



BRIEFING SUMMARY - How To Engage Syria: Policy Options For The New Administration

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On April 28th, 2009, the American Foreign Policy Council convened a Capitol Hill briefing on U.S. policy toward Syria and Lebanon. The event, held under the auspices of the office of Congressman Brad Sherman (D-CA-27), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, featured presentations by AFPC's own Matthew R.J. Brodsky; David Schenker of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; United States Institute of Peace scholar Mona Yacoubian, and; Tony Badran of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

In his presentation, Schenker, who directs the Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics, discussed the differences in the approach toward Syria taken by the Bush administration and the one now being pursued by the Obama White House. Going forward, he noted, the new administration is likely to default to a position very similar to that of its predecessor, based upon the understanding that Damascus will continue to play the role of regional spoiler.

Shifting gears, Brodsky, an AFPC Legacy Heritage Fellow, analyzed Syrian behavior in regional context, the prospects for a Syrian-Israeli peace, and the IAEA's investigation into Syria's undeclared nuclear program. Brodsky explained that Lebanon represents the most important arena in which the United States can test Syria's commitment to moderation, and cautioned that prematurely launching a Syrian-Israeli peace process would deny Washington vital leverage in dealing with Damascus.

Yacoubian, who serves as a Special Advisor to the USIP's Muslim World Initiative, addressed the Lebanese dimension of Syrian policy, based upon her recent trip to Beirut. Syria, she noted, has taken some steps toward a more moderate Lebanon policy (most notably, officially recognizing Lebanese sovereignty) which raise hopes that there could be a change in Syrian behavior toward its smaller neighbor.

In his presentation, FDD research fellow Badran examined the feasibility of Syria undergoing a strategic realignment towards Washington. Washington's "new" engagement approach is, in fact, an old approach, similar to the one attempted during the 1990s, he said, stressing that that earlier period of dialogue permitted Damascus to expand its ties to terrorist movements, consolidate its control of Lebanon, and develop a closer relationship with Iran.