

Syria: An Overview of the Situation

Panorama

Elias Samo

Professor of International Relations at American and Syrian universities (Ret.)

Med. 2010

No single statement underlines Syria's centrality in the turmoil-ridden Middle East more than Henry Kissinger's statement, made more than three decades ago, that Arabs cannot wage war without Egypt and cannot make peace without Syria. One could expand Kissinger's dictum to say that there can be neither Arab-Israeli peace nor regional stability without Syria.

186

Having weathered the surrounding storms of the decade, Syria feels justifiably at the centre of events in the region, with a finger in everyone's pie. For Syria, 2009 was a very good year in a bad decade. Gone are the days when Syria was a pariah, isolated, maligned and ignored; when it was considered by US president George W. Bush "a ripe fruit ready to be picked." The "rogue state" and "axis of evil" labels have disappeared and been replaced by friendly overtures and a process of engagement emanating from formerly unfriendly, if not hostile, sources including the US, the EU and some Arab quarters.

Syria holds several crucial cards which it uses to deal with regional conflicts: the Arab-Israeli peace process; Hamas stability in Lebanon in conjuncture with Hezbollah; stability in Iraq in conjuncture with the various Baathists, sectarian and ethnic groups Syria nurtured in past years; close ties with Iran; and its legacy and effectiveness in the fight against terrorism. In fairness, it must be said that these cards were originally dealt by the late President Hafez al-Assad and nurtured by his son President Bashar with the help of mistakes committed by others, particularly violent American ventures in Iraq and elsewhere, and misguided Israeli follies in Lebanon and Gaza. The Syrian leader has played his cards with finesse, mixing ideology with pragmatism.

A Regional Overview

In the Middle East, there are three major conflicts: the Arab-Israeli, the Sunni-Shiite and the Arab-Persian. Syria can play an important role in all three. However, what matters to Syria is how its role serves the national interest, which constitutes a framework of three pillars: (1) recovering the Golan, arguably in the context of a comprehensive Arab- Israeli peace deal; (2) recognition of Syria's centrality in the region; and (3) Syrian security in the context of regional peace and stability. In pursuit of these objectives, Syrian foreign policy is a mix of ideology and pragmatism, in which the latter is paramount. Perhaps this pragmatism explains how Syria can ally itself with Sunni Iraqis – and actually with other Iraqi groups, including Shiites and Kurds – and at the same time support Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria's close ties with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, all of which wish Israel would disappear, might seem in conflict with Syria's readiness to make peace with Israel. Syria's alliance with Shiite Persia might appear in conflict with Sunni Syria's Arabism. Syria's alliance with the two major non-Arab powers in the region, Turkey, which has strategic relations with Israel, and Iran, which wishes Israel's destruction, might seem incongruent. This says much for Syria's pragmatism and contrary to some misperceptions, the country is neither unmovable nor ready for re-alignment, unless the circumstances are favourable.

Arab-Arab Divide. An Overview

Historically, Arab-Arab relations have always been unstable, embroiled in dissension caused by differing views regarding regional issues. Presently, Arabs are divided into two groups characterised as moderates versus radicals; those who seek accommodation ver-

sus those who emphasise resistance. The divide is a consequence of their differing views regarding the three major regional conflicts: the Arab-Israeli, Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Persian. However, for Syria, the Arab-Israeli conflict takes precedence. As for the other two conflicts, Syria rejects the notion of a sectarian Sunni-Shiite conflict and believes that the Arab-Persian conflict should be dealt with through accommodation and peaceful resolution of the contentious issues. As viewed from Damascus, the Arab divide regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict is a consequence of a contest between the Sadat and the Assad models. There has been a historical tug-of-war between Damascus and Cairo as to who symbolises and represents Arabism. Tension between the two states increased after the break-up of the United Arab Republic in 1961, followed by the late Egyptian President Sadat's signing of a separate peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Sadat believed that, (1) it is unlikely for Israel to conclude a comprehensive peace treaty with the Arabs, but would rather precede step by step, peace by pieces and (2) the US holds all the cards in the peace process. Thus, unconstrained by regional implications, Sadat felt strong, independent and confident enough to put all his eggs in the American basket and sign a separate peace treaty with Israel, presumably to be followed by others.

As viewed from Damascus, the Arab divide regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict is a consequence of a contest between the Sadat and the Assad models. There has been a historical tug-of-war between Damascus and Cairo as to who symbolises and represents Arabism

By comparison, the late Syrian president Assad, constrained by regional considerations, convinced of the futility of peace by pieces, and mindful of the crucial role of the US, but doubtful of American commitment to the peace process, decided to wait and see, a hallmark of his patient approach. Although both leaders have left the scene, their legacies to the Arab-Israeli conflict and other regional issues are still relevant. In view of new developments in the region such

as the American invasion of Iraq, the Sunni-Shiite conflict and the rise of Iran's hegemonic aspirations, Arab weight, particularly among the Gulf Arabs, has shifted towards the Sadat model and the American basket. This shift has resulted in leaving Syria out of the traditional on-and-off tripartite Arab alliance of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. However, the recent rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia is a prelude for Syria's return to the fold. Thus, the present-day Arab divide is to a great extent between "all eggs in the American basket" versus "spreading the eggs around several baskets." However, for Syria, its immediate surroundings are of primary concern.

Lebanon

To the west, Lebanon, which constitutes Syria's soft belly, falls within the Syrian sphere of influence; thus relations between the two states are asymmetrical. In view of its democratic traditions and the presence of a variety of religious and sectarian warring factions, there is some truth to the notion that Lebanon is an improbable state, and if it becomes probable it cannot rule itself, and if it rules itself it is a ticking bomb. This notion is unsettling to Syria, which wants a reconciled Lebanon ruled by a national unity government. The Lebanese factions tried for months, in vain, to agree on the formation of a national unity government. However, when Syria wished to see a national unity government in Lebanon, this is what happened, with a helping hand from Saudi Arabia. Recently, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri travelled to Damascus to express his regrets – implicitly if not explicitly – for his past indiscretions and misdeeds and seek a new beginning. The trip was also an admission by the Lebanese leader that Syria is the power broker in Lebanon, irrespective of whether or not there is a Syrian military presence there. Damascus received him warmly, putting the past aside.

Iraq

To the east, Iraq was a traditional competitor with Syria. However, with the American invasion in 2003, it became a source of security threat due to intense US hostility towards Damascus and the rumours in Washington that Syria was next on the hit list; from which it has since been removed thanks to American mismanagement of the war and the departure of

President Bush. President Obama knows that Damascus, with proper incentives, can be a source of positive input in Iraq – and elsewhere – due to its ties with the various Iraqi factions it nurtured in the past. Syria wants a reconciled, united, stable, secure, secular and nationalist Iraq within the Arab fold. Syria originally opposed American invasion and now calls for American withdrawal. However, the irony is that while during the Bush administration Syria feared that American success in Iraq could lead to an American military invasion of Syria, now, Syria fears that American failure and eventual withdrawal could leave a power vacuum, and, as a result, domestic sectarian Sunni-Shiite and ethnic Arab-Kurdish conflicts, as well as regional clashes. The Arab states and Turkey seek a reconciled and united Iraq, preferably under Sunni dominance, and containment of Kurdish independence aspirations, while Iran seeks a Persian-oriented Iraq under Shiite dominance.

Turkey

To the north, Turkey is a major non-Arab regional power and historically a hostile neighbour; a relationship that dates back to the break-up of the Ottoman Empire after the end of World War I and particularly after World War II and the rise of the Cold War, in which the two neighbours found themselves on two opposite sides of the divide. Hostilities were due to historical baggage and several contentious issues, including border disputes, border security, water sharing and the Kurdish problem. Relations were so tense in 1998, that war was only barely averted. However, relations began to improve, particularly after President Bashar succeeded his father in 2000. The drums of war have been silenced and replaced by an alliance, thanks to the pragmatism of the leaderships in Damascus and Ankara. In addition to the bilateral mutual benefits, the alliance provides Syria security on its long northern border, so that it can concentrate on its ever-threatening southern border with Israel. Beyond the bilateral considerations, as viewed in Damascus, the alliance with Turkey plus Syria's alliance with Iran constitute a tripartite regional grouping. The recent Syrian-Saudi rapprochement will hopefully lead, with Saudi efforts, to the revival of the Arab tripartite alliance of Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Syria could be the facilitator for the two groups to cooperate for regional peace and security.

Israel

To the south, Israel, the invincible military giant, is occupying the Syrian Golan and perpetually threatening vulnerable Syria. Syrian-Israeli relations are linked to Syrian-American relations and the Palestinian-Israeli peace track. Although each issue can be dealt with separately, none can be settled individually; it is a package deal. The recovery of the Golan is a major Syrian foreign policy objective. The Syrian-Israeli peace track has taken a giant step backward since the promising days of the nineties when negotiations were bilateral, centring on four contentious issues: Israeli withdrawal from Golan, security arrangements, normalisation of relations and a time frame for the implementation of the peace treaty. Now, Israel and the US combined have made the peace process multi-lateral, where Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran have been introduced into the equation. Compounding matters is a right-wing extremist government in Israel, headed by Prime Minister Netanyahu who has declared that “the Syrian border with Israel has been Israel's safest for 35 years,” so why fix it, if it is not broken?

The irony is that while during the Bush administration Syria feared that American success in Iraq could lead to an American military invasion of Syria, now Syria fears that American failure and eventual withdrawal could leave a power vacuum

President Bashar's non-negotiable position regarding the Golan, which contemplates peace with Israel only if there is a total Israeli withdrawal, juxtaposed with Netanyahu's refusal to withdraw from the Golan, make it doubtful that negotiations will even be resumed in the foreseeable future. To compound matters, the deadlocked Palestinian-Israeli track enters the Syrian-Israeli equation. However, if the minimum requirements for peace for both Syria and Israel are met, the question is: Would President Bashar sign a separate peace treaty with Israel, in the style of the condemned Sadat, leaving the Palestinians, for whose cause the Golan was occupied, out in the cold, particularly in view of his stated position that there will be no peace

in the region without a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement? Or would he refuse to sign a separate peace treaty with Israel, thereby refusing to regain the Golan, which is a central Syrian foreign policy objective? Only the Syrian leader can resolve the riddle and he is keeping his cards close to his chest; he will cross that bridge in the unlikely event that he comes to it.

Only the US has leverage with both sides. But for America to get involved, Washington demands the precondition of a Syrian strategic re-orientation, which includes its relations with Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Lebanon and Iraq

Both Syria and Israel know that Washington is the cornerstone of the peace process and could possibly break the deadlock. The Obama administration has reversed the Bush administration's opposition to the resumption of Syrian-Israeli negotiations, which, it should be noted, is linked to improved Syrian-American relations. A process of engagement between Damascus and Washington started shortly after Obama's inauguration. A year has passed and there are no tangible results. Syria is aware that without American involvement, Syrian-Israeli negotiations are futile. Only the US has leverage with both sides and can assist with security arrangements and provide the funds needed to implement the agreement. But for America to get involved, Washington demands the precondition of a Syrian strategic re-orientation, which includes its relations with Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Lebanon, Iraq, etc. Damascus believes peace

with Israel and normalisation of relations with Washington will naturally lead to a Syrian strategic re-orientation, thus presenting the proverbial chicken or the egg scenario.

Hopefully, the status quo will be maintained. The Syrian-Israeli peace process, after all, is in for a long wait due to: (1) Obama's preoccupation with the many domestic and international problems, and his emphasis on the Palestinian-Israeli track; (2) the intransigent Netanyahu and his reluctance to fix what is not broken; and (3) Syria's legendary patience, for the Golan has been occupied for more than four decades and Damascus can wait longer if need be. Meanwhile, Damascus feels that it is sitting on top of the region, while some Israeli leaders are reluctant to leave home for fear of arrest for their war crimes in Gaza. Just a few years ago Syria was considered an international outcast while Israel was pulling the strings in Washington, Europe and some Arab states. Today, Damascus has become a Mecca for Western officials while the Israelis are shunned worldwide.

Conclusion

There are two contrasting views of Syria. One view considers Syria as mysterious, enigmatic, radical, a spoiler, warmonger, anti-peace, sponsor of terrorism, member of the axis of evil, etc. The other, putting aside political slogans and ideological posturing used for domestic and regional consumption, considers Syria a pragmatic, bargain hunter, horse trader and deal maker as good as any other. These characteristics are engrained in the Syrian genetic makeup, going back several thousands of years, to the ancient souks and bazaars of Aleppo and Damascus, some of which still exist today. It is never black and white, and in Syria's case it is a combination of both.