



Section: [National](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

Obama Adviser Offers Some Advice to Damascus

Daniel Kurtzer Says Israel-Syria Negotiations Should Be Moved Along

By **ELI LAKE**, Staff Reporter of the Sun | August 20, 2008

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WASHINGTON — THE NEXT PRESIDENT, WHETHER REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT, WILL MAKE A SYRIAN-Israeli peace agreement a priority only if the two sides, meeting now in Turkey, make substantial progress before the inauguration.

That is what a foreign policy adviser to [Senator Obama](#) told [Syria's](#) foreign minister last month while on a visit to Damascus. While the trip was not connected to the Obama campaign, Daniel Kurtzer nonetheless provided Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem with some advice of his own.

"I urged him to move ahead in the [Israel](#)-Syria negotiations as much as possible so that whoever is the next president would not start from too far down the track," Mr. Kurtzer, a former American ambassador to Israel, said yesterday in a phone interview. "I did not say anything about Obama or [McCain](#). I said whoever is the next president is not going to want to inherit a process that isn't going anywhere."

Mr. Kurtzer was in the Syrian capital for a conference co-sponsored by the Law Society of England and Wales and the [American Bar Association](#) and arranged by the British Syrian Society. That last group is chaired by Dr. Fawaz Akhras, a London-based cardiologist and the father of the Syrian president's wife, Asma al-Assad. The parley was underwritten by a number of Syrian corporations and also by Petro-Canada, a Canadian oil concern.

The First International Lawyers Conference was held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus between July 6 and 8; on July 22, Mr. Kurtzer joined the presumptive Democratic nominee for the Israeli-Palestinian Arab leg of his Middle East tour.

The adviser said he attended the event in part because he is on the board of the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative, which works with jurists in countries that lack transparent and independent judiciaries. "We felt it was worthwhile," he said. "There was no hesitation on the part of foreign experts to say what's needed is to improve the rule of law, including independence of the judiciary. There was a little bit of push-back from the Syrians, but there was a debate among the Syrians."

"None of us thought we were being used or abused," he added. "But we will see over time."

The purpose of the conference, according to its program, was "not only to raise awareness on legal issues but also to assist members of the legal profession in Syria in the development of contacts and links with lawyers in other parts of the world."

A spokeswoman for the Obama campaign, Wendy Morigi, said: "Senator Obama values the expertise of Ambassador Kurtzer, but he is not a paid adviser, nor is he authorized to conduct talks with any government. Ambassador Kurtzer's trip was part of an ABA delegation on legal reform and had no connection with the campaign."

Mr. Kurtzer said he informed the campaign of his trip to Damascus and described his role as someone who gives advice to the campaign and the candidate from time to time on the Middle East. In this capacity, he was at the Illinois senator's side in Israel last month. "I don't do politics, I do policy," Mr. Kurtzer said.

A Levant expert with the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Tony Badran, said the conference Mr. Kurtzer attended in Damascus was part of a Syrian campaign to build up good will with the West. "The British Syrian Society is closely connected to the family" of President al-Assad's father-in-law, he said.

Mr. Badran said the conference was similar to efforts last month by a nongovernmental organization, Search for Common Ground, and the International Crisis Group to bring what he called "official-unofficial Syrian intellectuals to come to Washington and lobby on behalf of the regime."

"They failed to meet with anyone in the administration," he said. "But it's not a secret that the Syrians are openly banking on Barack Obama. It's not surprising that they would build bridges in advance and do this through the window of the peace process."

President Bush's Syria policy toward has been bifurcated: While Secretary of State Rice invited the Syrians to the [Annapolis](#) peace conference in November, the administration in the past has accused the Syrians of letting Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadists enter Iraq and more recently of attempting to build a nuclear reactor with the help of North Korean engineers.

The deputy communications director for the McCain campaign, Michael Goldfarb, quipped yesterday: "If one of Senator Obama's advisers has been to Damascus, we just wonder how many have been to Tehran."

Ms. Morigi responded, "That's ridiculous. Of course no advisers have been to Tehran."

The New York Sun reported in February that a supporter of Mr. Obama, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and a finance chairman for Senator Clinton's presidential campaign, Hassan Nemazee, met with Mr. Assad in Damascus as part of a delegation sponsored by the RAND Corporation. When Secretary of State Powell visited Damascus over the objections of many Bush administration conservatives after the invasion of Iraq, in 2003, Senator McCain said in interviews that the visit was appropriate.