national interests. Historically vulnerable and politically unstable, Syria's actions have

been characterized by a pragmatic willingness to do whatever is necessary to ensure its

own survival.[10]
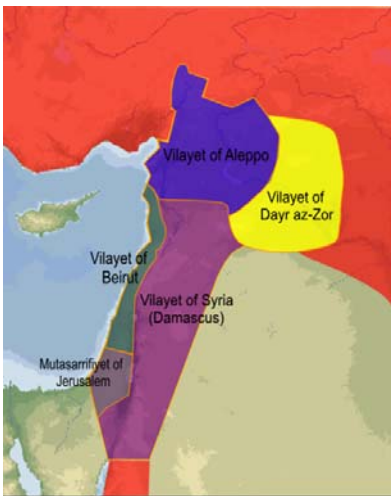
Pre-1918 'natural' Syria
(source: Wikipedia[11])

Modern Syria
(source: CIA World Factbook[12])

Prior to 1918, Syria's 'natural' territory included what is now Lebanon, Jordan,

Israel, the Palestinian Territories (West Bank and Gaza), and the Hatay province of

Turkey. Lacking political legitimacy, Syria nevertheless existed "in the minds of its

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[10] Max Abrahms, "When Rogues Defy Reason: Bashar's Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* X: 4 (Fall 2003), http://www.meforum.org/562/when-rogues-defy-reason-bashars-syria, Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

[11] Wikipedia, "Greater Syria," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ottoman_Syria_1918.png; Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

[12] United States, Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria," *The World Factbook*, updated 05 March 2009, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html; Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

inhabitants [as] a whole, homogeneous in culture, threaded with economic ties and known for centuries as *bilad al-Sham* – 'the lands of Damascus'."[13] Wrestling free from French control in 1946, modern Syria was still an infant when, two years later, it unsuccessfully fought a war as part of the Arab League to prevent Israel from being created out of territory that had until recently been its own.[14] Having accepted the majority of the resultant wave of Palestinian refugees, Syria has championed the Palestinian cause for the last half-century.

By contrast, dreams of expanding 'Eretz Israel HaShalem' ('Greater Israel') put Zionists in direct competition with Syrian nationalists who aspired to recreate a 'Greater Syria' in the same territory. Thus, Israel came to represent the very antithesis of Syrian national aspirations.[15] Feeling threatened and weak in comparison, Syria has sought whatever means available to counter the influence and strength of its US-backed adversary, leading it to embrace Iran and the constellation of Islamic extremist organizations it supports.

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[13] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 14.

[14] Dima Tawakkol, "Syria's History," *MadeInSyria.com*, http://www.made-in-syria.com/syria.htm; Internet; accessed on 10 March 2009.

[15] Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 366.

Competing world views: 'Greater Syria' (left) and 'Greater Israel' (right)
(sources: Wikipedia and GlobalSecurity.org[16])

US-Syrian relations have never been particularly warm, given Syria's longstanding conflict with Israel and its previous dependency upon the former Soviet Union for military and political support. Its relationship with the Soviets strongly demonstrates the overriding pragmatic nature of Syrian politics. Although Syria's ruling Ba'ath party has socialist roots, it has always been far more nationalist than communist; thus, Syria's ties with the USSR were those of convenience. After the dissolution of the latter in 1990, Syria found a new sponsor in Iran. With their shared enmity of Israel and Iraq, the alliance counterbalanced that of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and allowed Syria to establish ties with Hezbollah, reinforcing its ability to influence events in Lebanon.[17]

Despite antipathy for its choice of allies, Syria still managed to develop a limited relationship with the United States based largely on pragmatic accommodations of each

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[16] Wikipedia, "Greater Syria," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ File:Ottoman_Syria_1918.png; Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009. GlobalSecurity, "Israel: Military: Eretz Israel HaShlema," http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ world /israel /greater-israel-maps.htm, Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

[17] Ghiadaa Hetou et al, "Isolating Syria Strategy: Is it Isolating America in the Middle East?" The 50th Annual International Studies Association Conference, New York, 17 February 2009, 8-10.

other's interests.[18] Engaging in unsuccessful peace negotiations with Israel throughout

much of the 1990's, Syrian officials have remained hopeful that a US-brokered peace

agreement with Israel in return for the Golan Heights might be possible.[19]

However, relations between the two nations soured soon after the terrorist attacks

of 11 September 2001. With its clampdown on political activists at home and increasing

use of 'dirty tricks' to meddle in Lebanese politics, Syria ran headlong into the

ascendency of the 'Bush Doctrine'. Despite offering intelligence to the US and

participating in its 'extraordinary rendition programme', Syria's support for Hezbollah

and its opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq put it on the wrong side in the 'Global

War on Terror'.[20] The Bush Administration accused Syria of acting as a spoiler in its

relations with Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel, citing concerns which included:

> ... the Syrian Government's failure to prevent Syria from becoming a
> major transit point for foreign fighters entering Iraq, its refusal to deport
> from Syria former Saddam regime elements who are supporting the
> insurgency in Iraq, its ongoing interference in Lebanese affairs, its
> protection of the leadership of Palestinian rejectionist groups in Damascus,
> its deplorable human rights record, and its pursuit of weapons of mass
> destruction.[21]

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[18] The US supported Syrian interventions in Lebanon in 1976 and 1990 despite accusing Syria as
being a state sponsor of terrorism, while Syria acquiesced to US demands to expel the Abu Nidal
Organization in 1987 and joined the US-led coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. Syria has been on
the US list of state sponsors of terrorism since the list's inception in 1979. United States, Department of
State, "Syria," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, May 2007, http://www.state. gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm;
Internet; accessed on 09 March 2009, 5.

[19] Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 246.

[20] Rime Allaf, "Open for Business: Syria's Quest for a Political Deal," *Chatham House Middle
East Programme Briefing Paper*, MEP BP 07/03, July 2007, http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications
/papers/download/-/id/513/file/9441_bp0707syria.pdf; Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009, 3.
'Extraordinary rendition' refers to the alleged US practice of "extraditing terrorism suspects from one
foreign state to another for interrogation and prosecution. Critics contend that the unstated purpose of such
renditions is to subject the suspects to aggressive methods of persuasion that are illegal in America—
including torture." Jane Mayer, "Outsourcing Torture," *The New Yorker*, 14 February 2005,
http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/02/14/050214fa_fact6; Internet; accessed on 08 March 2009.

[21] United States, Department of State, "Syria," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, May 2007,
http://www.state. gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm; Internet; accessed on 09 March 2009, 5.

Seeking to force Syria to bend to American demands, the US government has implemented diplomatic, economic, and fiscal sanctions against Syria, and openly discussed its desire for a regime change in Damascus.[22] Given its status as a sponsor of international terrorism, Syria remained ineligible to receive US foreign assistance, which once included assistance for water supply, irrigation, roads, electricity, health and agricultural research. Other sanctions restricted military and economic assistance as well as the transfer of technology. In addition, the 2003 Syria Accountability Act imposed a ban on basically all exports to Syria except food and medicine. US financial institutions were required to sever their ties with Syrian banks, and the assets of particular Syrian individuals have been frozen.[23] Pending legislation in the form of the Syria Accountability and Liberation Act (2007) would enact sanctions against those who invest $5 million or more in Syria's energy sector, and would remain in force practically indefinitely:

> [E]xisting U.S. sanctions shall remain in effect until… Syria has "ceased support for terrorism, has dismantled biological, chemical or nuclear weapon programs and has committed to combat their proliferation, respects the boundaries and sovereignty of all neighbouring countries, and upholds human rights and civil liberties."[24]

Despite their intended purpose, critics posit that US attempts to isolate Syria diplomatically and economically may have actually reinforced its bad behaviour. A 2008

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[22] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 21.

[23] Jeremy M. Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, updated February 26, 2008, 22-29.

[24] Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, 29. The citation in quotations is part of the draft legislation which has not been ratified by the US Congress.

study conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations determined that the attempt to punish Syria's undemocratic behaviour may have exacerbated its interference in Lebanese internal affairs, as well as causing its internal crackdowns on domestic reformers.[25] Severed from the West, diplomatic sanctions have served to strengthen Syria's relations with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, and have led it to nurture economic ties with US competitors such as Russia and China. Economic sanctions thus appear to have been largely ineffectual, as Syria has been able to compensate for its shortfalls by diversifying its trade partners, joining in the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA).[26] If anything, the sanctions have only served to hinder the direct business efforts of US and western companies, many of whom have used offshore affiliates to sidestep restrictions and conduct business indirectly.[27] Such extensive 'all or nothing' demands on Syria have eliminated the ability of the US to negotiate incremental change. In some instances, it may even have driven Syria to take desperate measures in order to achieve its national interests (if its complicity in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri is proven true).[28]

Failed US sanctions against Syria may be symptomatic of a larger problem, namely, loss of American diplomatic credibility in the Middle East. Many critics share Khody Akhavi's opinion that the US invasion of Iraq "undermined the US position

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[25] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18.

[26] *Ibid*, 17.

[27] A prime example is Dell Corporation who, while using US trade restrictions to justify its refusal to honour the warranty on my US-built laptop, opened an outlet in Damascus in 2007 which offered its latest laptop products for sale – assembled in Ireland. (Author's note.)

[28] Allaf, "Open for Business: Syria's Quest for a Political Deal," *Chatham House Middle East Programme Briefing Paper*, 1.

throughout the region, and rendered it an increasingly dubious peace broker."[29] Even

prior to this diplomatic chill, inequities in the application of the Bush Doctrine led many

to question America's integrity. Notwithstanding Syria's failure to meet Western norms

of acceptable behaviour, it seems highly hypocritical of the United States to hold Syria

uniquely accountable to such standards. As Mona Yacoubin notes,

> If "bad behaviour" was the litmus test, the United States would need to
> curtail its engagement with a wide range of international actors, including
> Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. Even at the height of the Cold War,
> the United States maintained normal diplomatic relations with the Soviet
> Union. Periodic protests and negative signalling are par for the course...
> (b)ut in the case of Syria, the administration's "isolate and undermine"
> approach went too far.[30]

The lack of impartiality in policy application is even more apparent when one

considers the almost unconditional support the United States provides to Israel, a nation

which possesses and develops weapons of mass destruction, regularly violates Lebanese

sovereignty, resorts to "targeted assassinations", and refuses to share democratic rights

with its own Palestinian population.[31] While Israeli excesses are typically excused in the

name of 'survival' and national interests, it would appear that Syria is not permitted

similar latitude in meeting its own national policy objectives. This dichotomy has led

John Mearshimer and Stephen Walt to argue that US foreign policy has been irreparably

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[29] Khody Akhavi, "Israel-Syria: Peace, or Another "Accidental" Summer War?, " *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 11 July 2007, http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38498; Internet; accessed on 01 February 2009.

[30] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19.

[31] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," *London Review of Books* 28, 6 (March 23, 2006), 6 – 9.

compromised by "the Israeli Lobby", a view widely held throughout the Arab and Muslim world. According to Mearshimer,

> … the Lobby's hostility [towards Iran and Syria] makes it especially difficult for Washington to enlist them against al Qaeda and the Iraqi insurgency, where their help is badly needed... [,] undercuts Washington's efforts to promote democracy abroad and makes it look hypocritical when it presses other states to respect human rights. [32]

Certainly, the US decision to blame the Palestinians themselves for the massive casualties they suffered during the IDF attack on Gaza in January 2009 not only outraged the Arab world, but served to soundly refute claims of American impartiality in the Middle East.

Recently sending two envoys to Damascus, US President Barack Obama has publicly expressed his willingness to renew a dialogue with Syria; however, even this new Administration is encumbered with legacy issues. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has attracted criticism from both Israelis and Palestinians for flip-flopping on her longstanding support for Palestinian autonomy and have accused her of changing her stance in order to gain Jewish votes during her 2000 Senate campaign.[33] Thus, despite hopes for the new Presidency, lingering resentment over inconsistent and biased policies continues to pose a serious obstacle to renewed relations between the United States and Syria.

THE ARGUMENT FOR ENGAGING SYRIA

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[32] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," *London Review of Books* 28, 6 (March 23, 2006), 41.

[33] Michael Ellison, "Cash from Palestinian group mars Hillary's Fight," *The Guardian*, 26 April 2000, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2000/oct/26/israelandthepalestinians.hillaryclinton, Internet; accessed on 15 March 2009.

Although President Obama appears embarked on a policy of engagement, there are many Bush-policy proponents who still argue against normalizing relations with Syria until the latter satisfies US demands first. Their point of view is best summed up by former President G.W. Bush's remarks in 2007:

> My patience ran out on President Assad a long time ago. The reason why is because he houses Hamas, he facilitates Hezbollah, suiciders *[sic]* go from his country into Iraq, and he destabilizes Lebanon… and so, if he's listening, he doesn't need a phone call, he knows exactly what my position is.[34]

While the latter statement hints at some of the areas where Syria could play a decisive role in stabilizing the Middle East, they reveal an almost naïve lack of understanding of Syrian interests. Demanding that Syria relinquish its relationship with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran and keep out of Lebanon on a mere promise that its actions would be tangibly reciprocated is akin to demanding that Israel forego its relationship with the United States and withdraw completely from the occupied Palestinian territories in exchange for peace talks.[35] Having been repeatedly disappointed in US-led peace negotiations with Israel, and, having seen its attempts at cooperation go unnoticed or marginalized, it is hardly realistic to expect that Syria would comply.

Increasingly, regional experts like Jens Hanssen believe that "the road to stability in the Middle East goes directly through Damascus," acknowledging the decisive role

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[34] Brian Knowlton, "Bush has harsh words for President Assad of Syria," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 December 2007, as cited by Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 3.

[35] Christopher Patten and Thomas Pickering (co-Chairs), "Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report No. 63 – 10 April 2007, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library /documents/middle_east___north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/63_restarting_israeli_syrian_negotiations. pdf, Internet; accessed on 19 January 2009, 17.

that Syria can play to influence the interrelated security of Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, and ultimately, the United States and the rest of the world.[36] This viewpoint is reflected in France's recent initiative to re-establish ties with Syria which, according to Christopher Patten, demonstrated that Syria is "neither a rogue state to be tamed, nor part of an "axis" to be broken, but a country with an important place in the region – for the better and not only for the worse."[37]

It is now time for the entire West to adopt a new cooperative approach with Syria, one that acknowledges Syria as an equal and sovereign state with legitimate security concerns and the right to seek to advance its national interests.[38] By identifying the common ground of mutual interests which Syria shares with the West, as well as those areas where the West could tangibly help Syria achieve its national objectives, a collaborative approach can be crafted that would address both parties' needs.

Perhaps the most obvious area of 'common ground' can be found in the context of Iraq, whose stability is a key common interest for both Syria and the United States. Both nations wish to stabilize Iraq, limit the flow of refugees, and counteract al-Qaeda's operations.[39] Like Iraq, Syria's stability is threatened by the spectre of sectarian violence, reflected in its mix of minority Alawite Shi'a rulers and its majority Sunni population.

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[36] Jens Hanssen, as quoted by Deen Karim, "Does the road to peace lie through Syria?" *CBC News*, 13 January 2009, http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/01/13/f-gaza-syria.html, Internet; accessed on 13 January 2009.

[37] Christopher Patten and Thomas Pickering (co-Chairs), "Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Briefing No. 27 – 15 January 2009, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/syria/b27_engaging_syria___lessons_from_the_french_experience.pdf, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009, 3.

[38]Hetou et al, "Isolating Syria Strategy: Is it Isolating America in the Middle East?" 16.

[39] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25.

Having maintained its ties with most of the prominent figures in Iraq (such as Muqtada al-Sadr) and its close ties with Iran, Syria is ideally placed to play an important role in Iraq's future stability.[40]

In an attempt to assuage concerns that it allows insurgents to transit its territory enroute to Iraq, Syria has already taken measures to increase its border security, including increased patrols and tighter entry restrictions. Syria has absorbed nearly 1.5 million Iraqi refugees to date, which has placed a massive burden on its infrastructure. Previously mentioned punitive US legislation however prevents Syria from receiving direct US assistance for these refugees.[41]

As a secular Arab state, Syria is a likely target for al-Qaeda. This led to its initial offer to share related intelligence with the United States, but was withdrawn with the advent of US sanctions against Syria. Obviously, a wrathful Syria could greatly complicate matters by forcibly returning Iraqi refugees to their homeland 'en masse', and/or by neglecting to monitor the activities of transient insurgents and its extensive desert border with Iraq. That it has not done so to date may be interpreted as evidence of its willingness forge greater cooperation with the West, likely in order to further its own foreign policy objectives.

Syria's relationship with Israel inextricably places its overwhelming desire to regain possession of the Golan Heights at odds with its longstanding ties with Hezbollah, Hamas and many other militant Palestinian factions. Viewing their actions as "legitimate resistance activity as distinguished from terrorism," Syria's sponsorship of these groups

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[40] Allaf, "Open for Business: Syria's Quest for a Political Deal," *Chatham House Middle East Programme Briefing Paper*, 4.

[41] Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, 20.

provides it with an asymmetric counter to Israel's overwhelming military advantage.[42]

Although it is unlikely that Syria would ever completely sever its ties with these Islamist

factions, officials have expressed Syria's willingness to use its ties with these groups to

modify their behaviour if it were in its national interests to do so:

> Should a peace treaty [between Israel and Syria] become attainable, it
> seems that the Syrian regime will have absolutely no qualms about
> changing the nature of its espousal of the Palestinian cause, regardless of
> Baathist and Arabist rhetoric, in a 'Syria First'-style makeover.[43]

Pragmatically focussed, Syrian officials have reassured their Western counterparts

that "the entire dynamic of Syria's regional policy will change once we are sure we are

on the path to regaining the Golan."[44] Since its recent resumption of exploratory talks

with Israel, Syria has taken the positive initiative of sponsoring reconciliation between

Hamas and Fatah. It could easily expand its efforts by joining moderate Arab states in a

united front to force Hamas to moderate its behaviour towards Israel, while conversely

acting as an intermediary for Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.[45] While the degree of

control which Syria exerts over Hezbollah and Hamas is uncertain, its ability to impede

the flow of support to these organizations could exert a significant influence to modify

their policies and behaviour towards Israel.

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[42] Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, 12.

[43] Allaf, "Open for Business: Syria's Quest for a Political Deal," *Chatham House Middle East Programme Briefing Paper*, 6.

[44] Patten, "Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," *International Crisis Group*, 18.

[45] Bernard Gwertzman, "Obama Should Consider Inviting Arab Nations to Help Solve Israeli-Palestinian Issues," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 January 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/18123 /obama_should_consider_inviting_arab_nations_to_help_solve_israelipalestinian_issues.html, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009.

Syria's ability to have a decisive regional impact extends to Lebanon, where its recent attempts to forge peace with Israel may already be producing positive results. Syria and Lebanon share a defence treaty which binds them to cooperate in matters of security, based upon the "common destiny and interests between both countries."[46] Although not truly its proxy, Hezbollah has relied upon Syria to act as its conduit for supplies and support from Iran.[47] Forecasting that Hezbollah "cannot survive as it is now, as an armed militia, if Syria and Israel have peace", regional experts like Marina Ottaway and Paul Salem feel that Syria's attempts to kick-start negotiations with Israel have provided the main impetus behind Hezbollah's efforts to transform itself into a legitimate political power in Lebanon's parliament.[48] Inexorably, an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement would likely lead to peace between Israel and Lebanon as well:

> Syria will not allow Lebanon to remain a radical state if it is moving ahead with peace, it does not want a radical state on its flank. In that situation, Hizbollah *(sic)* would be... in a government which is facing external pressure for negotiations with Israel, and it would face the option to either enter those negotiations, and secure a place for itself at the table in a post-peace Lebanon, or face the alternative of trying to survive against Syrian opposition... It would be a very difficult situation for Hizbollah *[sic]* to sustain.[49]

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[46] Republic of Lebanon, *Fraternity, Cooperation and Coordination Treaty between the Republic of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic*, Damascus, 22 May 1991. http://www.syrleb.org/docs/agreements/01TREATYeng.pdf. Internet; accessed on 20 February 2009.

[47] Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," *Middle East Journal* 62, 1(Winter 2008), 37.

[48] Marina Ottaway and Paul Salem, "Syrian/Israeli Peace Talks and Political Deal in Lebanon: Teleconference with Carnegie Experts," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 May 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/0521_transcript_lebanon_syriaisrael.pdf, Internet; accessed on 13 January 2009, 3.

[49] Ottaway, "Syrian/Israeli Peace Talks and Political Deal in Lebanon: Teleconference with Carnegie Experts," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 4.

Much of the criticism levelled against Syria has centred on its reputed interference in Lebanese politics and its refusal to honour Lebanon's sovereignty. Demonstrating its desire to mend these fences and break its diplomatic isolation, Syria supported the 2008 Doha Accord which led to the election of Michel Suleiman as President, ending Lebanon's internal political stalemate. In recognition of Lebanon's sovereignty, Syria has also declared its intention to formally establish diplomatic relations.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Syrian officials have hinted that their nation's longstanding relationship with Iran is based on pragmatism vice ideology, and that a "successful peace process that delivers a just and comprehensive peace would shift the strategic balance and, therefore, would affect our priorities."[50] Indeed, Syria's interests do not entirely coincide with those of their Persian ally:

> First, Syria's ties to Iran put it at odds with its Arab allies, thus damaging its Arab nationalist credentials. Second, unlike Iran, Syria seeks to engage Israel and... accepted the U.S. invitation to participate in the Annapolis conference, much to Tehran's dismay. Third, ...an eventual U.S. withdrawal could turn Iraq into an arena of competition rather than cooperation between Syria and Iran.[51]

Given their extended history of close ties, it is unrealistic to expect that Syria would ever abandon its alliance with Iran; however, this could be used to advantage. Syria has already offered to mediate between Iran and the West over the former's nuclear programme.[52] A pro-Western Syria would complicate Iran's ability to support its

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[50] Patten, "Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," *International Crisis Group*, 18.

[51] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29.

[52] Bassem Talawi, "U.S. Envoy: Syria talks 'very constructive'," *USA Today*, 07 March 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-03-07-us-syria_N.htm; Internet; accessed on 09 March 2009.

Islamist factions in the region, and would therefore likely have a moderating effect upon the latter's behaviour.

Syria's cooperation will not be gained merely by citing areas of common interests. Instead, the West will have to turn Syria's irrepressible pragmatism to its advantage by addressing Syrian interests directly, making cooperation with the West more attractive than any other option. As previously alluded to, Syria has many pressing problems with security, stability and development. These include:

> ... sectarian polarization in the region, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, with inevitable ripple effects at home; decline in political legitimacy; and most of all, acute economic problems linked to the loss of external subsidies,... the expected drying up of its own oil resources over the next several years and the sclerosis of the economic system.[53]

Threatened by Israel's military might and surrounded by unstable or unsympathetic neighbours, Syria's search for security imposes a relentless economic burden in the form of heavy military expenditure on its chemical weapon and ballistic missile arsenals.[54] Its permanent state of besiegement has also provided justification for martial law and restrictions on personal rights and freedoms of its own citizenry. Unresolved bombings in Damascus, increasing Islamist extremism, shortages of housing and health care caused by the flood of Iraqi refugees, slow and *ad hoc* economic reforms, recent military attacks by Israel and the US, and frustrations over the unrequited return of the Golan Heights, are all significant factors contributing to a rising tide of civil unrest,

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[53] Patten, "Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," *International Crisis Group*, 16.

[54] In addition to its known chemical weapon capability, a 2008 report to the US Congress suggests that Syria has conducted research in biological and nerve weapons, and possesses over 300 Scud-variant ballistic missiles. In September 2007, Israel attacked what it claimed to be a nuclear weapons facility near Dayr az Zawr in northeastern Syria. (Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, 12 – 16.)

leading to international concerns about Syria's internal security.[55] Syria's current

economy suggests an approaching crisis:

> ...75% of the population [is] under the age of 35 and more than 40% [are]
> under the age of 15. Approximately 200,000 people enter the labour
> market every year. According to Syrian Government statistics, the
> unemployment rate is 7.5%, however, more accurate independent sources
> place it closer to 20%... Government officials acknowledge that the
> economy is not growing at a pace sufficient to create enough new jobs
> annually to match population growth... 30% of the Syrian population lives
> in poverty and 11.4% live below the subsistence level.[56]

The stability and legitimacy of Assad's regime may very well hinge on his ability

to deliver on his promise of a "great leap forward" in economic development; however,

he is handicapped by an often corrupt and inept bureaucracy, a heavy foreign debt, and a

budget deficit that stands at 10% of Gross Domestic Product.[57] As such, engaging "the

Syrians on economic reform issues would be viewed as a major incentive from the Syrian

perspective and [would] potentially provide an important lever of influence."[58] Given the

inter-related nature of Syria's challenges, a comprehensive approach is needed that can

improve its security, develop its infrastructure, diversify its economy, and offer assistance

with governance issues.

A LEADING ROLE FOR CANADA

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[55] During 2007 – 08, Israeli officials repeatedly expressed concerns that a 'grass roots' terrorist
movement may be afoot in the Golan Heights border area. UN installations were damaged, and several
threats were made against UN forces monitoring the Disengagement Zone during that period, despite an
increase in Syrian security efforts. As a result, a senior Syrian military officer admitted to UN officials that
Syrian security forces are unable to exert full control over events in the area. (Author's note.)

[56] United States, Department of State, "Syria," 4.

[57] Stephen Starr, "Syria reaches out for growth," *Asia Times*, 10 October 2008, http://www.atimes.
com/atimes/Middle_East/JJ10Ak02.html, Internet; accessed on 11 October 2008, 3.

[58] Yacoubian, "Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a Greater Return on U.S.-Syria Relations,"
Council on Foreign Relations, 38.

As we have seen, there is strong evidence to suggest that Syria might embrace the West if offered the tangible incentive of a partnership beneficial to its needs; however, in the absence of the United States, a suitable surrogate has yet to appear. Although President Sarkozy has had some initial success in re-engaging Syria, France has its own Chirac-era legacy of poor relations with Syria to overcome.[59] Unlike France, Canada refused to join the US-led isolation campaign by withdrawing its Ambassador from Damascus.[60] Instead, Canada has maintained its channels of communication with the Assad regime, using a 'soft-power'-style strategy to quietly influence Syria along Western lines.

It is this well-established connection that offers Canada a unique opportunity to play a key role in bringing Syria back 'in from the cold'. Although Canada appears to have moved closer to lockstep with American foreign policy since 9/11, it still enjoys a favourable image in the region as a largely independent and impartial advocate for peace and self-determination. With its tradition of multilateral diplomacy, and its history as peacemaker and intermediary, Canada is eminently qualified to take a greater role in bringing Syria back into the western fold.

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[59] Christopher Patten and Thomas Pickering (co-Chairs), "Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Briefing No. 27 – 15 January 2009, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/syria/b27_engaging_syria___lessons_from_the_french_experience.pdf, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009, 1-2.

[60] Robert Fife, "Canada won't join U.S. to isolate Syria, PM says," *National Post*, 16 April 2003, www.iraqwararchive.org/data/apr16/canada/post003.pdf, Internet; accessed on 11 October 2008.

Fleetingly mentioned during the 2004 Maher Arar scandal, Syria remains largely unknown yet directly important to Canadians.[61] First arriving in 1882, Syrian (and subsequently, Lebanese) immigrants formed what has become the sixth largest ethnic group in Canada.[62] When Israel invaded Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Canada evacuated approximately 14,370 citizens at a cost of $94 million.[63] Canada has sent over 12,000 of its United Nations (UN) peacekeepers to the Golan Heights since 1973 to maintain the ceasefire between Syria and Israel.[64] Despite these facts, Canadians seem unaware of the influence that Syria has upon the region's stability.

Perhaps as a result, Canada's current diplomatic efforts in Syria have largely been regulated to offering funds to various refugee-based UN programmes, fostering some limited cultural, social and academic activities and commercial ventures, and quietly

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[61] While travelling through the United States enroute to Canada in 2002, Mahar Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian, was accused of having ties to Al-Qaeda. Detained by US authorities purportedly on the advice of Canadian officials, Arar was summarily deported to Syria, where he was imprisoned (and reputedly tortured) in that country for nearly a year before public pressure forced the Canadian government to gain his repatriation. A subsequent Commission of Inquiry cleared Arar of any wrongdoing. Arar was subsequently awarded a judgement of $10.5 million and an apology from the Canadian government. See Canada, *Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar: Report of the Events Relating to Maher Arar*, Canadian Government Publishing, 2006.

[62] Canada, Embassy of Canada to Syria, "Canada – Syria Relations," http://www.international.gc.ca/missions/syria-syrie/bilateral-relations-bilaterales/menu-eng.asp, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009. Colin Lindsay, *The Lebanese Community in Canada: 2001*, Statistics Canada, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, 2001- No. 15. Released 28 August 2007. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-621-x/89-621-x2007015-eng.pdf, Internet; accessed on 27 March 2009.

[63] Canada, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, "The Evacuation of Canadians from Lebanon in July 2006: Implications for the Government of Canada," May 2006, http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/1/parlbus/commbus/senate/Com-e/fore-e/rep-e/rep12may07-e.pdf, Internet; accessed on 24 March 2009.

[64] Matthew Fisher, "Canada Leaves Golan Heights," Montreal Gazette, 25 March 2006. http://www2.canada.com/montrealgazette/news/story.html?id=a2efe576-16bc-43a6-bb80-a3ebd9296a87&k=29714&p=1, Internet; accessed on 04 March 2009. The Canadian Forces have suffered 59 fatalities while serving on UN missions in the Middle East. See United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "United Nations Peacekeeping: Fatalities by Nationality and Mission," 28 February 2009, http://www.un.org/Depts /dpko/fatalities/StatsByNationalityMission%202.pdf, Internet; accessed on 28 March 2009.

encouraging democratic reforms and its support for the US-led 'Middle East Peace Process'.[65] Within the latter, Canadians continue to be trusted to fulfill a vital interlocutor role between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.[66]

Under the guise of support for failed and fragile states and our 'Responsibility to Protect' agenda, Canada could apply its '3D' model of defence, diplomacy, and development to extend assistance to Syria, acting as a suitable vehicle for building a deeper, more trusted relationship while further advancing Canada's established multilateral foreign policy objectives. Focused on areas of mutual benefit and interest, this approach would appeal to Syria's pragmatic desire to seek the best options for its future by demonstrating the tangible benefits of cooperation with the West. A partnership approach could offer the best possibilities for influencing Syrian policies and behaviours without the need for 'sticks' or 'carrots'.

Defence concerns ultimately impact Syria's foreign and domestic policies. The mitigation of those concerns (and those of its neighbours) is the key to moderating these linked policies, which in turn would reduce tensions in the region. The Arar legacy aside, increased Canadian cooperation in counter-insurgency and information sharing would serve such a purpose. Canada could offer to assist with the creation of a UN or Syrian border police force to monitor the Syrian-Iraqi frontier, thereby addressing the security concerns of those two nations as well as the United States. Although outside Syrian

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[65] Canada, Canadian International Development Agency, "Syria," http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/syria, Internet; accessed on 29 January 2009.

[66] *Operation PROTEUS* is the deployment of four Canadian Forces staff officers to the office of the U.S. Security Co-ordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, where they "assist in its most critical capacity-building aspect, the reform of the Palestinian Authority's security sector." (http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/0506/nd-dn/nd-dn11-eng.asp)

borders, a similar UN force in Gaza and a recommitment to the development of an

effective Palestinian police apparatus could deter Israel and Hamas from further violence,

address Syrian concerns for Palestinian issues, and neutralize another source of regional

instability.[67] Renewed peacekeeping involvement in the Golan Heights would also signal

Canada's commitment to supporting Syrian-Israeli peace talks over the future of this

critical issue. Canada could also apply its military expertise in mapping and charting to

assist with the demarcation of Syrian borders with Lebanon, in concert with diplomatic

pressure on all parties to resolve ownership of the Beka'a Valley.

Increased Canadian diplomacy with Syria offers both significant challenges and

rewards. Canada could leverage its ties to the United States and France to play a

meaningful mediation role in renewed discussions with Syria, thereby forging "more

flexible and open-minded global relationships" while reinforcing our existing

partnerships.[68] However, demonstrating Canada's seriousness to work with Syria would

require the same ministerial-level involvement used with Israel which, given the

increasingly overt pro-Israeli stance of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government,

could be difficult to achieve.[69]

Breaking from Bush-era policies, engaging Syria will require an even-handed

approach to regional issues, along with a high-level acceptance of the need to negotiate

on the basis of legitimate concerns of parties on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian

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[67] Akiva Eldar, "Border Control / A UN force? Depends when you ask," *Haaretz*, 28 January 2009, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1054943.html, Internet; accessed on 27 March 2009.

[68] Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Canada's International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World: Overview* (Ottawa, 2005), 28.

[69] Andrew Mayeda and Meagan Fitzpatrick, "Harper vows to maintain strong pro-Israel stance," *The National Post*, 10 September 2008, http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=782725, Internet; accessed on 27 March 2008.

issue.[70] For example, achieving success in engaging Syria will likely require Canada to acknowledge the valid representational roles fulfilled by Hezbollah and Hamas within their respective communities, despite their extremist ideologies. While difficult, such engagement would demonstrate Canada's willingness to address Syrian security issues in a concrete manner, with the added possible benefit of mitigating Palestinian rejectionism and encouraging the eventual transformation of these terrorist organizations into fully conventional political parties, similar to the case of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland.[71]

There are numerous other areas where greater diplomatic involvement in issues of common interest could reap rewards. For example, Canada could cooperate with Syria with regard to the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), promoting their ratification of the chemical and biological weapons conventions as a 'high road' confidence-building measure while simultaneously advocating direct US involvement in peace negotiations with Israel. Syria could be encouraged to cooperate fully with the Hariri investigation in exchange for a 'quid pro quo' Canadian offer to assist with its re-entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and endorsement of its accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO), both of which would facilitate Canadian-Syrian trade.

In the realm of development, possibilities abound for greater Canadian-Syrian cooperation. In addition to contributing to UN-led projects, the Canadian International

[70] Michelle Collins, "Harper's Silence on Middle East Politically Calculated, Experts Say," *Embassy*, 7 January 2009, http://www.embassymag.ca/page/view/gaza-1-7-2009, Internet; accessed on 28 March 2009.

[71] Despite its roots in the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a terrorist organization in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin has evolved "from an anti-state insurgency to a potential partner in governing the state it was pledged to destroy." See Kevin Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

Development Agency (CIDA) could mimic the success of the Iranian/Hezbollah development scheme in Lebanon ('Jihad al-Bina') by directly sponsoring Canadian infrastructure partnership projects aimed at benefitting the most vulnerable segments of Syrian society while fostering greater grassroots support for Western policies and values.[72] A comprehensive programme could range from small scale Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) efforts through to larger projects aimed at providing reliable water, sewage, electricity and other social services. Canada could also take a leading role in assisting with Syria's economic development and domestic price stability by negotiating with the United States for the lifting of restrictions against Western companies. This would be especially beneficial to those companies wishing to participate in the expansion of Syria's oil reserves, an area currently being exploited by Russia and China.[73] All major projects would be built under the aegis of cooperative agreements between Syrian and Canadian companies, thereby creating new opportunities for Canadian businesses and furthering our own national economic interests.

Education and tourism represent two other prime opportunities for increased Canadian participation to mutual benefit. Syria is home to innumerable ruins of antiquity, most of which lies unexcavated and undeveloped, and its national museums suffer from years of neglect. With relatively minimal funding, enhanced partnerships with Canadian universities could be forged to provide mutual access to untapped

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[72] Matthew Levitt, "Shutting Hizballah's 'Construction Jihad'," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, PolicyWatch #1202, 20 February 2007, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05. php?CID=2571, Internet; accessed on 28 March 2009.

[73] Starr, "Syria reaches out for growth," *Asia Times*, 2.

archaeological discoveries, accompanied by follow-on opportunities for educational exchanges and tourism development.

Improving governance would not only facilitate Canadian ventures in Syria and advance our foreign policy objectives, but would also enhance Syria's stability and security as well. Canada could offer its expertise and assistance in various aspects of banking, financial reform, while elements of the 'Canada Corps' could assist with improving effective administration. Direct attempts to foster greater liberalization and human rights would undoubtedly be considered as attempts to destabilize the current regime; however, improvement in these areas will likely come incrementally as a result of growing prosperity, increased stability, and expanded contact with Canadians at all levels of society. Thus, while no panacea yielding instant results exists, a comprehensive '3D' approach that delivers tangible benefits is a necessary precursor to creating the bureaucratic, economic and social changes that should gradually lead Syria towards moderation and regional stability.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Syria can significantly influence the stability of the Middle East, and could play a decisive role in preventing the outbreak of a conflict which could have global consequences. However, it is unreasonable to expect that Syria will easily forego its well-established relationships with Iran and the Islamic rejectionist organizations whose continued aggression towards Israel contributes both to Syria's defence and the region's volatility. Engaging Syria should not be a matter of 'taking

sides'; instead, engagement should be viewed as the most viable course of action available to mitigate, and perhaps defuse the Israeli-Palestinian *impasse* that is the centre of gravity to the seemingly endless Middle Eastern conflict.

The failure of the US-led initiative to isolate and punish Syria has proven that the Assad regime cannot be coerced into surrendering its strategic alliances or changing its domestic and foreign policies. To demand as much is to naively ignore decades, if not centuries of cultural and political history. It is unreasonable to expect that any nation would forego its legitimate rights to survival and self-determination as a prerequisite for discussions over vague and often unfulfilled promises, such as Syria has experienced with Palestinian issues and the return of the Golan. *Realpolitik* dictates that change can only come from within, and will only occur when the tangible benefits of change are revealed to outweigh those of the status quo. The best strategy is to leverage Syria's historic pragmatism against the inertia of its current authoritarian regime.

Similarly, there is no quick solution or 'silver bullet' that will bring Syria into line with Western policies or resolve the region's pressing security issues. However, Canada's history of 'soft power' multilateralism, impartiality in Middle Eastern affairs and peacekeeping in the region, combined with its strategic relationship with the United States and European nations, offers it a unique opportunity at this crucial juncture. By leveraging its strengths in key areas of defence, diplomacy and development, Canada could play an important, perhaps major role in forging an expanded relationship with Syria, one that might influence Syria towards greater cooperation with the West. To successfully do so would be a small yet crucial first step in incrementally changing the region's balance of power, hopefully acting as a catalyst for greater stability, to the future

benefit of all.

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