



New England Americans for Lebanon

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I am Dick Gordon, this is The Connection.

Dick Gordon (DG): At the very moment the UN Security Council voted to send weapons inspectors back into Iraq, most observers weren't watching the raised right hand of the American French or Russian ambassadors.

Most everyone was watching the man from Syria, the one Arab ambassador with a seat on the Council. Some thought Syria might vote no opposing the harsh language against Saddam Hussein. Others thought Syria might abstain to avoid the public demonstration of siding with America. However the Syrian ambassador voted yes. Yes to the weapons inspection. And yes to the possibility of another war between the US and Iraq.

The Syrian Arab Republic is literally and figuratively pinched, pinched between East and West, between Israel and Iraq, between support for and prosecution of Muslim terrorist groups.

We are continuing our series examining nations in Iraq's backyard, nations facing significant choices, given the possibility of war.

So Connection listeners, whose side is Syria on? It remains at war with Israel, it trades with Iraq, and the nation's new leader has been pushing for reforms. So what effect would a war with Iraq have on Syria and on its relationship with the US?

Our # is 1-800-423-8255, that's 1-800-423-TALK.

Joining us today is Fuad Ajami (FA) professor of ME studies at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, and Murhaf Jouejati (MJ) Dr. Professor of Political Science at George Washington University and a scholar at the Middle East Institute here in Washington DC. Welcome to both of you.

FA and MJ: Thank you.

DG: FA let me begin with you. If I can give you the same question we are posing for our listeners. Whose side is Syria on?

FA: Well Syria obviously is on its own side. It understands that this war is coming if you will, so they priced it, they factored it into the equation. And as you rightly said in your introduction, which I thought was right on the mark. All the fundamental cause you made that we waited for the riddle of Syria to in a way be solved. The Syrian vote at the Security Council was a very shrewd piece of diplomacy. Where the Syrians can say they are engaged in dual containment that is containing the Iraqi regime and containing the Americans. And it was very, very subtle and very shrewd.

DG: Mr. J, do we need to go back to Sept. 11 to try and make sense of Syria's current relationship with the US. It seems to me there is something of a turning point.

MJ: Truly a turning point, Sept. 11, although I have to say here that Syria has for a very long time tried to improve their relations with the US, understanding perhaps that the US is the only external power that could use its influence and leverage with Israel in order for a final piece, a just piece, that would take place in the Middle East. But Sept. 11 did add a new dimension to the Syrian-US relation in that Syria has cooperated very intensively with the CIA in the US war against terrorism against Al Qaeda. So yes,

Sept. 11 is truly a turning point in the US-Syrian relations, and the Syrians have cooperated again tremendously with the US.

GD: So how is it that it is able to manage that strange position it is in, doing all the trade it can currently with Iraq, remaining at war with Israel, and still maintaining relations with the US?

MJ: Well here let me go back to your introduction. I am not quite in agreement with when you say that Syria is siding with the US. I do not think this is the reason why Syria voted positively at the Security Council. First and foremost is Syria's desire to avert war and this resolution from a Syrian perspective is exactly intended to avert war, to give Iraq one final chance to accept the international inspectors, to open up to the international inspectors, and so in the Syrian mind this is truly to avert war. This is why in the end Syria voted yes with the Security Council. Yes Syria trades with Iraq. Iraq is right next door to Syria. But Syria of course in the neighborhood is not the only one that trades with Iraq. The regional allies of the US such as Jordan and Turkey also have a lot of trade with Iraq. Yes, Syria is in a state of war with Israel. And that is because Israel occupies Syrian territory. Syria would like nothing better than to end this state of war, if there is, if the Israelis choose to abide by UN resolutions that request for them to withdraw from Syria territory. And yes the Syrians maintain a relationship with Washington. On most issues the Syrians and Americans in fact see eye to eye.

DG: Fuad, the relationship between Syria and Iraq, if we go back just to 1991 Syria was with the Western coalition that was part of the Gulf War. Would Syria join in another war with Iraq or have things changed?

FA: I think things are a bit different but nevertheless you're absolutely right. Let's go back to 1990-91 when Bush senior put together the, you know, that Gulf War Coalition. It is very interesting where in this land of dynasticism, if you will here, there was Bush senior and Assad senior in 1991, and now it is Bush junior and Assad junior, so we're highly synchronized if you will, the fathers in 1991, the sons in 2001-2002. So in that war in 1991, the Syrians joined our posse. They did not do very much but they did well by that war, and they sided with the Americans. Fundamentally they sided with Saudi Arabia. And they made, they cast a decisive vote then, not so much diplomatically but in the fight for the Arab world because they thought that Saddam was a brigand and they thought Saddam was a very dangerous man, and they looked around and they knew he was going to be defeated. And they did well by that war, and I think this time we really don't need the Syrians to be with us. They are not going to take part in any big military campaign, it is not about that. It is just that we need to make sure that we are not alone and exposed in the Arab world. And what the Syrians did at the Security Council, it was just good enough for now. So we do not require explicit Syrian support. We just understand we need tacit understanding in what we're doing. And the Syrians have provided this. Dr. Joueijati was absolutely on the mark. Behind closed doors in the war on terror, not so much the war on Iraq, because there are two wars here, one on terror and one against Iraq. In the war on terror the Syrians behind close doors without compromising the ideological purity of the regime, they are quite helpful to American intelligence and to this covert war on terrorism.

DG: And Murhaf, that...that...the nature of that relationship where the Syrians are supplying intelligence information to the US, primarily in the war on terror, but obviously in other areas as well. It is a part of the relationship that both sides would actually prefer to keep somewhat quiet. Which is why we never really here that much about relations between the US and Syria at that level?

MJ: Of course. The part of the discourse in the US has been very anti-Syrian and so for the US, suddenly to change the tone would be quite a departure from the past. By the same token in Syria at a time where the US does not enjoy very much support in public opinion, in large part due to its support of Israel, the Syrian regime would not look very good if it were to say to its people, yes we are cooperating with the CIA. So it probably is preferable for both sides to keep things hush hush, while at the same time both depend very much on one another.

DG: And Fuad, I mean, at one level too Syria benefits by having things exactly the way they are right now, with the amount of oil that they get from Iraq with Saddam Hussein in effect keeping that part of the border under control.

FA: You're absolutely right and the Syrians are shrewd, the Syrians are subtle, we allow them this subtlety. I mean, for example, there are several people who have been picked up, several Syrians who are practitioners of this trail of terror. Because we have to go back to the Syrian dilemma. The Syrians had a trail of terror and they had an Islamist movement in their midst, which they defeated and drove out of the country, drove fundamentally into Germany for one, among many many interesting spots where the Syrian terrorists are active.

DG: Are you going back to what? The early 80's when Hafez Al-Assad crushed the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama?

FA: Yes, that's absolutely right. I am going back fundamentally to that point. And that the Syrians had their own war on terror and therefore as you again go back to the assignment you gave us, in Sept. 11 suddenly we discovered that we have a marriage of convenience with the Syrians. And if the Syrians wish to deny that marriage in public and we wish to deny it in public because we have this war, Dick, on terrorism. So we have to do business with the Syrians, with the Pakistanis, with the men in Uzbekistan, but then we bill it to our own people as a Wilsonian campaign to expand liberty and democracy. There is a contradiction here. We live with the contradiction and the Syrians live with it. It's as Humphrey Bogart would say in Casablanca, "it is the beginning of a wonderful relationship". We can deny it, they can deny it.

DG: But Murhaf you know there are people saying that after Baghdad, then the US should turn its attention on Damascus, and root out all the support that exists there for Hamas and Hizbollah and Islamic jihad. Is that not something that the Syrians are concerned about?

MJ: Well if the US does that in fact what it would be doing is to take a gun and shoot itself in the foot. The US needs Syrian cooperation. And this is not only in the war against terrorism. Syria is a major player in the Middle East, and Syria is part and parcel of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and as Henry Kissinger once said, "there cannot be war in the Middle East without Egypt, and there cannot be peace without Syria". So if the end game for the US is a stable Middle East, one in which Arabs and Israelis can live in peace, Syria certainly will have to figure in that equation. And so going after Damascus would truly be the wrong thing to do, the wrong thing from a perspective of a US national interest.

DG: Fuad, let me ask you about this sort of Cheney-Wolfowitz favorite dream, and that would be that a friendly Iraq under US control would mean that Syria would then say yes, in fact democracy is the best thing for everyone in the region, and we'll get on board as well and stop our support for terrorism, I mean, is there, is that something that even bears consideration?

FA: You know this idea of the city on the hill that we would establish this pro-American regime in Baghdad and the light would go out into Arabia and Iran and Syria and we would change the region is a bit ambitious. I think what we would do, we are not going to wage war against Damascus. We just, we are not going to do it. We are not going to wage war against Iran. As soon as we're done with this war on Iraq, if we're done with this war on Iraq, we will be exhausted, we have a big bill to pay for we will have to make Iraq work. So the idea that we are going to go after the Syrians and after the Iranians is in my opinion quite far fetched. And the idea that we would get a big bang if you will and this kind of democratic dividend if you will in the region out of Iraq, there may be some truth to it, but I think it's a bit ambitious because the region there is stubborn. It can dilute any American victory. It can work its will on an American victory, so I think we have to take that region and work and try to improve it on the margins if we can.

DG: Connection listeners, our telephone number is 1-800-423-8255. This hour a conversation about Syria as Syrians anticipate the possibility of a war between the US and Iraq, and what that would do to different countries, both of which the Syrians have relationship with but both of which aren't really getting along that well and whether or not it would be the beginning of a beautiful friendship or the beginning of more difficulty in the Middle East. 1-800-423-TALK to join our conversation. I am Dick Gordon, and this is the Connection from NPR.

BREAK

DG: You're listening to the Connection from NPR. My name is Dick Gordon. Our number is 800-423-8255 and as we do our geographical series looking at countries in the neighborhood of Iraq and what would happen, what the possibility of a war in that country would mean for politics there. And in this hour we are focusing on Syria. I have with me today on the program Professor Fuad Ajami of the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Professor Murhaf Jouejati who is with at the Department of Political Science at George Washington University, and we are joined on the line now by Michael Young (MY). He is a columnist with the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut. And Michael was just this past weekend in Damascus, the Syrian capital, where he is looking at the implications of war with Iraq on Syria for the International Crisis Group. Hi Michael.

MY: Hello

DG: Thanks for joining us. I am interested in knowing what you are hearing this weekend? What people are saying?

MY: Well I mean one of the good things is you can actually go to Damascus these days and hear different opinions, as opposed to the past. The official line is, of course, at least from the Foreign Ministry because there again Iraq policy is compartmentalized in Syria even at official levels you have different opinions. But from the Foreign Ministry, the idea of war is in fact so abhorrent that Syrian officials will really not answer many questions on it. Clearly the Foreign Ministry is very worried about the war, hopes it won't occur, and in fact interprets the UN Security Council Resolution essentially as an instrument to avoid war. On the other hand, when you speak to members of the Syrian Intelligentsia, you hear a rather different point of view. While they may not support war per se, you hear much more openness when it comes to the idea of a war that would bring democracy. In other words, you hear people saying that in fact if a war can bring more democracy to the region, well why not. Although obviously the conditions there are, are..., they have conditions for that. But, so we have 2 extremes really, the official view, which is no war. We should not really get caught up in this. But also in the society a much more flexible attitude considering war and I think the regime is actually somewhere in the middle. I mean between its rhetoric and the opposition, the idea of, all right, if a war is coming, let's try to make the most of it.

DG: I want to ask you Michael if that notion you have of somewhere in the middle is in your view a reflection of the new leader in Syria? Bashar Al-Assad, two years in power, came in with real ambitions to bring about change, to do some reforms, has been a little bit constrained by the military taught so well by his father. But are you seeing evidence of the reform, the type of change that Bashar Al-Assad would like to push ahead?

MY: Well I think someone made, this past weekend someone made a good distinction. I mean that Bashar is a modernizer, he is not a reformer, in the sense that he is somebody who, yes, understands that Syria is behind, he would like to modernize it. He is finding a lot of problems from the so-called old guard, now that means many things, the old guard, there are many centers of power in Syria resisting change. There is the Baath Party, there are the intelligence services, there are even people within his own administration. So he tends now and then to be ahead of the people working for him, in the case for example of the Iraq resolution. It seems that the Foreign Ministry may well have advised him not to favor that resolution, but the President took a different decision, deciding it would be in Syria's interest. Now I do think he is a modernizer, on the other hand we should not ignore the fact that in the past year, in fact more than a year, several key people, including 2 parliamentarians, have been imprisoned, because they spoke their mind. Recently Ryad Turk, former communist, a communist former official, was released, but the trend in Syria, it does not seem to be going towards more flexibility with the opposition. There is some room for the opposition. But there are also many in the system who would favor imprisoning more people. I think the President is watering that down somewhat, but he is, he is certainly not going to take it to extreme limits.

DG: Our telephone number is 1800-423-8255 . Let's take our first call from Nashville, Tennessee. David is on the line. Hi David (D)

David: Good morning.

DG: Thanks for calling

David: Good morning to your guests. My question is, how does Syria's role in Lebanon affect the rest of the very complex equation that you have all been discussing this morning and I'll hang up and listen.

DG: I'll start with Michael on that, who jumps across that border fairly frequently, Michael.

MY: Well I think that is an important question because actually one of the implicit understandings between the US and Syria, and it has been a long-standing understanding. But the Iraq situation, I think, has sort of strengthened that, is that the US will really not threaten Syria's role in Lebanon at all. And of course the Syrians as they factor in their response to the US, including for example their positive reaction to the Security Council resolution, they understand that one of the things that they can get and that they are getting is the US recognition of their role in Lebanon. And repeatedly US officials have made it clear to at least the Lebanese opposition that they should not expect the US to cross Syria in Lebanon. So I think that as the Syrians look at the pros and cons of siding with the US, when I say siding I do agree with Murhaf Joueijati, we should interpret this in a conservative way. But as they look at how they should react to the US, one of the big, one of the important things they are considering is continued US recognition of their role in Lebanon. Of their preeminent role in Lebanon. And I think that that's one factor why the Syrians will, while they will certainly not curb, cut off Hizbollah, or suppress the movement, but I think that in the foreseeable future, they will try to keep a low profile and they will sort of advise the party not to provoke the Israelis in the Shebaa farms area along the border.

DG: But Murhaf, if Syria is looking for a closer relationship with the US, surely that the American State Department and the White House can only go so far as long as Syria will continue to support those terrorist camps in Lebanon, that's how they are referred to in this country.

MJ: This is really the major irritant between the US and Syria, and one of the major obstacles to a far more solid relationship. In the eyes of the US State Department, Hizbollah and other sub-national groups that employ violence and engage in low level conflict against Israel are terrorist groups. This is not the way Syria sees things. Rather it sees these sub-national groups, including Hizbollah, including dissident Palestinian organizations, as groups that are legitimately fighting for the liberation of their homeland. After all, their homeland in the case of Hizbollah and Lebanon, it is the Israeli occupation of the Shebaa farms in Lebanon. And in the case of the Palestinians, it is the West Bank in the Jordan. These groups are fighting for their national liberation and therefore Syria makes a distinction between these groups that, from its perspective, are fighting for national liberation, and the wanton murder of groups such as Al Qaeda, which has targeted innocent 3rd party civilians thousands of miles away from the theater of operations. So this difference in definition is truly a major irritant in the UA-Syrian relationship, and I do not see any one of the two backing down on their own definition.

DG: It would come down to, Fuad, some sort of conversation, some sort of agreement over the Golan Heights that would at least allow that backing down to begin, wouldn't it?

FA: It would, but you see, I just want to take a step back to something that, sure, Michael Young said. Because Michael, I don't want to blow Michael's cover, he's a good friend of mine and a former student of mine, and you can't have a better interpreter of Syria and Lebanon than the man you have on the line in Michael. I think Michael has it right....

MY: (inaudible)

FA: A lot of what the Syrians are doing is premised on protecting the sphere of influence they've carved out, this primacy they have won for themselves in Lebanon. And go back, Dick, to the Gulf War I in 1990-1991, and that's when Bush Sr. and Assad Sr. did business on that war. One of the covert understandings of that war was that America looked the other way, averted its gaze as Syria completed its takeover and its primacy of Lebanon. So there's a fight for the soul of this new Bush administration, and this new war on terror, because on the one hand, you say well look this is about self-determination, and it's about spreading democracy, and on the other hand, you need the Syrians, and the Syrians are keen to protect their position in Lebanon. And there are congressional elements and we could talk about them, down the road in this conversation. The congressional elements that would like to make sure that we push Syria out of Lebanon, that the price that the Syrians have to pay for this new order in the region,

this is the so-called Syrian Accountability Act about which the Syrians are extremely concerned. And this is a piece of legislation we don't want to get into the bowels of it, but nevertheless it has Senator Santorum from Pennsylvania, a man of the republican conservative right if you will, and Barbara Boxer, someone from California from the far left of the democratic party. And they've introduced this piece of legislation which aims to expel Syria out of Lebanon...

DG: But the White House has already said "forget it...we are not going to allow that to go through, has it not?"

FA: The White House will say, forget it, and that will be the White House's position, but this is really again one of the contradictions of this new war, and the Syrians are very concerned about it, and they've put the word out that this Syrian Accountability Act will have to be pushed aside if Syria is to be cooperative in other endeavors, i.e Iraq, and i.e. the war on terror.

DG: Michael Young, I fear that we risk getting a little bit complicated here, but it seems to me that it would be really important to figure out why. Why does Lebanon matter so much to the Syrians?

MY: Well, it matters to the Syrians for several reasons, and I will try to keep it as simple as possible. But as you know, the Syrian political system is a system of, ...I mean the political elite in Syria gets a great deal of money from Lebanon. It's ...we have about the same GDP as Syria. Of course they have a much higher population. It's a country that is relatively wealthy compared to Syria. The Syrian elite has long gotten money out of Lebanon. It's an outlet for Syrian labor. Syria is a very young society, and its economy is not able to absorb the increasing number of youths that are entering the marketplace each year. So what happens is you have hundreds of thousands of Syrian laborers coming to Lebanon to search for employment, obviously sending remittances back home. That's certainly important. It's for the Syrian armed forces a source of wealth through trafficking etc...it's also Syria's door to regional relevance, because of course what's happening in the South, I would like to take issue with something Murhaf Joueijati said. I mean the Shebaa Farms, whether it's occupied Lebanese territory or Syrian territory is really not clear yet. What is clear, however, is that Syria, through the continued attacks in the Shebaa Farms area, has a sort of point of leverage on Israel, It's not a very important point of leverage, but it has to be maintained.

DG: Almost like a proxy war...they get to fight through the northern border inside of directly confronting Israel over the Golan Heights, then.

MY: Well, exactly. Certainly, that's part of it. I would not want to say that Hizbollah is entirely Syria's proxy. It has its own interests, but certainly Syria has maintained that front open for specific reasons. It's because obviously at some point, they feel that when a regional peace settlement is going to come, they were going to be brought to the table, and one of the cards they will have is basically putting an end to Hizbollah operations. One of the key things you have to understand is that when you speak to American officials about Syria in Lebanon, well...One of the things they invariably bring up is that really only the Syrians can eventually put an end to Hizbollah. So I mean, Lebanon serves many purposes for Syria and I think that it really is...to be honest, maybe it is my Lebanese tendency to think that Lebanon is the center of the universe, but I really think that it's probably one of the most important issues in this current Syrian thinking on Iraq.

DG: Alright, let's move ahead with another call to Wayland, Massachusetts. Now Richard is on the line. Hi Richard.

Richard: Good Morning, an excellent panel, and quite essential to the understanding here. You mentioned in your presentation that Egypt is the key if war is to be waged, and I think that they are absorbed with the Gamaa Al Ismailiyiah (*sic*), who might be, and I use the term loosely, a think tank for the Al Qaeda operation, and that Syria is the key to peace. Now do you think that Syria wants the Palestinian peoples to be absorbed ultimately into Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon? Or that they would be supportive of an independent Palestinian state with leadership and an uneducated body politic that would perhaps present a danger to them going forward?

DG: Murhaf Joueijati, do you want to start on that one?

MJ: Thank you for the question. You know, Syria has been in a struggle with Israel in part also to defend the rights of the Palestinian people, and Syria would like nothing better than to have the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and Jordan. You have to remember, in the Syrian perspective this is not only a Syrian-Israeli conflict, it is truly an Arab-Israeli conflict, and Syria views itself as the defender of Arabism and it is that role, that self-perceived role which really which is the guiding thing of Syrian foreign policy. Again Syria would like the Palestinians to have an independent homeland, and when that is done then we will surely be on our way to peace in the Middle East. But if I may, Dick, if I may go back to what Michael told us in Beirut, I have two points of some contention here. We have to remind our audience that Syria and the Syrian military presence in Lebanon is not for money, and is not to export cheap labor, you have to remember that in Lebanon in the mid-1970s there was a civil war and there was a civil war that threatened to spill over into Syria. So it is in large part out of strategic reasons that Syria went inside Lebanon in order to separate the combatants. You have to remember that at the time, the Palestinians were the allies of the Moslem left and their victory threatened an Israeli invasion of Lebanon, something that does not sit down very well with Damascus, which is extremely close by. So we cannot underestimate the strategic reasons for Syria's presence in Lebanon.

Richard: Yea, but the Phalangists were also a factor...in order to achieve hegemony for the Arabs in the Middle East, the Phalangists needed to be...I think, they felt punished and controlled. So that's why Syria, I think, is using Lebanon as a puppet state. But, you know, the wife of the king of Jordan is a Palestinian. Americans have been told to leave Jordan now. Do the Syrians want to see... you said the West Bank and Jordan...Do you think the Syrians want to see the Palestinians take over the nation, the Hashemite Kingdom, and establish their supremacy in Jordan?

DG: Richard, I'm gonna thank you for the question, and refer it ahead to after the break, because we have step away briefly here. Connection listeners, we come back to continue our conversation about Syria and the particular place that that country is in with the possibility of war ahead. I take this moment to say thanks to Michael Young for joining us. Thanks, Michael. Michael is a columnist with the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut. Our number is 1-800-423-8255, 1-800-423-TALK. We invite you to join us; I'm Dick Gordon. This is the Connection from NPR.

BREAK

DG: You're listening to the Connection from National Public Radio, my name is Dick Gordon. Our number is 1-800-423-8255, with me on the program this hour is Murhaf Joueijati, he's a Professor of Political Science at George Washington University and a scholar of the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. Fuad Ajami is with us; he's a Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Our number is 1-800-423-TALK for you to join Fuad Ajami, and us, I'm gonna start if I can with you in responding to the last little bit of what Richard was asking. There is a pragmatic side to the Syrian support for anything, which is where you began by saying the Syrians will look up for themselves first.

FA: Exactly. It is a very very shrewd regime, and I think the thrust of your questions and the thrust of the discussion has underlined this. This is not a mad ideological regime. I'll give you one important distinction. When Saddam wanted to conquer Kuwait, he got up on the morning of August 2nd in 1990 and decided it is time to conquer Kuwait, that's it, and make it the 19th province. When Assad senior, Hafez Assad wanted to conquer Lebanon, it took him something like two decades to work his way directly and subtly and relentlessly into Lebanon. And there is a kind of...this is a response to something that Dr. Joueijati said about the Syrians having been invited to Lebanon. I don't know which image I should use. Is it the image of the fireman who comes in, puts out the fire and then claims the apartment? Or is it the policeman who comes, is invited to adjudicate a domestic fight, who comes in, throws the man out of the house, stays with the wife and has the claim to the house? The Syrians have been very shrewd in Lebanon. They came in in 1976, and have been working their way deeper and deeper into that political system. It's a very different regime than the regime in Iraq. It's much more subtle, it's much more supple, it knows how to avoid trouble, it knows how to make bargains, and they don't mind coming through the back door at Langley, Virginia, to meet with the CIA. They know they are not going to be invited to the Rose Garden at the White House. They know we can't embrace them in public, they are willing to accept this private embrace.

MJ: This is assuming that Syria claims the apartment. But Syria has not claimed the apartment.

FA (*interrupting*): Well they have a lease, a permanent lease.

DG: They got some keys cut. Come on, now.

FA: Yes, yes..so there....(laughs)

MJ: But some people in Lebanon would love for it that the Syrians have some keys. Let's not forget that Lebanon is scattered with Palestinian refugee camps, and that in those refugee camps there is any number of weapons that could destabilize Lebanon after even, what, 15 years of civil war. So even to those sponsors of the Syria Accountability Act that we talked about briefly earlier, they really should come up with alternatives to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. They should also convince us that Lebanon is not the fragmented society that it has been for a long time, and that the Lebanese army is able to take care, again, of those Palestinian refugee camps. In the absence of any alternatives, those that ask Syria to do this and that should really study Lebanon, I think, a bit further.

DG: Let's go back to our callers. Where are we headed to? To Worcester, Massachusetts, and Nabil is joining us. Hi Nabil (N).

Nabil: Yes, hello! Hi everybody. I just have a little a couple of comments I would like to make here. First of all, with the war on terrorism, Syria does not have any right to put any demands to cooperate with the war on terror. It's a regime...it's a dictatorial regime, that exports terror in the region and around the world. It's a regime that occupies Lebanon. It's not just in there for protection for anybody or any of the parties in Lebanon.

DG: But Nabil, if we look at it from a very cynical point of view. The Syrians have all this valuable information which the Americans want. Then can't they buy themselves a little bit of protection in exchange for providing that information?

Nabil: Well, it's information that they just...you know...whoever they want to get rid of...they can probably give the information to the Americans. Anybody else that's... that helps them...like all the training camps they have in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, for all the groups, they haven't turned anybody to the US, to us...They haven't dismantled any of these training camps or anything like that. And on the other side, the US administration, the President stood up and said, "you are with us or against us", so I don't see how the US Administration can just turn a blind eye to the Syrian occupation in Lebanon, and anything else that it's...

DG: So you're saying that Damascus should be another target, just like Baghdad?

Nabil: Well, it's not necessarily a military target, it should be at least – and definitely, not just at least – a political target, through the Syria Accountability Act and anything else that can force it to give up a lot of concessions from withdrawing from Lebanon, and which is, you know under a UN Resolution...

DG: Wait just a second, Nabil, I want to go to Murhaf Joueijati on this, because Murhaf you were saying earlier that if the US were to tighten the screws on Syria the way Nabil is describing, the reaction will be precisely the opposite from what America might benefit from.

MJ: Absolutely, what would entice Syria to cooperate with the US on this issue of terrorism? What would entice Syria to try to pursue the Middle East peace process? What would entice Syria to rein in those groups that Nabil is, in an articulate manner, describing to us? It would have the adverse effect, I think. I think the US on the contrary should enter into a more intense relationship with Syria so that the convergence of interests that now exist can blossom into something that is more sustainable and more solid. Bombing Damascus or putting political demands on Damascus and this and that usually has the adverse effect. We saw this for example when the US entered into a strategic alliance with Israel, well Syria entered into a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union. There are many cases in point to buttress this argument. Evidence is that Syria does not simply knuckle, it runs in the other direction when it feels a threat.

DG: But, but..Nabil puts his finger on a contradiction here where George Bush is saying, you're with us or you're against us, and in effect, having all these high level conversations with a country which is on record as supporting terrorist groups.

MJ: On the US record, as supporting terrorist groups. This definition of terrorism is not shared by most in the international community. The thing is not to blame Syria for terrorism; the thing that should be done is to push Israel into withdrawing from the territories so that these groups do not have a reason to exist.

DG: Well, well, let's just see whether in fact the definitions fit here, because the recent activity of Islamic Jihad and Hamas and Hizbollah is pretty widely considered to be basic terrorist tactics. I don't think that's just a US construct.

MJ: These acts, Dick, are reprehensible. There is no justification for the taking away of innocent civilian lives. Absolutely not. I think Syria would be very comfortable in denouncing those acts, should for example the US denounce the Israeli acts and their violations of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of civilians under occupation, and so on. Once the US is courageous enough to come forth and condemn Israel for its acts against Palestinian civilians, Syria will come forth and denounce these activities against Israeli civilians.

DG: But Fuad, what's the likelihood of that happening?

FA: Well, I think, Dick, I just want to zero in on something you said on the "you're either with us or you're against us", and I suppose there is this other third category, which are the silent accommodations, where the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It applies to Iran, they're against the Iraqi regime, and we have a covert understanding with them as indeed we had a covert understanding with them on the war against the Taliban. And in the case of the Syrians we have the same covert understanding, but I think we should not exaggerate the leverage of the Syrian regime. I just want to sympathize with Nabil's point. This is a police state, it's a decrepit regime, it's very poor, it's bankrupt, and in many ways it is a decaying country, and eager in some way to join the march to modernity outside this ... this...this black hole it's been in for many many years. And we don't really have to go to war against the Syrian regime. We just have to underline that in this new order, post-Iraq, post-Iraq, there is no room for a Syrian presence in Lebanon because the Syrians came into Lebanon allegedly to check the power of Israel. The power of Israel has been checked. Israel is out of Lebanon. Completely out of Lebanon. And has been since the year 2000. So I think part of the logic of Syria and Lebanon is this colonial logic that tells you that the Lebanese cannot govern themselves. These are very very defective arguments.

DG: Nabil, what do you think? We are hearing from the professors that, that perhaps the President has oversimplified the world for his own purposes with his "with us or against us", and that there have to be these sorts of relationships.

Nabil: Well, maybe these sorts of relationships sometimes can work with some things, and with other things they don't work. We don't have to tie the Syrian presence in Lebanon every time we talk about it with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the Middle East conflict, you know, Syria is an occupying force in Lebanon. This is...it should be a separate issue. It's always been, and it has always been used as one issue of the whole Middle East. If, you know, Syria withdraws from Lebanon, Lebanon can govern itself. Lebanon was a democracy in the Middle East; it's not anymore. It should be returned to a democracy, because you know, the more democracies you have in that region, the better it is to solve the conflict. It's not always a tie between Israel and the Palestinians in the Middle East conflict, and the Syrian presence in Lebanon. They never came in to help anybody. All they came in to do is to occupy the country because they do not believe in an independent and separate Lebanon.

DG: Nabil, let me if I can just go back to my two guests for some concluding remarks at this particular moment for Damascus. I was actually in that city in the late winter of 2001, a time the people are even looking back to now as a sort of Damascus Spring. The first opportunity that Bashar had to open things up, to make telephones work in the city, if you want to be really practical and simple about it. And yet, ever since that time, it's been the military leaders in Damascus who have in effect been calling the shots, because of all the Intifada in Israel. What about the moment that Damascus faces now, Murhaf, the war

with Iraq, the opportunity to take some of the modernization of Bashar. Could this actually create some new relations, some peace in the Middle East?

MJ: Well, you've raised many points here, and so did Professor Ajami. There was the emergence of a Damascus Spring last year, there has been a regime clamp down against this Damascus Spring. What this tells us really is that Syria is in a period of transition. You know, it would take a miracle for an old guard after 32 years of authoritarian rule not to appear and not to try to call the shots. What we have here, really, in Syria is a foot forward - foot back. And this is normal. It has only been two years that this young Bashar Al-Assad has been in power. In the meantime, the economy has somewhat opened up. Syria is trying to catch up. Unfortunately, it is unable to do so because it truly lives in a very violent neighborhood and it has to contend with a very powerful Israeli enemy. It also has to contend with another fire to its back, and it is in Iraq. So given all the circumstances in which Syria finds itself in, it is truly a miracle that Syria has been able to achieve what it has thus far achieved, with very limited resources.

DG: Fuad Ajami, is this a moment for Damascus?

FA: I think it is reckoning time for this regime. It has these chances, because these two wars that we have been talking about, the war on Iraq and the war on terror, are coming to its doorstep. It can make an accommodation with the wider world. The Syrians are close to the French, the Syrians are beginning to understand that this authoritarian regime, this (*inaudible*) economy, this Securitate regime, more in the traditions of Rumania and Ceauscescu and so on...that the time is up and you have to really reform this regime. And at some point down the road, believe you and me, down the road, the presence of the Syrians in Lebanon will come up. And a combination of both Lebanese pressure from within asking the Syrian friends and neighbors to retreat across the border, and a global pressure led by the United States will eventually force Syria out of Lebanon. It can't stay there permanently, because the age of satellite states is over.

DG: Fuad, thanks so much for your time. Fuad Ajami, Professor of Middle Eastern studies at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. And Murhaf Joueijati, thank you as well for your time, Professor Joueijati from the Political Science Department at George Washington University, and a scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. And a little earlier in the program, we also chatted with Michael Young; he's a columnist with the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut and editor for Reason magazine here in the United States.

Tara Murphy is our Senior Producer. I am Dick Gordon, and this is The Connection.

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