

# **WITH SYRIA, USE CARROTS**

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**Summary: The recent tension in the US-Syrian relationship must be viewed in the context of Syria's opposition to the US war against Iraq. Syria's anti-war stance stems not out of love for the Saddam regime but because Damascus opposes unilateral action in general and fears encirclement by American power in particular.**

**To be sure, Washington's displeasure is not confined to Syria's anti-war stance. It has to do with broader concerns regarding Syria's external action, including alleged Syrian support of terrorism, efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, and the destabilization of its neighbors.**

**The aim of this essay is to show that these concerns are inaccurate and that the persistence of Washington's aggressive approach toward Syria may impede rather than advance the US national interest.**

## **Syria and Terrorism**

With regard to the claim that Syria harbors terrorist organizations, Syria indeed hosts a number of militant Palestinian organizations that Washington considers "terrorist" but that Syria, together with other Arab and developing countries, regards as "freedom fighters." Therein lies the greatest irritant in US-Syrian relations. Syria provides these groups safe haven because it believes in their legitimate right to resist Israel's illegal occupation of their land.

While there is no evidence to support the claim that Syria provides material or financial assistance to these groups, the hypothesis according to which Syria allows them to engage in business and other money-making activities to finance and sustain their operations is plausible.

But this state of affairs seems to have changed following the meeting a few months ago between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus. Many reports indicate that Syrian authorities satisfied Washington's demand of shutting down Palestinian operations in Syria. More precisely, leaders of the Syria-based militant Palestinian groups moved out of Syria (into neighboring Lebanon) voluntarily in order to alleviate the anti-Syrian pressures emanating from Washington. Whether the closure of their offices is temporary or permanent is not altogether clear. What is clear however, is that whether militant Palestinian groups maintain offices in Damascus or not neither bolsters nor diminishes their ability to resist Israel's military occupation of their land.

At any rate, Syria has consistently prohibited militant Palestinian groups the use of its territory to launch military attacks against Israel, and this since 1970. This policy is part and parcel of Syria's broader policy of scrupulously adhering to the terms of the disengagement and cease-fire agreements with Israel that former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brokered in 1974. Other than militant Palestinian groups, Syria does not permit any politically-motivated organization to operate on its soil.

With regard to Hizbullah, Syria maintains relations with that group from a distance. There are no known Hizbullah offices, training camps, or military bases in Syria. Hizbullah operates from bases in the south of Lebanon. However, although Syrian officials deny providing Hizbullah other than moral support, evidence suggests that Syria has served on occasion as a conduit for Hizbullah-bound arms and equipment supplied by Iran.

Having said that, while Syria has some influence over Hizbullah (Damascus can cut-off the supply route at will), the degree of that influence is exaggerated. Hizbullah enjoys a fairly high degree of autonomy. At any rate, Iranian influence over Hizbullah seems to be greater than that of Syria.

In sum, although Syria harbors groups that Washington considers "terrorist," Syrian support is largely of a symbolic nature. To assert, therefore, that Syria supports terrorism is highly inaccurate, especially that, since 9/11 to date, Syria has been one of Washington's closest partners in the war against international terrorism:

- Syria has been "completely cooperative" in investigating al-Qaeda and persons associated with that organization, according to a senior CIA official. That cooperation was highlighted by the revelation last year that Syria "saved American lives," according to Richard W. Erdman, the chief State Department specialist for Syria. Indeed, Syrian security services tipped off the CIA of an impending al-Qaeda attack against the administrative unit of the fifth fleet headquarters in Bahrain. If successful, that operation would have killed a large number of American troops.
- Syrian intelligence tipped off Canadian and US authorities of a planned al-Qaeda attack against a US target in Canada.
- Syrian cooperation was also highlighted by an earlier revelation that a key figure in the September 11 plot, Mohammad Haydar Zammar, had been arrested in Morocco and sent to Syria for interrogation, with American knowledge. Although US officials have not interrogated Zammar directly, Americans have submitted questions to the Syrians who have in turn relayed Zammar's responses to the CIA.
- Damascus provided information on September 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta, an Egyptian citizen who worked on an engineering project in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo in the mid-1990s. Damascus also supplied information on Ma'mun Darkazanli, a Syrian businessman who allegedly served as a financial conduit to

al-Qaeda members and prayed in the same mosque in Hamburg, Germany, as did Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, who piloted the hijacked planes that blew up the World Trade Center. Darkazanli also allegedly managed the bank accounts of Mamdouh Salim, a top al-Qaeda member awaiting trial in the US on charges of participating in the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa.

- Syrian officials have avoided arresting certain suspects so they can continue to monitor their conversations and movements and report back to the United States.

Syria's war against al-Qaeda underscores the distinction Damascus makes between terrorist groups and national resistance movements. An impartial verdict as to whether Syria is a state sponsor of terrorism must await an international consensus over this definitional problem.

### **Syria and WMD**

With regard to the claim that Syria is developing weapons of mass destruction, that program dates back to the 1980s as part of the late Hafez Assad's policy of reaching strategic parity with Israel, a state whose nuclear stockpile includes over three hundred nuclear warheads. From his perspective, maintaining a balance of power with Israel in that field, no matter how lopsided, is the best guarantee to maintain quiet along the Golan front.

Having said that, Syria's arsenal of chemical and biological weapons is said to be too insignificant to pose a threat to US interests in the region. According to the internationally renowned military analyst Anthony Cordesman, Syria's WMD program is "silly."

At any rate, Washington must support Syria's recent proposal to the United Nations to ban non-conventional weapons throughout the Middle East, not oppose it as it has in recent times.

### **Syria: a Destabilizing Factor?**

With regard to the claim that Syria is a "destabilizing" factor in the Middle East, the evidence suggests the opposite:

- 1) As mentioned above, Syria has scrupulously adhered to the 1974 cease-fire agreement with Israel along the Israel-occupied Golan front;
- 2) Syria's military presence in Lebanon helped end the Lebanese civil war. Syria restored peace in that country by disarming all local militias (except Hizbullah). Although, as mentioned above, Syria has limited influence over Hizbullah,

Syria's military presence in Lebanon helps curtail the activities of that group in the south of Lebanon. It also keeps the lid on armed elements in Palestinian refugee camps in that country.

At any rate, given the overall improvement in the security situation in Lebanon over the past few years and the expansion in the size of Lebanon's armed forces, Syria, in keeping with the Tai'f accords and in coordination with Lebanese authorities, has, to date carried out four redeployments.

- 3) With regard to the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq, a top British official said recently that Syria and Iran, accused by some U.S. officials of subverting efforts to stabilize and rebuild Iraq, had in fact been cooperative. Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the most senior British official in the U.S.-led occupying administration, said a dialogue was under way with Damascus and Tehran to encourage them to back more openly the postwar drive to create a new Iraq. "I think on the whole that they have been quite cooperative," said Greenstock, Britain's former ambassador to the United Nations, when asked if Syria and Iran were actively trying to destabilize Iraq.

In the same vein, Gen. David Petraeus, Commander of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division, acknowledged Syria's cooperation. Syria is providing electricity to northern Iraq, especially the city of Mosul, from its own electricity grid. Gen. Petraeus also lauded Syrian efforts to curb the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq despite Syria's limited resources. Although Syria can not prevent all fighters from slipping across the long, porous border with Iraq, Syria is doing everything it can. According to Syria's Foreign Minister, "We have tightened our checkpoints and are turning people back. But the border is long and we cannot cover it all."

In sum, the characterization of Syria as a "destabilizing" force in the Middle East does not fit the evidence.

### **The US Approach**

In light of the above, the approach that Washington adopted vis-à-vis Syria is the wrong approach, and this for several reasons. First, the US is unwittingly undermining the reforms that were taking shape in Syria before the war on Iraq. Just as Bashar Assad's reformist team was beginning to gain ground in the new guard/old guard competition, US pressure came to unite the two camps.

The new cabinet that Assad put in place in mid-September is one case in point. Assad decreed the separation of the Ba'ath Party from the state and its day-to-day operations and was in the process of engineering the formation of a technocratic government. Assad planned to invite Rateb Shallah, the US-educated president of the powerful Damascus Chamber of Commerce, to form a new government. The choice of Shallah made sense given the latter's important Washington connections and close ties to the international business community. Assad also wanted to overhaul the foreign policy apparatus by removing Farouk al-Shara -- Syria's staunchly anti-US foreign minister -- and replacing

him with his deputy, Walid Mouallem, a professional diplomat who commands considerable respect in Washington. Assad also intended to remove the veteran Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, and to replace him with Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Hassan Turkmani.

Although the decision to make important personnel changes was meant to improve the standing of his regime in US eyes, it was also meant to satisfy Syria's domestic needs: Assad had become increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of the economic and administrative reforms that he had promised upon assuming power three years ago. Although the outgoing government instituted several important measures, including the establishment of private banks and private universities, it had done little to arrest the declining quality of life of the average citizen.

But against the background of Washington's saber rattling and unsubtle hints regarding de-Ba'athification, Assad, in a last-minute decision, scrapped his list of ministerial candidates and instead, called on an 'old-guardist,' Naji al-Otari, the 59-year-old parliamentary speaker to head the new cabinet. Assad was concerned with appearing as bowing to US pressures. This underscores what I have written elsewhere:

If the US continues to exert pressure against Syria, it risks having Syria run in the other direction. A historical analysis of Syria's behavior shows that external pressure against Syria does not always work. When Syria feels the heat, it generally runs in the other direction. The US-Israel strategic alliance in the early 1980s pushed Damascus into the Soviet embrace. The Turkish-Israeli alliance of 1996 drew Syria closer to Iraq.

Second, as a result of mounting US pressure and anti-Syrian rhetoric, Washington unwittingly bridged the gap between the state and society in Syria. Given Syrian society's intense Arab nationalist sentiment, and given popular mistrust of US intentions (in large part due to unconditional US support of Israel), the state-society gap (which helped advance the cause of democratization by pushing the state towards reform) has narrowed, further weakening the emerging civil rights movement.

Third, continued US pressure against Syria threatens to further alienate the broader Arab public. Moreover, it plays into the hands of radical Islamic fundamentalists who can now point to the threat of US sanctions against Syria as further evidence that the US is carrying out Israel's war against Arabs and Muslims.

Finally, by persisting in its pressure against Syria, the US might precipitate unintended consequences. Washington's tough anti-Syrian rhetoric has emboldened Israel, Syria's arch nemesis. Israel's October 5 air strike deep into Syrian territory would probably not have taken place had it not been for Israel's impression that it had Washington's 'green light.' President Bush's tacit approval of that air strike may have made matters worse: Following his statement that Israel need not feel constrained in defending itself, Israel threatened Syria with further military action, in which case the Assad regime is likely to

retaliate despite its inferior military position vis-à-vis Israel, a move that, in turn, might unleash Israel's vastly superior force against Syria and/or Lebanon.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, in its attempt to bring Syria to heel, the intense pressure that Washington is applying against Syria threatens Syrian cooperation against al-Qaeda and in Iraq. Another unintended consequence is that Washington might inadvertently thwart Bashar Assad's efforts to reform Syria, threatening in the process the small gains that the civil rights movement in Syria has made in the past three years. In addition, the US risks further alienating the Arab and Islamic worlds, and, more importantly, might bring the Middle East to the precipice.

A wiser course would be to emulate the British approach vis-à-vis Syria, one that engages Damascus through dialogue. Specifically, Washington must seize on the above mentioned instances of Syrian cooperation in Iraq by proposing, among other things, to carry out joint US-Syrian patrols along the Syrian-Iraqi border.

In the longer term, Washington will obtain total Syrian cooperation, not only in Iraq, but in the Middle East at large, if it engages in a balanced approach to peace-making in the Middle East. In this regard, Washington needs to show that it is determined to help solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, first, by including Syria and Lebanon in its current attempts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, and second, by demonstrating that Washington expects the parties to the conflict, including Israel, to abide by the terms of UN Security Council land-for-peace Resolutions. According to senior Syrian officials, if Israel were made to implement its share of the land-for-peace equation, namely the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the territories it occupied in June 1967, Syria would, in addition to normalizing diplomatic and other relations with the Jewish state, disband all anti-Israel groups. In the final analysis, is it not these twin objectives – peace in the Middle East and the end of terrorism that the US is aiming for?