

Syria's Strategic Ties to the Islamic Republic: Diplomacy in the Post-Iraq/Post-Peace Process Middle East

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Last week, just after we had completed our regional tour to **Beirut, Damascus, and Tehran**, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made his own journey to Damascus, for highly publicized meetings with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, HAMAS Political Bureau chief Khalid Mishal, and a "resistance" summit with Assad and Hizballah Secretary General Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah. Ahmadinejad's trip to Damascus came on the heels of public statements by Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** on Capitol Hill reiterating **longstanding American demands on Syria** for greater cooperation with respect to Iraq, the end to interference in Lebanon and the transport or provision of weapons to Hizballah, a resumption of the Israeli/Syrian track on the peace process which had been proceeding through the offices of the Turks, and generally to begin to move away from the relationship with Iran which is so deeply troubling to the region as well as to the United States.

As Presidents Assad and Ahmadinejad signed agreements suspending visa requirements for Syrian nationals traveling to Iran and Iranians traveling to Syria, **the Syrian leader responded to Secretary Clinton's demand that Syria roll back its relations with the Islamic Republic:**

We must have understood Clinton wrong because of bad translation or our limited understanding, so we signed the agreements to cancel the visas. I find it strange that they [Americans] talk about Middle East stability and peace and the other beautiful principles and call for two countries to move away from each other.

A week before Ahmadinejad's arrival in Damascus, we had our own conversation with President Assad -- a conversation that came one day after U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns met with the Syrian leader. In our session with him, Assad expressed satisfaction over his meeting with Undersecretary Burns. However, Assad also made clear that Syria's relations with Iran, as well as its ties to Hizballah and HAMAS, are not on the table.

Syria's relationship with the Islamic Republic seems increasingly strategic in character. Over the past year, key advisers to President Assad have told us as much; one of them went so far as to describe Syrian-Iranian relations with the French adjective "intime." If the Obama Administration is unable or unwilling to acknowledge this reality and the regional dynamics that have given rise to it, the already limited effectiveness of American diplomacy in the Middle East will be further undermined.

To understand Syria's increasingly strategic partnership with Iran, a bit of history is in order. The late Hafiz al-Assad inaugurated Syria's relationship with the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq war. The elder Assad was motivated to side with the Islamic Republic by several considerations, including his interest in winning Iranian clerical endorsement for his Alawi sect's Islamic legitimacy while he confronted a Sunni Islamist insurgency at home and his interest in resisting American efforts to bolster Iraq as a bulwark against Iran. This latter interest flowed naturally from Assad's chronic concern about his country's potential strategic marginalization by the United States and Israel. As Flynt described this concern five years ago in his Inheriting ***Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire***,

The Assad regime's inclination to challenge U.S. Middle East policy has not stemmed primarily from the personal obstreperousness of Syrian leaders, but from a particular assessment of what defending Syrian interests required in the face of the U.S. posture toward the region. The United States is, of course, the chief external backer of the state of Israel -- from a Syrian perspective, an expansive power seeking regional hegemony. U.S. military and political support has been critical to allowing Israel to expand its territorial holdings and occupy these lands in defiance of what Syrian leaders frequently describe as "international legitimacy." From a Syrian vantage point, U.S. policy in the Middle East for much of the last thirty-five years has aimed principally at ensuring Israel's ability to consolidate and maintain its hegemonic position in the region.

Given this interpretation of the underlying rationale for America's Middle East policy, the Assad regime has long been concerned to forestall a worst-case scenario in which Syria would be encircled by regimes hostile to its interests, allied to the United States, and docile toward Israel (that is, a Lebanon that has made a separate peace with Israel, a pro-Western Turkey cooperating strategically with the Jewish state, an Iraq with a regime supported by and supportive of the United States, a Jordan ruled by pro-American Hashemites who have sold out the Palestinian cause and forged security ties to Israel, and a rump Palestinian entity). Under these conditions, Syria would be marginalized in regional affairs, with other states free to ignore or undermine its interests.

Seen through this prism, cooperation with Iran proved enormously valuable to Syrian interests during the balance of Hafiz al-Assad's tenure, on multiple fronts -- resisting U.S. and Israeli military incursions in Lebanon; cultivating Hizballah as a military and political asset; using Palestinian Islamist resistance groups like Islamic Jihad and HAMAS to press the United States, Israel, and the PLO not to neglect Syrian interests in the Arab-Israeli peace process; and, in general, underscoring the potential costs to the United States, Israel, and other regional actors of ignoring or threatening Syria's regional interests. Nevertheless, at the end of Hafiz al-Assad's life, the Syrian-Iranian relationship still seemed as much tactical as strategic in character.

Following the end of Cold War, the elder Assad's preferred strategic option was a peace settlement with Israel that, under appropriate circumstances and with firm parameters for an acceptable deal, could be negotiated bilaterally under U.S. mediation. Assad saw such a course as instrumental to achieving his real post-Cold War foreign policy objective -- a fundamental strategic realignment toward the United States, which had emerged from the Cold War as a superpower of seemingly unprecedented proportions. In his last years in office, the elder Assad seemed prepared to modify significant aspects of Syria's relationship with Iran, including Syrian ties to Hizballah and Palestinian militant groups, as part of the "price" for an acceptable peace deal with Israel and strategic rapprochement with the United States. (Of course, this hypothesis was never put to the test, as the Syria track effectively collapsed just two months before Assad's death in 2000).

Bashar al-Assad's accession to the Syrian presidency in 2000 took place near the beginning of what has proven to be a still ongoing period of dramatic shifts in the Middle East's strategic environment. These shifts include the effective collapse of the traditional Arab-Israeli peace process, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the rise of Hizballah and HAMAS as important political actors in their national and regional contexts, the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in Lebanon, and the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as well as subsequent Israeli military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza. In "[Will America's Arab Allies Strike Their Own Deal with Iran?](#)" we have described these developments as conditioning the emergence of a new regional "Cold War."

Following Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, the Islamic Republic was able to take advantage of these developments to effect a significant boost in its own regional standing. And, as we and our colleague Ben Katcher have discussed in a number of posts,¹ Turkey has intensified its diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, in ways not always congruent with U.S. strategic preferences, thereby boosting its own regional standing.

For Bashar al-Assad, these developments have created both enormous challenges and, over time, new strategic opportunities. In this context of daunting challenges and emerging opportunities, Syria's diplomatic calculations have shifted in at least three important ways during Bashar's presidency; one consequence of these shifting diplomatic calculations has been an ever greater inclination in Damascus to see Syria's relationship with the Islamic Republic as an unalloyed strategic partnership.

First, Syria's ties to regional "resistance" forces -- including groups like Hizballah and HAMAS that are also closely linked to Iran -- have taken on an increasingly strategic character during Bashar's tenure. As we have discussed previously, with the removal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon following the Hariri assassination, Hizballah has become an even more valuable asset for Syria. Similarly, on the Palestinian front, it is hard to imagine that, at this point, Bashar would agree to expel Khalid Mishal from Syria as part of a purely bilateral peace settlement with Israel -- as, it would seem, his father had been prepared to do

On this point, it is noteworthy that, since late 2008, Bashar has adopted a rhetorical position on Arab-Israeli issues emphasizing the need for a "comprehensive" Arab-Israeli settlement, along the lines indicated in the 2002 Arab League peace initiative, and with HAMAS playing a central role on the Palestinian side. When we asked him about this evolution in his rhetoric, President **Assad said that, if Israel were prepared to conclude a peace treaty with Syria meeting his longstanding requirements (full return of the occupied Golan Heights to the June 4, 1967 line, etc.), he "could not say 'no'."** He noted, though, that, while Israel could get a "peace treaty" with Syria, such a settlement would give Israel little more than a "ceasefire" and, perhaps, a heavily guarded embassy in Damascus. For real "peace", according to President Assad, Israel will need to negotiate a comprehensive settlement, including on the Palestinian track.

Second, **the Islamic Republic has proven its steadfastness to Syria in recent years.** Syria and Iran were the two regional states which argued most vociferously that the United States would face serious difficulties in its occupation of post-Saddam Iraq, and their stance was widely viewed in the region as having been vindicated by events. More practically, Syria's ties to Iran were critical in fending off the heavy pressure applied on the Assad regime by the United States, most of Europe, and moderate Arab states in the wake of the Hariri assassination. As another of Bashar's advisers said to me recently, it would be hard for Syria to forsake Iran, as Iran, in the period following Hariri's assassination, had "stood by us when no one else did." This should not be interpreted as a sentimental statement. Rather, it is a statement that, **in an uncertain strategic environment, Syria will continue to need the "hedge" provided by its close relationship with the Islamic Republic.**

Third, **the perceived value in Damascus of strategic realignment with the United States through a carefully conditioned peace deal with Israel is slowly declining as America's hegemonic standing and influence erode.** Certainly, the Syrian leadership was relieved by President George W. Bush's departure from office and his replacement by President Obama. But, with a right-leaning coalition headed by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in power in Israel, expectations in Damascus for what Syria would see as major improvements in America's Middle East policy are not high. And, as President Assad noted to us, poor policy choices in the Middle East by the United States over the last decade have created "vacuums" which "others [Iran and Turkey] filled." (In this context, Assad argued that Iran's evolving regional role does not represent "new ambitions" on Tehran's part.) This has expanded Syria's strategic optionality. In this context, **Assad underscored that the rise of Iran and Turkey to new levels of regional influence has not come at Syria's expense; rather, all three states have been able to improve their own relations and bolster their regional influence.**

This is not to say that Hafiz al-Assad's preferred strategic option of realignment toward the West through a "principled" peace with Israel does not remain deeply attractive to his son and successor. But, the longer that Damascus must wait for the United States to deliver on its end of the peace process, the more time that Bashar and his advisers have to internalize what they see as the reality of America's slow decline. And that has a palpable effect on the price they are willing to pay for realizing Hafiz al-Assad's preferred strategic option.

In closing, we would note that we had not had an in-depth meeting with President Assad for five years. Flynt's *Inheriting Syria* -- for which he interviewed President Assad -- was published in 2005, shortly after the Hariri assassination. At the time, many U.S. and Western commentators were predicting the downfall of the Assad regime. We visited Damascus in June 2005, immediately following the withdrawal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon, to observe the Ba'ath Party congress. We came away from that visit convinced -- *contra* the conventional wisdom in Washington -- that the Lebanon withdrawal had been well internalized in Syria, that President Assad was more in control of the Syrian government than he had been before Hariri's assassination, and that U.S.-French efforts to isolate Syria from regional affairs would ultimately fail. That assessment has been powerfully validated with the passage of time. Bashar al-Assad has weathered the storm unleashed in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination and has emerged as a masterful player of the regional game. It is striking that many of the people who argued in 2005 that the Syrian leadership was internally conflicted and uniquely vulnerable to external pressure are now making the same arguments about the Islamic Republic of Iran. They were wrong then; they are wrong now.

1 "Iran, Turkey and the New Middle East" (29 October 2009); **"Understanding Turkey's Foreign Policy"** (4 November 2009); **"Erdogan in DC: Iran, the United States, and the Middle East's Future"** (8 December 2009); **"Turkey Asks For Some Respect"** (25 January 2010).

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