

# MEMMO

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## Proceed with Caution if Engaging Iran and Syria

**There have been increasing calls in recent months for the United States to engage in dialogue with Iran and Syria to help stabilize Iraq and other conflicts in the region. While engagement can be a useful diplomatic tool, both Iran and Syria have used past talks with the United States and Europeans as a time-buying exercise to continue their destructive policies and stave off serious consequences. Before any renewed dialogue with these countries, the United States must examine the history of previous efforts to engage the two regimes and clearly evaluate the potential ramifications for the United States of any new negotiations.**

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Iran has rebuffed previous U.S. efforts to engage its leadership and has exploited negotiations over its nuclear program to continue its weapons pursuit.

- The Clinton administration took numerous steps to encourage rapprochement with Tehran, including waiving prohibitions on some Iranian imports and apologizing for past U.S. involvement in internal Iranian affairs. Tehran spurned the gestures, and in the years since has continued supporting terrorism and has accelerated its clandestine nuclear program.
- In August 2005—after years of negotiations—the EU-3 offered Iran a far-reaching package of political, security and economic incentives only to have it rejected out of hand by the Iranians, who immediately announced that they were resuming their uranium enrichment-related activities.
- Despite Iran's resumption of uranium enrichment, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in May 2006 that the United States would join multilateral talks with Iran if it suspended enrichment. The United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany offered the Iranians a major package of economic and security incentives. After taking three months to consider the package, Iran rejected the offer and continued accelerating its nuclear enrichment activities.
- In 2005, President Bush instructed U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to Iraq to begin a diplomatic dialogue with Iran concerning the situation in Iraq—an invitation that Iran rejected. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said, “Negotiating with America is not on our agenda or program.”

Syria has repeatedly reneged on key commitments it has made to the United States and other international leaders.

- Following 15 trips to Damascus by then Secretary of State James Baker, Syria grudgingly joined the U.S.-led coalition during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Despite its commitments, Syria contributed little to the war efforts, actively worked to undermine U.S. post-war efforts in Iraq in 1991 and continues to this day to support terrorism.
- After dozens of high-level U.S.-Syrian contacts and negotiations with Israel, Syria rejected the far-reaching efforts of President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 1999 and 2000 to negotiate a peace agreement between Damascus and Jerusalem.

- Between 2001 and February 2005, the Bush administration sent five senior-level U.S. delegations to Syria, including Secretary of State Powell, in an effort to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to end his support for terrorism. Assad reneged on his 2003 commitment to Powell to close the offices of the 11 Palestinian terrorist groups operating in Damascus.
- Assad met in January 2005 with then-Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and rebuffed his request for Damascus to help end the violence in Iraq by stemming the flow of insurgents from Syria.
- U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said Assad committed to him that Syria “will take all necessary measures to implement in full” the arms embargo imposed on Hizballah by U.N. Security Council 1701 in the aftermath of the recent Lebanon war. In recent weeks, the Lebanese government has told the U.N. that Syria is continuing to help funnel weapons to Hizballah.

The United States must carefully consider the potential costs of engagement with Iran and Syria.

- U.S. efforts to engage Tehran and Damascus could provide the regimes legitimacy and prestige at a time when they are using terrorism, murder and the threat of nuclear weapons to destabilize the region.
- Engaging Iran without a suspension of its uranium enrichment program could allow the Iranians to use their apparent willingness to negotiate solely as a cover to continue their nuclear weapons pursuit, further delay sanctions and continue their support for terrorism.
- Engaging Syria while the investigation of its role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and other prominent critics of Syria is still ongoing could undermine the democratic forces in Lebanon and relieve the international pressure on Damascus to end its destructive actions.

Possible dialogue with Iran and Syria should not delay or replace real consequences for their continuing destabilizing actions.

- Potential engagement with Iran and Syria must be accompanied by clear consequences if the regimes use talks merely as a tactic to continue their current dangerous policies.
- Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon only after increased international and Lebanese pressure resulting from the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, demonstrating the effectiveness of proactive measures outside the realm of negotiations or dialogue.
- Robust sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States and the international community could further isolate the regime and force it to focus more on addressing its faltering economy rather than on its nuclear pursuit and other destructive policies.