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## Don't Push Syria Away

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Damascus, Syria

BASHAR AL-ASSAD would have been the first Syrian president in 40 years to visit the United States had he attended the United Nations summit meeting in New York this week as planned. And it could have been an opportunity for two countries that have notably tense relations to talk. Instead, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice delayed his visa, excluded him from a meeting of foreign ministers to discuss Lebanon and Syria, and had a United Nations investigator arrive in Damascus at the time of his departure. Boxed in, Mr. Assad canceled his plans.

Ms. Rice's actions were in keeping with what Bush administration officials say their goal is toward Syria, to "continue trying to isolate it." Many in Washington argue that Syria is the "low-hanging fruit" in the Middle East, and that the United States should send it down the path to "creative instability," resulting in more democracy in the region and greater stability in Iraq. But this is a dangerous fantasy that will end up hurting American goals.

Mr. Assad's regime is certainly no paragon of democracy, but even its most hard-bitten enemies here do not want to see it collapse. Why? Because authoritarian culture extends into the deepest corners of Syrian life, into families, classrooms and mosques. Damascus's small liberal opposition groups readily confess that they are not prepared to govern. Though they welcome American pressure, like most Syrians, they fear the deep religious animosities and ethnic hatreds that could so easily tear the country apart if the government falls.

Nonetheless, Washington seems to be pursuing a policy of regime change on the cheap in Syria. The United States has halved Syria's economic growth by stopping Iraqi oil exports through Syria's pipeline, imposing strict economic sanctions and blocking European trade agreements. Regular reports that the United States is considering bombing Syria, and freezing transactions by the central bank have driven investors away. Next week, United Nations investigators will begin interviewing top officials in Damascus about the bombing death of the anti-Syrian politician Rafik Hariri in Lebanon, a matter that many expect the United States will bring before the Security Council. Politicians and businessmen alike here are convinced that Washington wants to bring down the regime, not merely change its behavior.

Nonetheless, the two countries have much to talk about: both are trying to solve their Iraq problems. They share a common interest in subduing jihadism and helping Iraq build stability. But instead of helping Syria help the United States, Washington prefers to make demands. The Bush administration believes it will be an easy matter for Mr. Assad to crack down on the Syrian Sunnis, who are giving comfort and assistance to mostly Arab fighters traveling through Syria.

On the contrary, it would be extremely costly for Mr. Assad. Sunni Arabs make up 65 percent of the population and keeping them content is crucial for any Syrian leader.

Syria has already taken the easy steps. It has built a large sand wall and placed thousands of extra

troops along its 350-mile border with Iraq. Foreign diplomats here dismiss the American claims that the Syrian government is helping jihadists infiltrate Iraq. All the same, Syria has not undertaken the more painful internal measures required to stop jihadists before they get to the border, nor has it openly backed America's occupation of Iraq.

Nor is Mr. Assad - who inherited his job from his father, Hafez, in 2000 - willing to make a wholesale change in his authoritarian policies. But he has worked hard to repair sectarian relations in Syria. He has freed most political prisoners. He has tolerated a much greater level of criticism than his father did. The religious tolerance enforced by the government has made Syria one of the safest countries in the region. Washington is asking Mr. Assad to jeopardize this domestic peace.

Worse, if Mr. Assad's government collapsed, chances are the ethnic turmoil that would result would bring to power militant Sunnis who would actively aid the jihadists in Iraq. Mr. Assad is a member of the Alawite minority, a Shiite offshoot that fought a bloody battle against Sunni extremists in the 1980's. For Mr. Assad to help the United States, he must have sufficient backing from Washington to put greater restrictions and pressure on the Sunni majority. It would be suicide for him to provoke Sunnis and extremists while Washington seeks his downfall.

Those in Washington who insist on fighting Mr. Assad because he is not democratic are hurting Iraq's chances for a peaceful future. The United States needs Syrian cooperation in Iraq. This will require real dialogue and support, not snubs and threats. Washington must choose between destabilizing Syria and stabilizing Iraq.

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