

Syria Exports Trouble

Contributed by Michael Young
Wednesday, 09 December 2009

How Bashar al-Assad is playing the world.

Paris, July 14, 2008. On the podium of dignitaries at the bottom of the Champs Élysées one man savors the irony of the moment. He has been invited by President Nicolas Sarkozy to this celebration of Bastille Day, when France commemorates the opening shot in its revolution to end absolutism. Yet for the invitee, Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, this is a consecration, the first major sign that his regime's isolation is about to end, and that his brand of absolutist rule is getting stronger.

After the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, in February 2005, Syria, the only credible suspect in the crime, found itself accused and was forced to withdraw its army from Lebanon. Its subsequent rapprochement with Iran widened the rift between Damascus and two major Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But within three years, Sarkozy, who hoped his efforts would earn France a greater role in the Levant, became the first major Western state to reverse that trend. Assad had surrendered nothing to warrant the embrace.

This has become a Syrian habit. Assad has been getting away with murder, literally. His regime allows foreign jihadists through Syrian territory to carry out attacks in Iraq. Syria has bolstered Hamas's intransigence over a settlement with Israel, and has encouraged the Palestinian Islamist movement to scuttle inter-Palestinian reconciliation. In Lebanon, Syrian meddling has been unrelenting since the pullout of its soldiers, while Assad has armed or allowed the rearming of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah, violating U.N. Resolution 1701 that ended the Lebanon war of 2006.

The former U.S. secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, once declared that the Bush administration did not seek regime change in Damascus, only "behavior change." It achieved neither, and during his campaign, Barack Obama approved of a dialogue with Syria (and others) "without precondition," a gesture unlikely to alter Assad's behavior.

Today Syria continues to export instability in defense of its regime and interests, and the reality is that no one is doing anything about it--not the United States, the United Nations, the Arab states or the European Union. To Assad's dubious credit, he has positioned his otherwise weak country in a perfect dead spot regionally and internationally, unmolested by any political will to forcibly curtail Syrian misdeeds.

In Iraq, the Syrians have exploited several parallel dynamics--Sunni displeasure with the Shiite-led government, divisions in the Iraqi political elite, and American haste to withdraw--to ensure they have a say in a future Iraq and access to cheap Iraqi oil. Assad's regime, in addition to offering Al-Qaeda militants safe access into Iraq, also hosts Iraqi Baathists under its control. According to an Iraqi security official cited by the Washington Post, Syria allowed Baathists and Al-Qaeda to co-ordinate actions at a meeting held in Zabadani, Syria, last July 30.

Syria knows that as long as it does not give in to Israel's demand on Golan it will be seen as a beacon for Arab world whose black goggled Kings and princes have no moral or educational backing. Syria

Syria has also benefited from Obama's impatience to leave Iraq. Following devastating attacks against Iraqi government targets in Baghdad last August, the administration was markedly tepid when Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki publicly blamed Syrian-backed Iraqi Baathists.

American military officials leaked that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was behind the explosions, not Baathists, leaving unmentioned the probability that the militants had entered through Syria. The State Department spokesman also played down the crisis, saying that "diplomatic dialogue was the best means to address the concerns of both parties." The Syrians surely read in that lukewarm reaction Washington's inclination to look the other way on Syrian transgressions, in order to facilitate its drawdown in Iraq.

On the Palestinian front, Assad is striving to achieve what his father, the late Hafez al-Assad, tried for decades to do with mixed results: Hijack the Palestinian card to use in Syria's own negotiations with Israel. Under Yasser Arafat, the Palestinians retained what was known as "the independence of the Palestinian decision." When Arafat died, however, gone was his ability to impose unity on Palestinian ranks, which allowed the Assad regime to gain the leverage it sought through Hamas' leader, Khaled Meshaal, who is based in Damascus. Syrian sway over Palestinian affairs only increased when Hamas won Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006, and subsequently expelled its Fatah rivals from Gaza.

Syria has not only used Hamas against Israel, it has also pushed the movement to thwart Egypt's ability to act as principle Arab mediator between Israelis and Palestinians. Egyptian officials accused Syria of pressing Hamas to undermine Egyptian-led negotiations last year to extend the truce in Gaza. Syria has taken a similar position on inter-Palestinian talks, whose successful outcome would revive Cairo's influence over Palestinian affairs, to Syria's detriment.

This has exacerbated Egyptian-Syrian hostility, even as Saudi Arabia earlier this year patched things up with Damascus in an effort to break Syria away from Iran. The Saudi-Syrian understanding, however, has not affected Assad's close ties with Tehran. Instead, it has handed Syria more latitude to re-impose its will in Beirut. The Saudis believe that one way to contain Hezbollah's power, and therefore Iran's, is to endorse a Syrian resurgence in Lebanon.

The Saudi turnaround vindicated Assad in his view that by destabilizing Lebanon in 2005 and the following years--during which time politicians, journalists, and security officials were assassinated--he managed to get his way. Yet nothing suggests that better Syrian-Saudi relations will end Syria's support for Hezbollah, which neither the Arab world nor the international community has made a condition for normalization with Damascus. On the contrary, since 2006 European states with contingents in the U.N. force in South Lebanon, which is charged with implementing Resolution 1701, have wooed Assad, fearful that his proxies might harm their soldiers.

After Hariri's murder, the U.N. Security Council set up an investigation and later a tribunal to identify the guilty. Almost half a decade later, the process has yet to show results. Assad is confident. Everyone is knocking at his door while Hariri lies forgotten. The Syrian president knows that in a world afflicted with amnesia he can do as he pleases.

Michael Young is opinion editor of the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut.