

Decoupling Syria from Iran: Constraints on U.S.-Syrian Rapprochement

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Articles & Testimony

- Damascus' foray into diplomacy with Israel has had little discernable effect on Syria's longstanding, unhelpful policies vis-a-vis Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestinian politics.
- While moving Syria into the Western camp would be a great accomplishment, it's not clear that this development would necessarily constitute a long-term strategic setback for Iranian efforts to undermine U.S. policy in Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, and Iraq. In the absence of Syria, Iran would still be capable of supporting Hizbullah, Hamas, and its Shiite allies in Iraq.
- Developments in Damascus point to an erosion of state security and a domestically-weakened regime. Internationally, however, Syrian diplomatic gains are irrefutable and have buoyed the regime.
- In this fluid environment, the Assad regime is betting that an Obama administration will provide relief, and the opportunity to reassert itself in Lebanon and reintegrate into the international community.
- Yet the ultimate disposition of the new administration's policy toward Syria is far from certain, particularly if the Assad regime continues to pursue its unhelpful regional policies. In this regard, Assad's hopes for a dramatic change in U.S. Syria policy may be short-lived.

Like many authoritarian states, developments in Syria are notoriously difficult to interpret. The closed and conspiratorial nature of Syria's Assad regime has always made it a challenge to divine exactly what is going on in Damascus. Lately, however, this task has been further complicated by two seemingly contradictory trends in Syrian politics. Since November 2008, a spate of killings and a suicide bombing in Damascus have fueled speculation that the Assad regime is facing unprecedented infighting or succumbing to terrorism and/or destabilizing external meddling. At the same time, however, the regime has derived enormous political and diplomatic benefit from its indirect negotiations with Israel, sponsored by Turkey. These talks have effectively undermined the international isolation of Syria in place since the 2005 murder of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri.

Is the Assad regime under threat, or increasingly confident, buoyed by the election of Barack Obama and the apparent shift in international attitudes regarding its status as a rogue state? Dynamics on the ground suggest that the answer lies somewhere in between. Despite significant challenges facing Syria, the Assad regime today appears cautiously optimistic that trends are once again working in its favor.

Pressures Spike . . .

Since 2003, Damascus has found itself under unprecedented pressure. Syria's policy of sending military materiel to Saddam Hussein on the eve of the Iraq war and facilitating the movement of al-Qaeda and other insurgents to Iraq not surprisingly proved a real irritant to the bilateral relationship with Washington. As a result of these Syrian policies, in 2004, the Bush administration levied sanctions against Damascus and subsequently pushed for the passage of several UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) targeting unhelpful Syrian behavior in Iraq and Lebanon, including, most prominently, UNSCR 1559, which demanded an end to the decades-long Syrian occupation of Lebanon.

The watershed in the deterioration of Syria's bilateral relationship with Washington and Syria's heretofore cordial relations with the international community was the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, a crime for which Damascus is the leading suspect. Two months after the murder, pressures drove Syrian forces out of Lebanon. And in the aftermath of the killing, the Security Council initiated an independent investigation (UNSCR 1644) and later voted to establish an international tribunal (UNSCR 1701) to prosecute the culprits.

Subsequently, not only was Damascus treated as a pariah, the Assad regime faced the very real prospect that senior regime officials -- including members of Assad's family and inner circle -- would be implicated in the killing, a development that could shake the very foundations of the regime. These pressures were compounded in September 2007, when Israeli jets bombed a presumed Syrian nuclear facility near the village of al-Kibar.

. . . And Diminish

Severe pressures lasted about a year, but then chinks in the armor of the isolation policy started to appear. First, the Iraqi prime minister visited Damascus in August 2007; then trips by delegations of US congressmen headlined by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. At the same time, Syria saw dramatic increases in foreign direct investment, particularly from the Gulf, most significantly Qatar. Despite these challenges, however, the policy of diplomatic isolation largely remained in place until the announcement on May 21, 2008, of indirect negotiations in Turkey between Syria and Israel.

The impact of this announcement was compounded by Damascus' decision, the very same day in Doha, to consent to the election of a new, ostensibly pro-Syrian president in Lebanon[1] -- a move that temporarily ended a seven-month standoff between the pro-West government and its Syrian and Iranian allies led by Hizbullah.[2]

For Damascus, the publication of the talks with Israel -- and the appearance of being helpful on Lebanon -- opened the floodgates of European engagement. President Assad traveled to Paris for Bastille Day celebrations and talks with President Sarkozy. Shortly thereafter, Sarkozy appealed to the European Union to end its opposition to Syrian membership in the EU Economic Association. He also raised the possibility of Airbus sales to Damascus, and gave the green light to Total and Lafarge to sign major business deals.[3] Sarkozy himself visited Syria in September 2008, setting the stage for a visit by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moullem to London in October.

Echoing the European position and that of the newly-appointed Lebanese president -- who called in August for the world to "open up to Syria" -- Washington followed suit.[4] On September 26, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Moullem on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The meeting was followed by an additional round of talks between Moullem and Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Welch on September 29.

This seeming reversal in the longstanding Bush administration policy of isolating Damascus was only interrupted on October 26, when U.S. helicopters targeted a senior al-Qaeda operative on Syrian territory responsible for shuttling terrorists into Iraq. Responding to the strike, the Assad regime organized mass protests,[5] shuttered the American school and cultural center in Damascus, and expelled U.S. personnel working for these institutions.[6] Syrian officials likewise indicated that their government would aver future negotiations with Washington and instead wait for the next administration to further pursue dialogue.

Even after the U.S. cross-border strike, Damascus continued its progress in securing European diplomatic gains. Moullem traveled to London to meet with British Foreign Minister David Miliband to discuss a renewal of bilateral ties and London's support for Israeli-Syrian negotiations. In November, in the first senior-level visit since 2005, Miliband went to Damascus to

meet President Assad. On November 19, it was announced that Britain had reestablished high-level intelligence ties with the Assad regime.[7]

Damascus Murder Mysteries and Other Security Breaches

While developments with Europe appeared to be in Syria's favor, events at home generated concern. The Assad regime long prided itself on the capabilities of its state security, but several security breaches in 2007-2008 undercut this carefully cultivated image. The first blow came on September 6, 2007, when Israeli planes penetrated Syrian airspace and destroyed what western intelligence agencies almost universally agree was a Syrian nuclear facility at al-Kibar.[8]

On February 12, 2008, longtime Hizbullah military commander Imad Mughniyeh was killed by a car bomb in a tightly controlled area of Damascus. In the aftermath of the assassination, recriminations flew. While most people attributed the operation to Israel, Mughniyeh's widow blamed "Syrian traitors" for her husband's murder,[9] and there are some signs that the killing may be contributing to tensions in the Syrian-Iranian alliance.[10]

A second high-profile assassination involved Mohammed Suleiman, a top military aide to President Assad who reportedly managed both weapons transfers to Hizbullah and the Syrian nuclear program. Initial reports of the August 1 killing focused on the possibility of an Israeli sniper hit, but subsequent speculation has focused on the possibility that the killing was related to Syrian infighting,[11] Iranian revenge for an alleged Syrian role in the Mughniyeh killing, and/or an operation to cover up evidence regarding al-Kibar. According to International Atomic Energy Agency Director Mohamed ElBaradei, Suleiman was the IAEA's "main interlocutor" in the investigation into the facility.[12]

On September 27, a suicide car bomb went off in the heart of Damascus, killing 17. Official spokesmen immediately blamed "Islamic extremists," (i.e., al-Qaeda) for the strike, although it remains unclear whether the incident is being seriously investigated. No claims of responsibility have been forthcoming. Still, if al-Qaeda did perpetrate the attack, it would come as little surprise: Damascus facilitated the organization's movement across, and allowed it to train on, Syrian territory since 2003. Over the years, some of these jihadis may have taken up residence in Syria, adding to the regime's security concerns.

Responding to the attack, Syria intimated a connection to Fatah al-Islam, the Lebanon-based al-Qaeda affiliate.[13] The linkage was odd, given Syria's close relationship to the group.[14] Nevertheless, the regime started to mass troops on the Lebanese border, ostensibly to protect Syria from further attack.[15]

In October 2008, U.S. forces crossed the Syrian border to target a high-value al-Qaeda operative in Syria. The brazen raid, which occurred during daylight hours and was captured by a local on video, infuriated Syrian authorities.[16] Foreign Minister Walid Moualem denied the al-Qaeda connection, described the U.S. strike as a violation of sovereignty, and pledged to "defend [Syrian] territories," in the future. He also claimed the U.S. strike was intended to undermine recent Syrian diplomatic inroads in Europe.[17] At the same time, Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa indicated that his government would no longer engage with the Bush administration. Instead, he said, Syria would wait for a new [Obama] presidency.[18]

Shoring Up the Alliance with Tehran

The security setbacks for Damascus and the ongoing talks with Israel have likely been viewed by Iran with concern. Israeli officials articulate the view that talks with Syria constitute a tool to "help isolate Iran." [19] Iranian officials have likewise issued public warnings to the Assad regime not to go too far in these discussions. In June 2008, a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini cautioned Syria of the "consequences of 'peace' on its relations with Tehran." [20]

In response, Damascus has sought to reassure Tehran that it has no intention of undertaking the kind of strategic reorientation toward the west envisioned by Israel as underpinning a peace treaty. In May 2008, for example, a day after Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni mentioned the Israeli quid pro quo for a peace deal -- i.e., a Syrian split from Tehran and an end to support for Hizbullah and Hamas as the price for the Golan Heights -- Damascus dispatched Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani to Tehran for three days of talks, including a meeting with President Ahmadinejad.[21] Turkmani returned to Syria with a signed memorandum of understanding for military and defense cooperation with Iran.[22] In August, President Assad himself traveled to Tehran for meetings with Ahmadinejad.

During 2008, Syria and Iran signed several additional agreements, dealing with cooperation in electricity, science, and communications, among other fields. In July 2008, just two months after the Israeli talks were announced, Iran and Syria signed a preferential trade agreement and agreed to establish a joint bank.[23]

At the same time, Syria has worked to reassure Hizbullah that it remains committed to their relationship. In a September 2008 interview with Hizbullah's Al-Manar television, President Assad explained Syrian policy: "We don't see an interest in abandoning the resistance [i.e., Hizbullah]....Our clear position remains in all our political discourse -- our steadfast position for resistance" in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.[24] One month later, Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha referred to Hizbullah as a "close ally" which Syria regarded with pride.[25]

A New Page?

Damascus' foray into diplomacy with Israel has had little discernable effect on Syria's longstanding, unhelpful policies vis-a-vis Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestinian politics. Indeed, according to Iraqi military sources, prior to the October 2008 U.S. cross-border strike, Baghdad had informed Damascus of the senior al-Qaeda official's presence on Syrian territory and had requested that Syria take action.[26]

Even as Syria continued to pursue policies seemingly designed to undermine U.S. interests in the region, the Assad regime has made no secret of its preference for an Obama administration. During the summer, presidential confidant and Minister of Expatriates Bouthaina Shaaban opined that "America desperately needs a logo change." [27] Obama, she said, would change both the content and tone of American foreign policy, presumably in a direction more amenable to Syrian interests. On the eve of the U.S. elections, with Obama far ahead in the polls, President Assad similarly announced that Syria was waiting for the next administration to mediate Israeli-Syrian negotiations.[28]

However, several senior advisors to the president-elect have suggested that Washington will continue to maintain high expectations of Syrian behavior as the sine qua non for bilateral progress.[29] Moreover, there is no indication that an Obama administration would be willing to sacrifice Lebanon and its democratic pro-West allies in exchange for marginal and likely temporary improvements in Syrian policy.

Even if the Obama Administration wished to "test" Damascus' intentions regarding the potential for a split with Tehran, Washington would be somewhat constrained in the kind of concessions it could make to cajole Syria. The international tribunal on the Hariri assassination, for example, is not under U.S. but rather UN auspices; the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigation into illegal Syrian nuclear activities is likewise independent and not subject to U.S. political interference. In fact, given the IAEA's initial report about the Syrian nuclear facility at al-Kibar -- and in light of Damascus' lack of cooperation in the investigation -- the IAEA may be particularly tenacious in pursuing this matter.[30]

An Obama administration may also face constraints from its Arab allies, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, which possess few illusions about Syria's capacity and willingness to change. This "moderate" Arab bloc would not welcome a policy that freely gives away the few precious levers of pressure on Syria while strengthening Iran. These Arab states, and particularly Saudi Arabia, are concerned about recent Syrian diplomatic gains, and have tried to revitalize the Arab peace proposal -- focused on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations -- as a means to counter progress on the Syria-Israel track and the international rehabilitation of Damascus.

Of course, even if Washington's diplomatic efforts to foster a Syria-Israel deal ultimately fail, it's possible that the negotiations themselves could result in U.S.-Israel bilateral tensions. While it seems unlikely, Israel could face pressure from an Obama administration to ink a deal that does not explicitly demand a verifiable shift of Syria away from the Iranian orbit. In the absence of a Syrian strategic realignment, however, it would be difficult to imagine Israel consenting to such a deal.

Furthermore, while moving Syria into the Western camp would be a great accomplishment, it's not clear that this development would necessarily constitute a long-term strategic setback for Iranian efforts to undermine U.S. policy in Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, and Iraq. In the absence of Syria, Iran would still be capable of supporting Hizbullah, Hamas, and its Shiite allies in Iraq.

Conclusion

Developments in Damascus point to an erosion of state security and a domestically-weakened regime. Internationally, however, Syrian diplomatic gains are irrefutable and have buoyed the regime. In this fluid environment, the Assad regime is betting that an Obama administration will provide relief, and the opportunity to reassert itself in Lebanon and reintegrate into the international community. Yet the ultimate disposition of the new administration's policy toward Syria is far from certain, particularly if the Assad regime continues to pursue its unhelpful regional policies. In this regard, Assad's hopes for a dramatic change in U.S. Syria policy may be short-lived.

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Notes

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29. See, for example, Dennis Ross, "A Ceasefire Reality: Engaging Syria," Washington Post, August 17, 2006, and Ross' quotes in Natanya Mozgovaya, "Dennis Ross on Why He's Working for Obama and How He'd Talk to Iran," Ha'aretz, November 7, 2008, [link \(http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1030931.html\)](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1030931.html). On July 29, 2005, then Senator Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton -- the Obama Administration Secretary of State designate -- signed a letter urging the Bush administration to identify Hizbullah's Al-Manar television as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization, because "Hizbullah, a known terrorist organization, funds Al-Manar." [Link \(http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getpage.cgi?position=all&page=S11652&dbname=2005_record\)](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getpage.cgi?position=all&page=S11652&dbname=2005_record)
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