

# The Damascus Mirage

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## Team Obama's Syrian education

In recent years, Syrian President Bashar Assad has been visited by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry (twice), Senator Arlen Specter, Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman and National Security Council Senior Director Daniel Shapiro. All came to Damascus seeking to impress the strongman with their eagerness to turn a new diplomatic leaf. But Mr. Assad, like his father before him, likes to play hard to get.

Now the Obama Administration seems to be losing its patience, sort of. "There is a cost to the potential in our bilateral relationship to what Syria's friends are doing in Lebanon," Mr. Feltman recently told the Washington Post. He was referring to Damascus's ongoing military support for Hezbollah and its efforts to obstruct the U.N. probe investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri.

Surprise, surprise. The Administration and its allies (including a few Republicans) have gambled that the Syrians might somehow be detached from Tehran's strategic orbit and play a more constructive role in Lebanon and reach a peace agreement with Israel.

Since Mr. Obama came to office, Syrian meddling in Lebanon—including reports of supplying Scud missiles to Hezbollah—has only increased, while its ties to Iran have deepened. At a press conference with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in February, Mr. Assad railed against the U.S. for imposing "a new situation of colonialism," while Mr. Ahmadinejad promised the "demise and annihilation of Israel." At the time, Mr. Obama had just named a new ambassador to Damascus after a five-year vacancy. We suppose Mr. Assad was only reciprocating the gesture.

Now the Administration seems to have alighted on the idea of judging Mr. Assad by what he does and says, rather than on what it thinks he should do and say. As for what Mr. Assad can expect of the U.S., the Post reports that "Feltman refrained from naming any consequences for Syria and Lebanon, except to say that Syria risks losing an opportunity to improve ties with Washington." Mr. Assad must be amused at that one.

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