

The Executive Memorandum

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CLINTON MEETS ASSAD: NO TIME TO APPEASE SYRIA

President Bill Clinton will meet Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva on January 16. The shrewd Syrian dictator will try to extract concessions from Clinton for Syria's return to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, which it has boycotted since September, in part because of Assad's disapproval of the Israel-Palestinian accord. Clinton must resist Secretary of State Warren Christopher's inclination to appease Assad with diplomatic concessions for merely returning to the talks. This would only reward Assad for his delaying tactics, and stiffen his future negotiating demands. In Geneva, Clinton should press Assad to reverse Syrian policies that threaten American interests, not reward him for participating in peace talks that serve his own interests.

While probing Syrian intentions toward the peace negotiations, Clinton must not lose sight of other critical American interests regarding Syria: ending Syria's support for international terrorists, building an independent Lebanon free from Syrian intimidation, stanching the flow of illicit drugs from Syrian-controlled Lebanon, and containing the threat of radical Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Syrian-backed Hezbollah (Party of God). Firm and relentless American diplomatic and economic pressures—not diplomatic appeasement—are the best means to attain these goals.

The Dangers of Tunnel Vision. The Clinton-Assad summit was arranged by Secretary of State Christopher, who has visited Damascus three times in the past year seeking to engineer a breakthrough in the deadlocked Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. Christopher's preoccupation with the peace process has come at the expense of other important American foreign policy goals. Christopher's eagerness to woo Assad has undermined U.S. efforts to force Syria to abandon its longstanding support of more than a dozen international terrorist groups. Christopher notified Assad on December 5 that Washington will relax sanctions against Syria to allow the transfer of three U.S.-made Boeing 727 jet airliners from Kuwait. These sanctions, imposed on Syria because of its support for terrorism, prohibit the sale or transfer of American military equipment and equipment or technology that could be used for military purposes. Christopher's easing of the sanctions has sparked rumors that he soon will lift the sanctions completely by removing Syria from the State Department's terrorism list.

Christopher also reportedly is considering recognizing Syria's "special relationship" with Lebanon as a means of inducing Syria to make peace with Israel. This would mean acquiescing to Syria's domination of Lebanon and abandoning America's long commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

The U.S. can not afford to sacrifice long-term American interests in fighting terrorism and creating a stable Lebanon to obtain easily discarded Syrian promises concerning peace negotiations. A stable and lasting Arab-Israeli peace is unlikely unless international terrorism is suppressed and Lebanon is transformed from a snakepit of anti-Western and anti-Israeli terrorism into a reliable neighbor that Israel can count on to maintain the peace.

Syria has more to gain from cooperation and more to lose from confrontation than does the United States. The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived Assad of the military, diplomatic, and economic support he needed to challenge Israel and to stake a claim as an Arab leader. Russia now insists that Syria must repay its \$8 billion debt to Moscow, and has withheld military spare parts to force Syria to pay an initial installment of \$100 million. Damascus increasingly will need good relations with the West to help reform its state-dominated economy.

Clinton therefore can deal with Assad from a position of overwhelming strength. Clinton has the opportunity to prod Assad to revise Syria's policies across a wide spectrum of issues. While peace negotiations will be a key

topic, Clinton should not allow himself to become bogged down in an attempt to micro-manage the negotiations. This would deflate pressure on Assad to accommodate the U.S. on other important issues.

At Geneva, Clinton should press Assad to:

- ✓ **Demonstrate to Israel that he is serious about peace talks.** The Syrian-Israeli negotiating track, created at the 1991 Madrid peace conference, has been blocked by Syrian insistence that Israel declare its willingness to withdraw from the entire Golan Heights, which Syria lost to Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Israelis have spoken of withdrawing "on" but not "from" the Golan Heights, and have refused to clarify the scale of withdrawal until Syria explains fully the nature of the peace it is offering. Clinton should urge Assad to end Syria's sterile posturing when bilateral Syrian-Israeli talks resume in Washington in early February. Better yet, Syria should begin direct, secret talks with Israel, as the Palestinians did last year, to accelerate negotiating progress. Clinton should demand that Syria cut its support for the ten Palestinian groups opposed to the Israel-PLO peace accord. Finally, Clinton should stress that Assad fulfill his promises to permit the emigration of Syria's remaining 1,200 Jews and to cooperate with efforts to search for six Israeli soldiers missing in Lebanon. These actions should help to convince the Israelis that he is serious about peace.
- ✓ **End Syrian support for terrorist groups.** Syria long has used terrorism as an instrument of policy, giving sanctuary and political, military, and financial support to at least fourteen Palestinian, Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish, and other terrorist groups. Clinton should tell Assad that the U.S. will not lift anti-terrorist sanctions against Syria unless Assad expels all terrorist groups from Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon, ends Syrian support for those groups, and cooperates with Western counter-terrorism agencies by providing useful intelligence on terrorist personnel and operations. Clinton should stress that an indispensable condition for improved Syrian-American relations is the systematic eradication of Syria's terrorist network.
- ✓ **Allow the gradual emergence of a stable, independent Lebanon.** Roughly 40,000 Syrian troops have occupied much of Lebanon since 1976, ostensibly as peacekeeping forces under the aegis of the Arab League. At the October 1989 conference on Lebanon sponsored by the Arab League in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Syria agreed to phased withdrawal of its forces to the Bekaa valley in eastern Lebanon, and to negotiate subsequently with the Lebanese government on the future status of its troops. Clinton should press Assad to abide by the Taif agreement and allow the Lebanese government to expand its control over Lebanese territory. Clinton should stress that if Assad can not fulfill the commitments made at Taif to other Arabs, then he will not be considered a reliable negotiating partner capable of fulfilling commitments made to the U.S. or Israel.
- ✓ **Crack down on drug smuggling in Syrian-controlled Lebanon.** Syrian officials reap immense profits from the massive flow of hashish and heroin from the Bekaa valley to the U.S. and Europe. Up to 20 percent of the heroin smuggled into the U.S. is estimated to come from Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon. Clinton should demand that Assad take decisive action to curb the production and smuggling of illegal drugs.
- ✓ **Cease supporting the Hezbollah fundamentalist group.** Syria long has supported the operations of the radical Lebanese Shiite fundamentalist group Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. This Iranian-inspired group has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks on Americans, including the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and the seizure of American hostages. Syria, in cooperation with Iran, has given free rein to Hezbollah to stir up trouble on Israel's northern border. Clinton should make it clear to Assad that if he wants to improve relations with the U.S. and be taken seriously as a peacemaker, he must sever his ties to Hezbollah, allow the Lebanese government to disarm it, and expel the several hundred Iranian Revolutionary Guards that train and support Hezbollah from the Bekaa valley.

At Geneva, Clinton must bear in mind that Syria's Assad is much more cunning and no less brutal than Iraq's Saddam Hussein. Clinton should be aware from George Bush's experience with Saddam that the most effective policy for protecting American interests from ruthless dictators is to be firm and hard-headed. Put simply, Clinton should lay down markers for Assad that clearly define the boundaries of unacceptable behavior.

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