

Three Syrians play Washington

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A delegation of Syrians is now doing the rounds in Washington and has even asked to meet with representatives of AIPAC, the leading pro-Israel lobby in the United States. Though the Syrians have tried to sell themselves as private citizens, they are all close to the Assad regime and trusted by it, even as their status allows them to hide behind a veneer of independence. One of them, Samir Taqi, is at a research institution close to Maher Assad, the brother of Syria's president; while another, Samir Seifan, has advised the Syrian government on economic reform.

That's why when The Wall Street Journal announced earlier this week that the Syrians would be meeting with the US assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, David Welch, people perked up. This would be a rare meeting in Washington between a senior American official and Syrians since the murder of Rafik Hariri in 2005. The media was not fooled and quickly sensed that while the delegation was officially unofficial, it was in fact unofficially official. News of the meeting with Welch was likely leaked by Imad Mustapha, Syria's ambassador in Washington, who welcomed the visit as a step in the right direction.

Then something happened. Most probably because of disagreements within the Bush administration, Welch pulled out of the meeting. As a result, Riad Daoudi, a legal advisor to the Syrian government who is a negotiator with Israel, also the most important of the Syrians in terms of contacts with the US, didn't go to Washington, leaving Taqi, Seifan and a third delegation member, Sami Moubayed, to do the Washington tour on their own. The man organizing the delegation's meetings was Thomas Dine, a former AIPAC director now at Search for Common Ground, an American NGO that promotes dialogue and conflict resolution.

From what we hear, the tour appears to have been a success. The Syrians have fed lines to the Americans that the Americans have just been dying to hear: that Syria wants peace, can help the US in the Middle East, is looking for a way to break with Iran, and so forth. But one statement in particular by Moubayed at the Brookings Institution alarmed us. It included the usual implied threat that Syrians issue whenever they talk about their role in the Middle East. And it mentioned Lebanon.

Moubayed said, "If Syria can wreck things in the region as some say, then it can also stabilize. This has been demonstrated through Syria's lead role in releasing the British sailors from Iran through diplomacy and through the working with the Palestinian groups for the release of the BBC's Alan Johnson. For us, Lebanon is minor, Iraq is now the strategic issue, and we can help. We have legitimacy and relations as an honest broker to deal with all major parties in Iraq. This is an American interest."

Ignore the first part. Syria had nothing to do with the release of the British sailors in Iran and probably little to do with Johnston's release. Left to their own habits, the Syrians will say they freed Nelson Mandela, but that's no reason to believe them. But the second part about Lebanon and Iraq was more serious, and this is our translation of what Moubayed meant: "For us, Lebanon is major, in the same way that Iraq is major for the United States. We can scratch your back in Iraq if you scratch ours in Lebanon. That is in the American interest and the Syrian interest, too."

Why are we worried? Because on the eve of Rafik Hariri's assassination, that was precisely the Syrian thinking on Lebanon. The Assad regime was convinced that Resolution 1559, which called for a Syrian withdrawal from the country, was no more than a ploy to pressure Syria into behaving in a more forthcoming way toward the US in Iraq. Damascus never took seriously the American desire to push the Syrians out, and its murder of Hariri illustrated the depth of the Assad regime's confidence at the time. With Hariri dead, Syria intended to manipulate the summer 2005 parliamentary elections and win a new lease on life in Lebanon.

Now we're hearing that same line again. Here is Moubayed trying to prove that Syria is an honest broker in Iraq — a preposterous notion considering that most Iraqis spent years watching Syria dispatch Al-Qaeda suicide bombers through its borders to murder Iraqi civilians. Here is Moubayed telling the US that Syria deep down really does want to advance American interests. For heaven's sake, we were not a day older than 10 when we knew that that kind of pitch was the pitch of a liar and a scoundrel.

Sham offers like those only affirm to us that Syria remains focused on re-imposing its hegemony in Lebanon and remains very much in the same mindset as the one that preceded the assassination of Hariri. That's why we're worried, because when the Syrians see an opening, when they've hoodwinked the Americans and everyone else into believing that Damascus is a capital of peace, we expect more killings in Beirut.

Sometimes we feel like Cassandra, because so few people in Washington seem to be in a mood to listen to our dark prophecies. But in the last three years the worst of what we predicted about Syria's intentions in Lebanon has occurred: its intention to kill more politicians, to block our presidential election, its refusal to recognize our sovereignty, and its persistent effort to reverse what happened in 2005. But the Syrians seem to be fooling everyone, and now we're bracing ourselves for the worst.

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