

Sanctioning Syria: The Long Road to Damascus

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In 1996, an Israeli think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, prepared "[A Clean Break](#): A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" for incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In that [seminal report](#), the Richard Perle-led study group suggested that Israel could "shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria." Comprised mainly of American-based pro-Israel advocates, [the group](#) stressed, "Most important, it is understandable that Israel has an interest supporting diplomatically, militarily and operationally Turkey's and Jordan's actions against Syria, such as securing tribal alliances with Arab tribes that cross into Syrian territory and are hostile to the Syrian ruling elite."

Although Netanyahu didn't act on their advice at the time, Perle and two of his co-authors, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser, found George W. Bush more receptive to "securing the realm" – for Israel – after September 11, 2001. Nine days after that "catastrophic and catalyzing event," Perle signed a Project for a New American Century [letter](#) to President Bush, urging the United States to "consider appropriate measures of retaliation" against Iran and Syria if they didn't "immediately cease all military, financial, and political support for Hezbollah" – whose presumably unforgivable crime was that it had "humiliated Israel by driving its army out of Lebanon." Explaining the Bush administration's subsequent decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Patrick Buchanan [famously wrote](#) in *The American Conservative*, "In the Perle-Feith-Wurmser strategy, Israel's enemy remains Syria, but the road to Damascus runs through Baghdad."

Notwithstanding Syria's initial cooperation with the [Israeli-inspired](#) but American-fought "war on terror," the [Israel lobby ensured](#) that there would be no long-term rapprochement between Washington and Damascus. A September 5, 2002 document, "Working to Secure Israel: The Pro-Israel Community's Legislative Goals," declared AIPAC's intention to "sanction Syria for its continuing support of terrorism" by working "with Congress to pass the Syria Accountability Act."

In October 2003, Representative Eliot Engel, who sponsored the legislation, [proudly reported](#) the bill's imminent passage to the [inaugural Jerusalem Summit](#), organized by Ariel Sharon's government and its diehard American supporters (including the ubiquitous Perle) "to work out a joint strategy of resistance to the Totalitarianism of the Radical Islam, and to the moral relativism which in vain tries to placate this Totalitarianism by sacrificing Israel." Confusing the ultimate target of the AIPAC-crafted legislation with Israel's more southerly *bête noire*, the Jewish Democrat from New York informed the summit, "It's no secret that the people on Lebanon's southern border, the terrorists, Hamas, are wrecking [sic] havoc and causing all kinds of destruction and could be stopped tomorrow if Syria wanted it. This is Hamas, the group which blew up over 200 US marines. This is the group that goes out not only to destroy Israel, but would destroy the United States as well."

With Iraq proving to be less of a “cakewalk” than America’s [pro-Israel warmongers](#) had breezily predicted, Syria managed to survive two Bush terms. The failure of Israel’s 2006 invasion of Lebanon to dislodge Hezbollah, however, added significantly to the impetus for regime change in Damascus. When Israel’s friends in Washington concluded that the Syrian corridor to Iran was “[Hezbollah’s Achilles heel](#),” Bashar al-Assad’s days were increasingly numbered. The [Arab uprisings of 2011](#) provided them with their long-sought opportunity for “rolling back Syria.”

Writing in the *Guardian*, [Alistair Crooke describes](#) how the “great game” of “losing Syria” is currently being played out with the cooperation of the absolute monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar; the also predominantly Sunni secular Republic of Turkey; and France, arch-promoters of Libya’s NATO-backed “revolution” and Syria’s short-lived former colonial rulers, i.e. “set up a hurried transitional council as sole representative of the Syrian people, irrespective of whether it has any real legs inside Syria; feed in armed insurgents from neighbouring states; impose sanctions that will hurt the middle classes; mount a media campaign to denigrate any Syrian efforts at reform; try to instigate divisions within the army and the elite; and ultimately President Assad will fall.”

Enforcing those [AIPAC-endorsed sanctions](#) has been the [happy task](#) of the U.S. Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. Created in early 2004 after intensive lobbying by AIPAC and its associated think tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the TFI unit has been [aptly described](#) as “a sharp-edged tool forged principally to serve the Israel lobby.” With David S. Cohen [succeeding Stuart Levey](#) as Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence in January 2011, a [leading journalist](#) on the Middle East was later prompted to call the position “a job which seems reserved for pro-Israeli neo-cons to wage economic warfare against Tehran.”

In recent days, Cohen’s TFI unit has been [eagerly waging economic warfare](#) against Damascus. Daniel L. Glaser, the Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing, has just completed a tour of [Lebanon](#) and [Jordan](#) to secure their compliance with economic sanctions against the Assad government. In Beirut, the U.S. Embassy announced that Glaser was pressing the authorities to “remain vigilant against attempts by the Syrian regime to evade U.S. and EU sanctions.”

In a recent [policy alert](#), WINEP’s executive director, Robert Satloff, urged that “with the strategic opportunity of contributing to the demise of Iran’s premier Arab ally, Washington should be working overtime to act in defense of the Syrian people.” Considering the long road to Damascus pursued by [Satloff’s fellow-travellers](#), it should be clear for which country regime change in Syria presents a “strategic opportunity.”

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