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Syria has been described by some US analysts as a 'low hanging fruit' in the Middle East; a potential partner for resolving some entrenched obstacles to an eventual peace resolution. This fruit many argue is 'ripe' for strategic realignment; a move that would generate new and potentially crucial opportunities.

Syria will become an increasingly important player within the affairs of the Middle East. A comprehensive appreciation of the country and its internal dynamics is a clear requirement and shall form the basis for a new UK Defence Forum country series on Syria.

Syria is a country that bridges military, political and social divides between several key Middle East countries. As a result, a perception lingering over Syria is that of contradiction and 'double-standard games' with the West. Syria's stated aim is peace with Israel and yet they have allied themselves with partners whose stated aim is the destruction of Israel. Syria is a bastion for secularism and yet they promote a common cause with numerous political Islamist groups. Syria simultaneously supports Iraqi Sunni insurgents and Lebanese Shi'ite armed groups.

These glaring and controversial actions have played no small role in obstructing diplomatic progress between Syria and the US. Western perception is that Syria has yet to take the first, genuine steps towards redressing these areas. The other and problematic side of this coin is that Syria believes it has taken these first steps, demonstrated as they see it by their cooling of relations with Hezbollah and warming of relations with Turkey.

Consequently, an impasse exists whereby the US waits for a show of commitment by Syria to rethinking its alliances with such undesirable partners as Hezbollah, Palestinian armed political groups and critically, Iran. Syria in turn waits for a greater show of commitment by the US for support if these entrenched status-quo's are to be uprooted. Syria simply does not have the motivation to do so until they feel that the steps they have taken are appreciated; Syria is weary of what Damascus sees as a one-way show of commitment.

Equally, there is undoubtedly safety and comfort for Syria in preserving its current position. The Syrian regime, itself a Shi'ite minority within a Sunni majority nation, has been described as one that must preserve certain instabilities in order to survive. Its relations with such countries as Iran are fraught, and indeed perhaps governed, by parallel shared and competitive interests. Damascus manoeuvres between Ankara, Riyadh and Tehran, pursuing the bilateral relations it has with each whilst holding the others at bay with the 'stick' that it does have at its disposal.

Each side tends to view their own "gestures of goodwill" as holding enormous significance while dismissing the others' as insignificant. Resolution of contradictions on Syria's part will likely require a slow-but-sure start rather than sweeping and dramatic changes. Gambling with their future is clearly not something the Syrian regime can do. The regime is, for the medium term relatively secure. Economics is central, and while the country is faring well in terms of macroeconomics, underlying problems will in the longer term become increasingly problematic for the current regime's survival.

Syria can indeed be described as a low hanging fruit among potential Middle East partners for the West. However, progress in improving relations will have to be seen if it is to be 'plucked' or flipped towards a new regional status quo of power. Not simply normalisation but instead an expansion of dialogue shall be required to discuss the relevant issues and problem areas in order to determine a new regional role for Syria.