

Don't Know Much about History

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Articles & Testimony

The last time Syria pursued a brazen, unrestrained foreign policy, it wound up losing the Golan Heights. The lesson from the Six Day War -- the most stunning defeat ever handed to Syria in modern history -- should not be forgotten: reckless statements and provocations can have unintended, disastrous consequences. Regrettably, there are already perceptible parallels.

- In February 1966, a new, inexperienced Syrian leader by the name of Salah Jadid came to power. Because he assumed the presidency through a military coup and his Alawi-based regime did not represent the Sunni majority, Jadid lacked legitimacy.

In June 2000, a new, inexperienced Syrian leader by the name of Bashar Assad came to power. Because he essentially inherited the position from his deceased father, who was also an Alawite, Bashar does not have broad-based legitimacy.

- To shore up domestic support and rally the Arab world behind him, Jadid adopted extreme positions by threatening Israel. In the months preceding the Six Day War, the state-run Radio Damascus gushed, "Arab masses, this is your day. Fight, Arabs we have decided to oust you, aggressors (Israel)."

To shore up domestic support and rally the Arab world, Assad has adopted an extreme position against the war in Iraq. Assad has taken the lead in trying to unite the Arab world against what he regularly calls "American aggression."

Last week, he stated in the pro-Syrian daily Al-Safir that Syria is "at the heart of battles against the invaders, because [Syria] is the heart of Arabism."

Foreign Minister Farouk a-Shara echoed, "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq." The Syrian Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaru was even more explicit, calling for fard ayn -- a duty compulsory for every Muslim man and woman -- that demands using "every available means to combat the aggression in Iraq."

- Leading up to the Six Day War, Syria backed its rhetoric with increasingly hostile actions against Israel. Jadid gave Fatah added license to strike northern Israel from Syrian territory, and by the spring of 1967, border tensions rapidly escalated.

Currently, Syrian rhetoric has been backed by increasingly hostile actions against the United States. Assad has granted Hizbullah increased freedom of action if not operational support to apply pressure on Israel's northern border. He has used Syrian territory as a safe passage for Palestinian, Lebanese, and especially Syrians to fight American forces in Iraq. And Assad is believed to have supplied military equipment such as night-vision goggles to Iraqi militants.

- Leading up to the war, Jadid pressured the Arab world, especially Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, to assume an increasingly radical anti-Israel stance.

Throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom, Assad has encouraged President Hosni Mubarak and other relatively

moderate Arab leaders to step up their rhetoric against the United States.

- During the buildup to war, Jadid's provocations of Israel attracted immediate support throughout the Arab world.

Assad's recent provocations against the US have won him immediate praise. Last week, the Yemeni weekly al-Jamaheer extolled the "national and pan-Arab stances under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad."

The Emirates newspapers al-Bayan and al-Khaleej followed by commending Syria for "its supportive stance to the Iraqi people who are facing an unjust aggression."

Jordan's King Abdullah, an ally of Washington, also caved in by calling the war an "invasion" and referring to Iraqi civilians as "martyrs." Similarly, Mubarak resorted to the anti-America card when he said ominously, "Egypt's position has been and still is clear in rejecting the military option against brotherly Iraq. Instead of having one [Osama] Bin Laden, we will have 100 Bin Ladens."

- In November 1966, Syria convinced a skeptical Egypt to sign a mutual defense pact that united the Arab world against Israel. This symbolic stand opened the floodgates. The Egyptian masses demanded war, delegations began to arrive in Cairo from Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Kuwait, and Jordan and then Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to the Sinai. What began as rhetorical barbs against Israel had snowballed into all-out war frenzy.

Last week, Assad advocated that the "The Arab Defense Agreement should be implemented," whereby "if an Arab country is invaded, the rest of the Arab countries should defend it." Mubarak responded, "Our relations with Syria are strong and historical."

A number of other Arab leaders pledged their symbolic support.

Much has, of course, changed since June 1967. It seems unlikely that any Arab country apart from Iraq would intentionally push the US too far, or that Egypt or Jordan would again follow Syria's perilous path to war. Yet the Arab world, and Syria in particular, would do well to recall the lessons of the Six Day War -- reckless rhetoric and provocations can have dire, unforeseen consequences. ❖

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