

Syria, as it is

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In his book *Peace Not Apartheid*, former president Jimmy Carter writes that soon after he was elected, "I invited the Syrian leader to come and visit me in Washington, but he replied that he had no desire ever to visit the United States."

So in May 1977, the 39th US president instead met Hafez Assad in Geneva. Their seven-hour meeting began with an hourlong speech by the Syrian president, on which Carter attentively took notes.

Carter is in the Middle East again this week. In April, he came to Damascus to visit President Bashar Assad and Khaled Mashaal, the head of Hamas. This time, Carter began his trip in Lebanon, where he sought meetings with Hizbullah officials, only to be rebuffed.

"Hizbullah does not meet with anyone from a US administration which supports Zionist terrorism," said Muhammad Raad, head of Hizbullah's parliamentary bloc.

When he met with Assad yesterday, Carter should have kept in mind the regime's insecure and vulnerable position. Some of that insecurity is economic. After a half century of Ba'ath Party rule, the Syrian economy remains an inefficient, heavily regulated socialist command economy. Because the country's oil sector provides a quarter of its GDP, half of the government's revenues and some two-thirds of its export receipts, declining oil prices are having devastating effect. The International Labor Organization has estimated Syria's unemployment rate at almost 18 percent.

But most of Syria's weakness, which has become ever more apparent since Bashar Assad assumed power in 2000, is political. It was forced to withdraw from Lebanon, following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005. It has endured humiliating incursions into its territory, like September 2007's strike on a nuclear facility that North Korea was helping to equip. (Assad refused to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to conduct a follow-up visit to the site, despite its recent report confirming the presence of uranium there.) And in late October, American special operations forces made a raid into eastern Syria to target militants responsible for running weapons and fighters across the border into Iraq.

Assad is directly culpable for these events. Besides serving as the headquarters of the Arab League's office for the boycott of Israel, Damascus is host to the political leadership of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and has abetted Iraqi insurgents in their campaign against American troops. "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq," then-foreign minister and current vice president Farouk Sharaa said in 2003.

Then there has been the spate of assassinations in Syria: Gen. Muhammad Suleiman, a top Assad adviser; Imad Mughniyeh, the operations commander of Hizbullah; Muhammad Suleiman, a senior military officer killed last month in the port town of Tartus; and Hisham el-Badni, Khaled Mashaal's top aid, who was taken out of his car and shot in the city of Homs earlier this month. In late September, meanwhile, a car bomb exploded near a Syrian intelligence agency office in Damascus, killing 17.

If all this weren't telling enough, Assad's recent crackdown on dissidents offers yet another sign of his growing insecurity. In May, Tarek Bayassi, aged 24, received a three-year sentence for publishing "false news" on the Internet. After reporting on riots in an industrial town near Damascus, Mazen Darwish, president of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, was given a short sentence for "defaming and insulting the administrative bodies of the state."

Journalists Jabr al-Shoufi and Fayeze Sarah, and Democratic Party member Muhammad Haji Darwish were sentenced to two and a half years in prison for "spreading false information and belonging to a secret organization promoting sectarian strife."

FOR all these reasons, now is precisely not the time for Carter or anyone else to be kowtowing to Assad, whose position is as tenuous as ever. There may be little chance of peeling Syria away from its dangerous alliance with Iran. But we can still hope that a strong Western position vis-à-vis Syria, of the kind Carter has so far proven woefully incapable of taking, might one day encourage the kind of institution-building and civil society that would transform today's Ba'athist dictatorship into a regime capable of making peace with Israel. This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com>

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