

Who are Syria's real friends?

Contributed by Ian Black guardian.co.uk
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As its relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran blossom, is Syria still keen for a rapprochement with the west?

Bashar al-Assad has every reason to be pleased with himself: barely a week goes by without some western VIP dropping in to see him. The other day it was the Spanish prime minister José Luis Zapatero. Even better, Syria's deputy foreign minister was in Washington earlier this month after several senior Americans came to Damascus – living proof that there is a thaw in relations with the Obama administration, even if it has not yet gone as far as the president would like.

But a couple of things suggest that the Syrian leader is not as keen as some had thought for a rapprochement with the west – or that he has already reached his own limits. Last week the security authorities arrested Haitham Maleh, a leading lawyer and human rights activist, underlining the ease with which opposition figures are thrown into prison. That brought instant condemnation from the British Foreign Office and international human rights organisations.

The other is that after years of negotiations, the Syrians have just asked to postpone a long-awaited association agreement with the EU, which was supposed to be signed in Luxembourg on 26 October. The EU delay may simply be about trying to obtain better terms: low-tariff or duty-free access to European markets should certainly help boost Syrian exports, though some manufacturers reportedly fear the higher standards it will require. The second thoughts could also be because, at the insistence of the Netherlands, the EU text also included an explicit reference to respect for human rights. Whatever the objections, the sudden postponement still strikes an ill-tempered note that jars with the current make-nice mood in Damascus.

It's a sensitive subject as talks on the EU agreement were frozen in 2004 under pressure from the Bush White House, angry over Syria facilitating the transit of foreign fighters across the border into Iraq. Jacques Chirac, then French president, resented Assad's hostility to his old friend Rafiq al-Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister who was later murdered in Beirut (many assume by Syrian agents, despite denials from Damascus). The Hariri killing sent Syria straight back into the cold.

Maleh's sudden arrest – apparently because of an interview deemed to contravene the country's draconian emergency laws – is a depressingly familiar phenomenon: Syria's securocrats seem to operate on auto-pilot, oblivious to any effect their moves may have on the wish to be part of the wider world. "Syria is busy welcoming foreign diplomats and talking about peace and development," said Sarah Leah Whitson of Human Rights Watch. "But to its internal critics, it only unfurls the prison mat." In the past external pressure has been counter-productive: when George Bush made a statement demanding Syria respect human rights, more of the usual suspects were rounded up the next day. Obama should, in theory, be able to be more effective. It is not enough for the US to focus solely on securing Syrian co-operation over Iraq, where there has been real progress.

Officials in Damascus generally exude confidence about things going their way. Relations with Turkey are blossoming as Turkey snubs Israel over the Gaza war. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Assad's chief Arab adversary, has been mending fences too. The UN's Hariri tribunal is going nowhere slowly. Above all, Syria wants an end to the bilateral US sanctions imposed because of its support for Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Hezbollah in Lebanon: Washington calls them terrorists; Syria legitimate resistance to Israel. That standoff does not look like ending any time soon. Nor is there any sign that Assad will, as the US would dearly like, drop his odd-man-out alliance with Iran. "Foreign relations are not a zero-sum game," said Syria's deputy prime minister, Abdullah Dardari. "Or at least they shouldn't be."

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