

INEXTRICABLY LINKED: THE U.S. AND SYRIA



“**I** THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION COULD ADVANCE ITS OBJECTIVES, NOT ONLY IN SYRIA BUT THROUGHOUT THE REGION, BY OFFERING CARROTS INSTEAD OF STICKS.

BY MURHAF JOUEJATI

It takes two to tango” is perhaps the best way to explain why U.S.-Syrian relations are at an impasse: each has repeatedly engaged in behavior that alienates the other, yet neither can achieve its objectives without its reluctant partner. Damascus shot itself in the foot when it initially facilitated the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq soon after American troops marched into Baghdad. For its part, Washington has made it nearly impossible for Syria to provide the cooperation the U.S. needs to stabilize Iraq. Such miscalculations are all the more damaging because, in the long haul, both countries need each other to advance their respective interests —

which, in the final analysis, are convergent.

There have long been tensions in the U.S.-Syrian relationship, of course, which the war has exacerbated. Damascus opposed U.S. intervention in Iraq, not out of love for Saddam Hussein but as a result of its perceptions of threat.

Despite the fact that the two countries share a history of Baath Party rule, Syria and Iraq were at loggerheads even before Saddam came to power in 1979. Yet Syria, like Iraq's other Arab neighbors, was satisfied with the status quo: Saddam was weak enough not to threaten the region, yet strong enough to keep Iraq united.

If Damascus became the most vocal regional critic of U.S. policy, it is because it had additional reasons for opposing the war. It opposed the concept of regime change, fearing it would become a precedent in international relations: if strong nations do not like the leadership of their weaker rivals, they could take unilateral action to change the regime of their foe. In particular, Syria feared that Israel, its militarily superior rival, might one day embark on such an adventure. Nor did it relish the prospect of having 140,000 American troops at its doorstep. Syria is already surrounded by U.S.-backed powers, whether to its north, where Turkey is a powerful member of NATO; to its south, where Jordan is Washington's closest Arab ally; or to its southwest — Israel. Moreover, it feared that the U.S. war in Iraq would cause northern Iraqi separatist Kurds to break away and proclaim an independent state of their own. Such an outcome would likely whet the appetite of Syria's own Kurdish minority for greater autonomy.

It is as a result of these perceptions of threat that Damascus facilitated, at least initially, the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq. Its aim in doing this was to tie down U.S. occupation forces in the hope that Washington would later turn to it for help in fighting the insurgents and stabilizing the new Iraqi government, much as it

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had done during the first Persian Gulf War.

All Sticks, No Carrots

Underlying Syria's initial policy is the carrot-and-stick approach that the late Hafez Assad, the current president's father, employed successfully vis-à-vis Washington.

On the one hand, Syria frequently did Washington's bidding to demonstrate that it could be useful in advancing U.S. interests in the region. Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war, initially against the Muslim/Palestinian alliance, is one case in point. Its stabilization of Lebanon and the assistance it rendered in gaining the release of American hostages there during the 1980s is another example. And its participation alongside U.S.-led coalition forces against Iraq during the first Persian Gulf War is yet another.

On the other hand, Syria has never been shy about defending its national interests. Its support for Shiite groups resisting the U.S. peacekeeping presence in Lebanon during the early 1980s is just one example.

As it turns out, however, that approach backfired against Damascus. For in the post-9/11 era, Washington was in no mood to offer carrots. Moreover, Bashar Assad is not the master strategist his father was, nor does Russia provide the same patronage as the former Soviet Union did. Making matters worse, Assad, a political neophyte, badly underestimated longstanding American wrath against Syria and the intensity of the U.S.-Israel alliance, especially under the current administration.

Even when Syria belatedly took measures to stop the infiltration of jihadists into Iraq, including the erection of a 12-foot-high wall along a section of its 360-mile border, the deployment there of 15,000 troops, the arrest of over 2,000 Syrian and non-Syrian would-be infiltrators, and the repatriation of the latter to their countries of origin (Saudi Arabia and Jordan), Washington continued to pursue a policy of "sticks only" with Damascus. The U.S. imposed economic sanctions against Syria, withdrew its ambassador from Damascus, helped evict Syrian forces from Lebanon and, to further isolate Syria, pressed its European allies to postpone the signing of the E.U.-Syrian Associate Agreement. Nor would Washington provide Syria with

night-vision equipment or even assent to British assistance to Syria. Over and above that, Washington stood in the way of joint Syrian-Iraqi patrols along the common border. In fact, Damascus is still waiting for an official Iraqi security team to initial that agreement.

Miscalculations

Such tactics indicate that Washington is lashing out in frustration, at least partially because it does not understand what makes Damascus tick. By virtue of its history, specifically its leading role in the Arab national revolt during World War I, Syria sees itself as the champion of Arab rights — an ideational constraint that limits the external action of any regime that dominates Syria. Accordingly, to retain its legitimacy any Syrian government is expected to defend Arabs, whether in Syria, Palestine or anywhere else in the region.

Thus, by ostracizing Damascus, Washington is opening itself up to unintended consequences. First, the little popularity that the U.S. enjoys in the Arab world is diminishing. Indeed, the perception on the “Arab street” — that the U.S., in cahoots with Israel, has occupied one Arab country and is targeting another — runs directly counter to American efforts to win Arab hearts and minds.

Second, U.S. pressure is forcing Assad to limit the domestic reforms he set out to implement. Indeed, the message of the Tenth Baath Party Congress that was held in June is one of defiance to both civil society and to the U.S.

Finally, Washington’s persistence in its aggressive policy vis-a-vis Damascus might cause the Assad regime to implode. This might not be such a bad thing, were it not for the fact that (other than the ruling Baath Party) the Muslim Brotherhood — an Islamist political party that has been operating in Syria since the 1940s — is the largest and most organized political force in the country. Although some in Washington like to think that this is just the kind of disinformation that the Syrian government propagates to deter Washington from attempting to destabilize or even oust it, the reality on the ground speaks for itself: political Islam is continually gaining in strength in Syria, helped along by

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American miscalculations.

A Win-Win Scenario

This situation is unfortunate, for Washington and Damascus need each other to attain larger objectives. Syria needs America’s influence with Israel to recover its Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Washington needs Syrian cooperation to control the border with

Iraq to put pressure on the insurgency there. Beyond that, Damascus’ staunchly secular government can help the U.S. check the rise of political Islam in the region.

Most broadly, Washington needs Syrian support to combat terrorism. Although this last point may, from Washington’s perspective, seem a stretch in light of the country’s long presence on the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, it is not a contradiction in Syrian eyes. Whereas Damascus views militant Palestinian anti-Israel organizations as national liberation movements struggling to end Israel’s occupation of Arab lands, it sees al-Qaida as a terrorist organization that has murdered thousands of innocent civilians.

To emphasize that distinction, Syria has been a valuable ally in the fight against al-Qaida. Consider the revelation that three years ago, Syrian security services tipped off the CIA to an impending al-Qaida attack against the administrative unit of the Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. If successful, the operation would have killed a large number of American troops, according to Richard W. Erdman, a State Department specialist for Syria speaking at an American Israel Public Affairs Committee meeting in Washington. In addition, Syria provided information to the CIA on Mohammed Atta, the leader of the Hamburg cell who had lived in Aleppo during the early 1990s, and Marwan Derkazenli, the financial conduit to al-Qaida, enabling the CIA to break up the Hamburg cell and other al-Qaida entities in Europe. Syria also helped save American and Canadian lives when its security services tipped off Canadian authorities of an impending attack against American institutions there.

Indeed, American and Syrian agendas are not mutually exclusive. Washington could obtain Syria’s cooperation on securing its border with Iraq, as well as controlling Hamas and Hezbollah (particularly in

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Lebanon), if it were to press Israel to resume peace talks with Syria, this time in good faith. Although the Clinton administration attempted to do just that during the Syria-Israel peace talks of the past decade, it could have pressed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak harder to withdraw from the Golan in exchange for Syria's recognition of Israel. After all, history shows that virtually every Israeli prime minister, Labor and Likud alike, had at least one showdown with the U.S. For David Ben Gurion, it was Dwight Eisenhower's order to quit the Sinai in 1956; for Menachem Begin, the most well-known face-off was Ronald Reagan's 1982 demand to stop the shelling of Beirut. Even the late Yitzhak Rabin, serving his first term as prime minister in the mid-1970s, suffered a "reassessment" of U.S.-Israeli ties when Henry Kissinger, then negotiating a Sinai disengagement agreement with Egypt, insisted upon a deeper territorial with-

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drawal than Israel thought necessary.

Serious U.S. engagement in the Syrian-Israeli issue that leads to peace is a win-win situation for all concerned. For the U.S., such an agreement would help stabilize the Middle East. As for Syria, recovery of its sovereignty over the Golan would facilitate its desire to achieve an honorable peace. And for Israel, peace would accomplish what the Jewish state has sought throughout its embattled history: to be accepted in the region and to live within secure and recognized boundaries, free from the threat of war.

In the final analysis, despite the sometimes overheated rhetoric emanating from some quarters, Washington's regional interests and those of Syria are convergent, not mutually exclusive. It is time for U.S. policy to reflect that fact. ■

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