

Syria's Answer

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Advocates of U.S. diplomatic reengagement with Syria have received a clear answer from Damascus. On August 15, Syrian president Bashar Assad gave a lengthy speech to the Syrian Journalists Association condemning the Bush administration, disparaging the United Nations, declaring support for Hezbollah and regional “resistance,” and calling for the removal of the democratically elected government of Lebanon. The address and subsequent interviews with Assad in the Arab press highlight the absence of any foundation for fruitful discussions with Damascus. Indeed, given the context and the content of Assad’s recent remarks, it would be difficult to interpret the Syrian position as anything less than a resounding rejection of dialogue with Washington.

Regrettably, Assad’s recent remarks are not a departure from the policies pursued by Damascus in recent years. Indeed, President Assad’s speech reflects the broad range of unhelpful policies to which Assad has committed Syria. Syria’s relationship with Iran and Hezbollah remain the priority for Assad. During his August 15 speech, Assad referred to “resistance” as “the alternative for restoring rights.” Lavishing praise on Hezbollah, Assad claimed Hezbollah’s “victory” as his own, and made recommendations for “turning the military victory into a political victory.”

The Assad regime also has a beef with the U.N. Damascus “cannot accept” the U.N. Security Council ceasefire resolution (UNSCR 1701), because, according to Assad, “it held the resistance [Hezbollah] accountable” for starting the war. For Damascus, UNSCR’s stance regarding Syrian involvement in Lebanon as well as UNSCR 1701 are problematic, because they represent a U.N. trend “toward interfering in the domestic affairs of member countries.”

More ominously, though, during his August 15 speech, Assad explicitly threatened the deployment of international forces to Lebanon if the mandate conflicted with Syrian interests. UNSCR 1701 will “either not be implemented or will lead to instability,” Assad warned, “if [the U.N. tries] to implement it by force and against the will of the countries of the region.” The reference to “instability” harkens back to the dark days of the early 1980s, when Syria played a key role in facilitating Hezbollah attacks against the multinational forces in Lebanon.

Assad emphasized his point during an August 22 interview on Dubai TV, describing the potential deployment of UNIFIL on the troops on Lebanese-Syrian border as “a hostile position” toward Syria that would “naturally create problems.”

In recent weeks, Assad has likewise been particularly disparaging of moderate Arab leaders in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, who in the early days of the war were critical of Hezbollah. Assad referred to these leaders as “half men.”

But Assad has reserved his harshest criticism for the democratically elected Government of Lebanon led by Fouad Sinora, which he accused of collaborating with Israel. During his August 15 speech, Assad held the Sinora government—and the March 14 movement that had earlier expelled Syria from Lebanon—“responsible for the destruction, massacres, and war from A to Z.” According to Assad, the government of Lebanon had “failed,” and “their fall is looming.”

Syria has been extremely critical of the Bush administration as well, blaming Washington for the Hezbollah-Israel war. Indeed, in his August 15 speech, Assad described the war as “an Israeli aggression in tools, but an American aggression in decision.”

The rhetoric emanating from Damascus suggests that Assad is trying to set the parameters for a new, more militant Middle East—one in which “resistance” to Israel and to Western interests are of paramount importance. Given the Syrian regime’s hostility toward the U.N., the West, and the U.S. in particular, it’s not surprising that Assad is looking to consolidate his relations with Iran and Hezbollah. He is also apparently looking to change the current regional dynamic in which Washington plays a predominant role.

Indeed, in an August 14 interview with the Egyptian weekly *Al Usbua*, Assad said that Syria had decided to “look East, toward Asia [i.e., China and North Korea],” to escape the Western hold on the Middle East, “in which there is no alternative to America.”

Today, Assad’s August 15 speech and his other recent remarks stand as a clear statement of Syrian policy. Like Iranian president Ahmadinejad’s May 2006 open letter to President Bush—in which Ahmadinejad essentially counseled President Bush to convert or die—Assad’s belligerent speech articulated a Syrian position antithetical to Western interests and those of moderate Arab states including Lebanon.

Six years into his rule, President Assad has consolidated his control, so there should be no debate as to whether the remarks constitute a nod to Syrian “hardliners.” Indeed, Assad’s articulated positions demonstrate that he is a “hardliner.” In the aftermath of the disastrous Hezbollah-Israel war that Syria helped to foment, the danger posed by the Assad regime is evident. Based on his remarks and the policies he has pursued since coming to power, President Assad means what he says. Washington should take him at his word.

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