

Haaretz: Assad Stresses Ties with Iran, Hizbullah Are Not Up for Discussion

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Syrian President Bashar Assad has told former senior White House officials that the issue of Syria's relations with Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas was "not on the table," Israeli daily Haaretz reported Wednesday.

Assad told Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett two weeks ago that U.S. policy in the Middle East has been wrong for the past decade and has created a vacuum that has been filled by other countries, meaning Iran and Turkey.

The Leveretts, who served on the National Security Council during the Clinton and Bush administrations, said Tuesday on their website that Assad told them Iran's rise has not come at Syria's expense.

Despite Assad's criticism of U.S. policy choices, the Leveretts said the Syrian president seemed satisfied with his meeting the day before with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns. However, Assad made clear that discussions on Syria's ties with Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas were "not on the table."

According to Haaretz, Flynt Leverett said that an Assad adviser had told him recently that Damascus would find it difficult to distance itself from Tehran because only Iran had stood by Syria in the aftermath of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Last Thursday, Assad defied U.S. calls to loosen ties with Iran, saying his long-standing alliance with Tehran remains strong despite overtures from Washington intended to shift his loyalties.

With Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by his side in Damascus, Assad said that America should not dictate relationships in the Middle East.

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