

The Allies and the Baker Trip

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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

Secretary of State James Baker's Middle East trip is designed to firm up and define an anti- Iraq coalition held together by U.S. power, Saudi money, and Egyptian management of inter- Arab politics, while Israeli and Turkish power constrain Iraq. Recently, Syria has been the alignment's weak link, but political and economic benefits are locking Damascus in the alliance for the time being.

Syria has been promised about \$1 billion in Saudi aid for opposing Iraq and is promising in turn to send another division to join the 4000 troops already in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the political pay-off for Syria was non-interference and non-criticism when it destroyed General Aoun's anti-Damascus regime and occupied East Beirut.

This move will either begin a new era of peace in which Lebanon's 15-year-long civil war will end or initiate a new period of more ruthless Syrian domination in that country. In the words of Lebanon's President Ilyas al-Hirawi, in a joint press conference with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, "I hope that we, with the support of fraternal Syria under Brother President Hafez al-Assad will achieve the security, stability, freedom, and independence which we desire for Lebanon as soon as possible."

Syria's Ingratitude

The Lebanese, however, have learned to be skeptical. And the United States may find Syria an equally unreliable partner. An official Syrian government dispatch of October 25 showed Damascus' gratitude to Washington for not criticizing its actions in Lebanon by attacking U.S. regional policy. The reaction to U.S. support for a UN resolution condemning Israel's handling of the Temple Mount riot was to charge that Washington's "unlimited support for Israel cannot promote peace but represents encouragement for [Israeli] aggression and expansion."

"Syria believes," the dispatch continues, "that the furor the United States has raised over the Gulf crisis is aimed at deception, to divert the attention of the world, and especially the Arab nation, away from the grave designs against us by Israel backed by the United States and certain Western countries."

Some observers commented that such remarks were meant to satisfy the regime's domestic critics, yet Assad's government is the source of political power and anti-American sentiment in Syria. More likely, the signal is meant for the United States itself. Syria wants to make perfectly clear that it will not make concessions to U.S. policy. If the United States defeats Iraq, Syria's strong rhetoric stresses that it will not be intimidated and it is prepared for an

American second step against itself.

The lessons of dealing with Iraq set the pattern for Syrian behavior. In Baghdad's case, US, help for an anti-American, radical, ambitious dictator who supported terrorism did not make him more moderate or friendlier to Washington. "Let no nation think it can devour another nation and that the United States will somehow turn a blind eye," Secretary of State James Baker said in a major October 29 speech defining U.S. motives in the Gulf crisis. Yet the Administration considers Syrian domination of Lebanon acceptable.

Syria's consolidation of power in Lebanon is extremely important for Israel, though it is not yet clear to what extent this is good or bad news. If Syria cracks down on PLO and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, Israel's security situation would improve. But if Syria's control over Lebanon expands its ambitions and Damascus turns the energies of Lebanese militias southward, it could give Israel a major new problem.

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad has been feuding with PLO leader Yasser Arafat since 1983 and forced much of the pro-Arafat forces out of the country. One of Assad's Lebanese Christian allies was the commander of the forces which massacred Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila camps in 1982. Syria also has an incentive to weaken the pro-Iran fundamentalists of Hezbollah who have caused troubles for it.

There are, of course, good reasons for the United States to bring Syria into the anti-Saddam coalition. One factor is Syria's symbolic importance as a radical Arab nationalist regime supporting the alignment. Damascus is also promising to help free the 12 Western hostages still held in Lebanon. It is acting as an intermediary with Iran to make progress on the hostage issue and to ensure that Tehran does not help Iraq circumvent sanctions. A high-level Iranian delegation visited Syria last weekend to discuss these matters.

Signs of Support

On another optimistic note, visitors and journalists in Saudi Arabia report that the Saudi people are accepting the foreign presence with no visible opposition. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia also stood firm despite Soviet efforts to start a bargaining process with Iraq. Moreover, anti-American demonstrations in the Arab world have been rare in recent weeks. Even Jordan is quieter and cutting its commerce with Iraq. Libya's expulsion of Abu al-Abbas' terrorist Palestine Liberation Front -- although Libya still supports a PLF branch of its own -- indicates that even Colonel Muammar Qadhafi wants to be on good terms with what he sees as the winning side.

Yet Baker's visit also must deal with critical questions about the Arab members of the coalition. The primary issues are whether they want the United States to attack Iraq or not and whether they are willing to help in the war effort. Saudi and Kuwaiti statements are often quite belligerent. But the London-based newspaper Al-Hayat, which often serves as a Saudi mouthpiece, says Baker is being given an Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi memorandum urging a postponement of any military action.

Syria has spoken of an Arab summit to seek conciliation with Iraq. The military field commanders of the three Arab armies have also stated in interviews that their job is to defend Saudi Arabia and that they would not participate in any offensive into Kuwait. These uncertainties must be resolved before the United States becomes involved in any armed conflict with Iraq.

The key element here is that the United States will enjoy this Arab support as long as it is perceived as being willing to attack Iraq, bear the burden of the fighting, and persevere in destroying Saddam Hussein's power. This is also true for Syrian interests, which are equally threatened by Iraq's ambitions. Any other issue -- including the Arab-Israel conflict -- is irrelevant. Any sign of weakness or deviation in U.S. resolve to do whatever is necessary to reverse Saddam's aggression will undermine the coalition.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute

study Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries (Policy Focus #12, 1989), Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO. ❖

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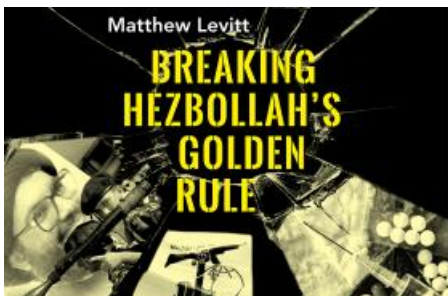
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