

Syria and the Peace Process:

Looking to Re-Engage?

Feb 28, 1997



Brief Analysis

So far, 1997 has not been a good year for Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad. It began with a deadly New Year's eve bombing in the heart of Syria's capital, which was followed soon after by the Palestinians' first signed agreement with a Likud government. The Hebron accord marked a reversal in deteriorating relations between Israel and the PLO, and inadvertently appeared to reaffirm Syria as the odd-man-out of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. At about the same time, Assad was reported to be recovering from prostate surgery, following a disappearance from public view that raised suspicions at home and abroad over the succession issue in Damascus. To make matters worse, relations between Syria and key ally Iran hit a periodic low when the latter accused Damascus of "stabbing Iran in the back" over Syria's support for Gulf states in a territorial row with Tehran, while Saudi suspicions over Syrian complicity in the al-Khobar bombing were leaked to the press. All the while, Israel and Turkey continued to strengthen their burgeoning strategic relationship. Although these developments are separate and largely unrelated, they have contributed to what appears to be Syria's growing sense of regional isolation and vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, the Syrians have hinted - obliquely yet loudly - that they are prepared to negotiate with the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's government, albeit on their terms. Syrian Ambassador Walid Muallem's interview last month, which described in unprecedented detail Damascus' interpretation of past Syrian-Israeli negotiations, can thus be seen both as an effort to claim that an Israeli-Syrian peace was - and by implication could again be - close to completion and as an opening bargaining position for a resumption of talks.

Hitting Home. The December 31 bus bombing in downtown Damascus claimed at least eleven lives and was the most dramatic display of the increased vulnerability that Assad's regime feels itself facing. The only thing more surprising than an attack in the heart of the normally tranquil Syrian capital was the graphic footage of it broadcast on tightly controlled Syrian television. In the wake of a December 18 attack on a Syrian minibus near the Lebanese town of Tabarja, which led to large-scale arrests, and the unprecedented revelations of Assad's medical status, the image of the December 31 carnage on Syrian television suggested a regime whose control may be slipping at home.

Who Is to Blame? Indicative of Syria's relative isolation in the region is the long list of countries under suspicion for the attack. Damascus reflexively pinned the blame on Jerusalem, but regional commentators pointed fingers toward each of Syria's other neighbors: Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. And indeed, a plausible case could be made for elements from each. Probably more frightening to the Assad regime, however, is the possibility that its own domestic Muslim Brotherhood could have been responsible for the attack. The Syrian situation remains, as always, a riddle wrapped inside an enigma, evidenced by the intense speculation over the meaning of the abrupt departure for Paris last month by the President's brother Jamil and rumors about a crackdown on businesses owned by the President's other brother, Vice President Rifaat al-Assad.

With Friends Like These. Adding to a sense of estrangement Damascus feels from its neighbors are the recurring tensions in relationships Syria considers fundamental. As Damascus has struggled to accommodate itself to the loss of its former superpower patron in Moscow, its ties with Iran grew in importance. But the Iran-Syria connection has

appeared to fray in recent weeks, with Tehran accusing Damascus of "selling out" Teheran by joining "known Iran-haters" in the Gulf by joining GCC states in demanding that Iran withdraw from the three Gulf islands of Abu-Mousa and the Greater and Lesser Tumbs. Last week's visit to Damascus by Iran's defense minister suggests an effort on both sides to repair these tense ties. At the same time, numerous reports suggest Syria's traditional ally and financial backer, Saudi Arabia, may suspect some level of Syrian complicity in last year's bombing of the U.S. military housing complex at al-Khobar outside Dhahran.

Why Now? Against this backdrop of suspicion and regional vulnerability, more immediate developments may be pushing Assad to re-engage Israel and the West. First, the Hebron agreement - which was brokered by Washington with Jordanian and Egyptian support - appeared to place the Syrian leader outside the peace process, suggesting that things have come full circle for Damascus. As long as Arab and international media branded Netanyahu as the primary obstacle to progress on the peace process, Syria stood to reap the benefits as the stalwart of the Arab nationalist hard line. The Arab League summit in Cairo last summer - the first since the 1991 Gulf War - was called in response to Netanyahu's victory and appeared at the time to mark a return to center-stage for Damascus, after having been absent from the Sharm el-Sheikh "Summit of the Peacemakers" three months earlier. The Hebron accord, however, put the Israeli-Palestinian talks back on track, improved Netanyahu's political standing and injected new impetus for wider Arab normalization with Israel. With the Syrians once again appearing to be odd-man-out in the peace process, Damascus may be trying to compensate by seeking a way back into negotiations with Israel, while at the same time cautioning other Arab states against any further normalization with Israel.

Second, the Syrians no doubt are acting with an eye to the new foreign policy team in Washington. Damascus no doubt would prefer to re-engage the administration in lengthy discussions, even if they invite pressure to behave more responsibly in Lebanon, rather than find itself totally estranged and ignored by Washington.

A third consideration for the Syrian regime appears to be a real fear of what Damascus sees as an Israel led by a relatively new and possibly unpredictable prime minister. To a Syrian regime not known for its keen reading of the Israeli scene, Netanyahu is an unknown political actor. Leading a center-right/religious coalition (which includes Ariel Sharon, who as Defense Minister went to war against Syria in 1982), Netanyahu's campaign rhetoric and brief experience in office allows the Syrians to fear the worst in him. The Israeli leader's "Lebanon First" proposal floated early in his tenure only reinforced suspicions in Damascus that the Likud leader seeks to cut Syria down to size. The latest rumblings from Israel suggesting a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon are likely to be seen in Damascus as a trick aimed at robbing Syria of a pressure point against Israel.

Process, Yes—But Peace? Since Madrid, Syria watchers have debated whether Assad truly wants peace or simply seeks the improved atmosphere that surrounds the limited engagement of a peace process. For Syria, the decision to seek renewed talks with Israel doesn't settle the debate. Damascus appears to be advocating talks not because there are new Israeli concessions on the table or because a breakthrough is near, but rather because it hopes the United States can provide bridging formulas that would reconcile Jerusalem and Damascus' opening gambits. Syria would thereby win renewed high-level engagement with the predominant outside power in the region as well as the protection such engagement brings with it. The real question is whether the Syrians are willing to pay the price, in terms of normalization and security for Israel, which would be necessary for any deal that would allow Syria to regain part or all of the Golan Heights.

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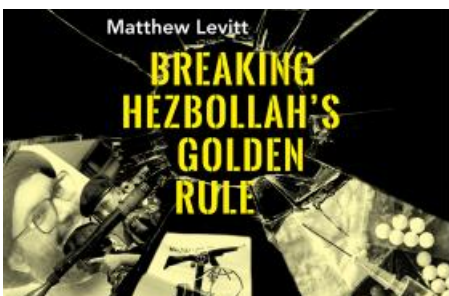
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