Baker's Damascus Trip:

Is Syria America's New Iraq?

by Barry Rubin **(/experts/barry-rubin)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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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

It is surprising how few Arabs and Arab states are supporting Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. As Secretary of State James Baker's visit to Damascus on Thursday shows, the anti-Iraq coalition includes the Arab world's three other most important powers: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. This triumverate marks the Arab world's new power alignment. Each has something to contribute. Egypt has the manpower; Saudi Arabia the money. Syria's main asset has been its ability to veto Arab action, to block any consensus by appealing to Arab militancy and anti-Western feelings.

During the 1980s, the United States gained a new radical Arab ally, Iraq, because of a mutual interest in fighting an even more dangerous Iran. During the 1990s, U.S. policy is turning to Syria to combat the Iraqi threat. It is understandable that, in playing Middle East politics, the United States finds that the enemy of its enemy is its friend. The risk lies in sentimentalizing Syria, being willing to overlook its involvement in terrorism, human rights violations, and other policies conflicting with U.S. interests.

Historically, the Arab League has been stifled by the need to have unanimity before action was taken. By invading and seizing Kuwait, Iraq shattered that rule. A simple majority vote was sufficient to agree that Arab states would support the UN-imposed sanctions. Not only did Saudi Arabia invite in U.S. troops to protect it, but Egypt and Syria agreed to add their own soldiers to create a truly multinational force. Saudi, Kuwaiti, and United Arab Emirates financial contributions buy more support, stabilizing countries suffering economically due to the sanctions. Within the Arab League itself, the crisis highlighted a return of Egyptian leadership already underway. Last summer, when the PLO balked at a return of League headquarters to Cairo, Egypt reacted with furious denunciations of Arafat. Now the League has officially decided to move back to Egypt -- its original home abandoned as one of the anti-Egypt sanctions following the Camp David agreements -- at the end of September. Arab League chief Chadli Klibi and Ambassador Clovis Maksoud are being forced to resign as part of the shake-up. Egypt would not accept the continued tenure of men who had boycotted it for a decade. They will be replaced by officials who will willingly carry out the anti-Iraq measures.

Thus, the confrontation is not merely one of the U.S. versus Iraq, or even the world versus Iraq, but also the majority

of Arab governments versus Iraq. Apart from those countries who are so far away that the issue is an abstraction for them -- Tunisia, Algeria -- only a reluctant Jordan and a self-injuring PLO are left on Iraq's side. It is also easy to overestimate support among the Arab masses for Saddam Hussein. Most estimates of popular enthusiasm over Iraq have come from observers in Jordan, whose government's pro-Iraq stand encourages such sentiment and whose Palestinian half of the population are the Arabs most inclined toward it. Saddam Hussein's appeal to the Egyptian and Saudi people failed to elicit any response; there have been no major pro-Iraq demonstrations recently. Yet the crisis exposes once again the fact that Pan-Arabism is a greatly overestimated phenomenon and that Arabs increasingly identify with their own nation-state. Saddam Hussein himself has demonstrated that fact. He promoted Iraqi nationalism during the Iran-Iraq war and seized Kuwait for Iraqi nationalist reasons. He did not, for example, offer to share his stolen wealth with other Arab countries, a stand that might have been gained him more support.

Syria was the Middle Eastern state most hurt by the end of the Cold War. It was nearing bankruptcy and could no longer count on Saudi-Kuwaiti aid as a "confrontation state" in the Arab-Israel conflict. An attempt to achieve military parity with Israel had failed; Syria's debts to the USSR for military supplies made it difficult to obtain new shipments. Although it continued to occupy most of Lebanon, Syria was unable to displace the Beirut government of Michel Aoun. In the region as a whole, it was badly isolated, conducting simultaneous quarrels with Egypt, the PLO, and Iraq, as well as Israel. The end of the Iran-Iraq war in August 1988 only deepened this malaise. Syria had supported Iran in exchange for oil shipments but Tehran had no incentive to keep supplying such a highly subsidized bounty. Saddam Hussein, who has been duelling with Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad for almost 20 years, was now freed to seek revenge for Syria's pro-Iran stand.

For Damascus, then, the Kuwait crisis was a welcome relief. It was already working on rebuilding relations with Egypt. Now Syria had a strong rationale for receiving Gulf Arab -- and perhaps European -- aid and for making an opening to the West. Yet while Syria's support is a useful addition to the anti-Iraq coalition, it should also be remembered that Syria is operating from a very weak position. There need be no unilateral Western concessions to Damascus. On the contrary, the United States can ask Syria for a number of things. The United States is not likely to replace Saudi Arabia as a source of money or the USSR as a source of arms. Therefore, U.S.-Syria relations will not be, directly, the key element for Damascus. Nonetheless, U.S. approval will be critical for Syria in escaping from its isolation and regaining some international legitimacy. For Assad, the visit of a U.S. secretary of state is in itself a prize, showing his centrality in regional affairs.

This gives U.S. policy some important leverage over three issues:

• The Syria-Israel conflict. Syria could be asked to take a more flexible stance on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Far short of a comprehensive settlement, it could be asked to take part in tension-easing and confidence-building measures, such as regional arms control talks. Since Syria has long been at odds with the PLO, it would be interesting to see if Damascus has alternative suggestions over Palestinian participation.

• Syrian-sponsored terrorism. To normalize relations with the United States and be taken off the State Department's terrorist list in 1983, Iraq had to expel Abu Nidal. Given the involvement of Ahmad Jibril and his Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) in the attack on a Pan American plane in December 1988, resulting in 251 deaths, the United States might make a similar demand in his case.

• Syria's occupation of Lebanon. While rejecting any linkage with the Gulf crisis, the United States should step up discussions with Syria on reducing the Lebanese civil war and pursuing some political solution. There are also certain parallel U.S. and Syrian interests in that country, namely, limiting Iranian influence and combatting the Hezbollah terrorist movement.

The U.S.-Syria rapprochement is a positive development but Syria, like Iraq, is a radical state with a brutal leader.

Bearing in mind the fate of the U.S.-Iraq entente it would be foolish to give Syria no-cost benefits or to overstate its new-found moderation.

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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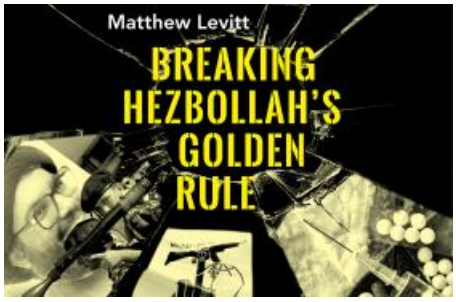

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