At the July CPRF, Rabbi Marc Gopin discussed his recent peace-building trips to Syria, and Middle East experts Murhaf Jouejati and Moshe Ma’oz, commented on the wider political context.

Marc Gopin, along with his partners in Syria, has been conducting interventions there over the past year and a half. One of the reasons the interventions have so far worked so well is because they found a way into the situation that was not political, but through religion and culture.

Although Marc is not a public official, he was treated as such. This is a way that relations can proceed when there aren’t any relations. There were formal dinners held each night in a different home in Marc’s honor, with thirty to fifty guests each. Most of the guests were Christian and the exchange of views was very frank. A broad spectrum of people in this group want democracy, despite being a minority. Syria has a very secular public culture.

There is a dark segment of the intelligence services that is responsible for not only the very public assassinations in Lebanon, but also less public actions in Iraq and in Jordan. So, there is a deep desire for peace with Israel, but there is also deep fear.

It’s baffling to Syrians why there’s not investment in Syrian entrepreneurs, who want to become part of the world economy. The US has a pressure and punishment policy with Syria, instead of a more nuanced policy of pressure on the military side while helping others who want democracy.

People were very grateful to Marc for allowing himself to be assaulted with tough questions on Palestinians in public. But in private, people talked only about poverty in Syria and normalization, not the Palestinians. He was surprised that no one ever brought up the Golan.

The Syrian people have very little knowledge of jihadists passing through their country to Iraq. The US always wants to blame one person (in this case Bashar al-Assad), but there are other forces at work separate from him that the US does not recognize.

The message from the Syrian people to the US is keep the pressure up, but don’t start a war, and, don’t change the regime—there are elements of the family, and others, who are much harsher than Bashar, and a very strong Islamist movement at work.

Moshe Ma’oz has been working on Syria for many years, but has never been allowed to visit. He feels that ninety percent of the problems between Arabs and Jews are psychological. They don’t understand each other’s culture, aspirations, or sensitivities. He is an advocate of people to people contacts. His ambition is for Arabs and Jews to know each other; they are cousins and have much in common. Arabs and Jews have more in common than Jews and Christians. They have mutual influences, especially from the time of Spain.

We had a chance that we missed in Geneva in 2000. The issue was a strip of land nine miles wide. Barak initially agreed to a deal, then changed his mind under the pressure of Israeli public opinion. Leaders should lead, not let themselves be led like this. And Clinton just dropped it.

Moshe said that in Israel and Syria there are more open discussions than in the US; in the US there is much more conformity. Bush is more Sharon than Sharon. Sharon may be willing to
give on Syria, but the US wants to humiliate the Syrians first. Peace would be a win-win-win situation for all three sides. The US needs Syria very much if it wants to change its image as a lone crusader. There is an opportunity for Israel, too. They want very much to integrate into the Middle East. And peace with Syria could help in neutralizing Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad.

Murhaf Jouejati was in Syria about a week before the forum, and had observations similar to Marc’s. The Old Guard is really a Stalinist mindset: a huge bureaucracy that has been in operation for the past forty years, and has no interest in changing.

Initially there were questions of whether Bashar was really in control or not. Now that there has been a purge of the Ba’athist party, Assad is really in control. The intelligentsia are talking more openly than ever before and criticizing the regime, but everyone else is talking about jobs. They wonder why Jordan is out-performing them, and so on. So Assad is concentrating on economic reform.

Politically Syria is not as much changed as it is economically. Murhaf expressed his disappointment with the Ba’athist convention. The changes they made to the emergency laws were very minor: Syrians can now open falafel stands and hair salons without permission.

There are two types of opposition in Syria. The first is the intelligentsia. They are talking about democracy, but it is not a concerted effort. They are unable to organize, given the coercive opposition of the state and a lack of resources. The other type of opposition is the Muslim Brotherhood. They have been around since the 1930s and are very organized. If Bashar’s regime is brought down by US pressure, the Muslim Brotherhood will fill the void.

Murhaf holds the view that Syria wants peace and has wanted peace since Hafez. This is not for idealistic reasons, but because Hafez saw that the Golan could not be retrieved by force. He came to believe that the only way to contain Israel was through peace. He said yes to the Madrid Peace Conference and to Shepherdstown. Unfortunately, Barak got cold feet in Geneva. But Assad was not blameless, either. Instead of trying to soothe Israeli public opinion, he gave the Israelis a lecture on TV.

Bashar has also made gestures that, unfortunately, have not received attention. For example, he imported apples from the occupied Golan, and, when with the Pope, shook the hand of the Israeli President. This was unprecedented and a big deal. Syrian officials had always refused to shake hands with Israelis. People always said that if Assad would only shake hands with an Israeli official, it would be a big breakthrough, and everything would change. But when he did, nothing changed and it got no attention.

The key to peace is not solely in Tel Aviv or Damascus, but in Washington.