

MERIA

IRAN'S NUCLEAR AND SYRIA'S IRAQ ADVENTURES

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The two main areas where the alliance of radical forces in the Middle East confront Western interests and pose a danger of major instability are Iran's drive for nuclear weapons and Syria's efforts to destabilize Iraq. This article considers these two issues. First, it examines what effect Iran's obtaining nuclear weapons would have on Middle East politics, with an emphasis on scenarios that would occur even if Iran never actually uses them. Second, it asks why it is that the interests of Iran's ally, Syria, compel it to destabilize Iraq.

A NUCLEAR IRAN AND MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

If Iran gets nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them to targets, what impact would it have on the Arab world? While this is necessarily speculative, an analysis of the strategic effect of Tehran having nuclear weapons is the most important piece of contingency planning in the world today. One can make some very educated guesses as to what would happen.

Public statements by Arab leaders, journalists, and others of indifference or even Muslim solidarity with Iran are more than matched by private remarks showing fear and hope that Tehran will be stopped. As so often happens, however, the Arab regimes and intellectuals will do almost nothing to help achieve the outcome they want. It is left in the hands of the West, the United States, or even Israel to block Iran's progress. However, an outcome with Iran having nuclear weapons is more likely than the alternative.

A great deal of attention has rightly been paid to the possibility that Tehran might use nuclear weapons against Israel--especially given the threatening statements of Iranian leaders, which do not stop short of advocating genocide. If Iran had nuclear bombs it might well use them to attack Israel, a situation that would produce hundreds of thousands of deaths--especially if a nuclear exchange followed--and provoke the biggest crisis in the

region's history. This is a terrifying possibility no matter how low one assesses its chances of happening. This threat is sufficient in itself as a reason to stop Iran from obtaining such terrible weapons, all the more since it is an extremist, aggressive government that has voiced its readiness to use them and has shown its willingness to employ terrorism.

While this is important, however, there are other elements of the issue that deserve fuller consideration. There are other outcomes that--compared to the actual firing of nuclear-tipped missiles or giving such arms to terrorist groups--are a 100 percent certainty given a nuclear-armed Iran. These strategic concerns are of the highest importance for the entire world. This point would be true even if there were no oil and natural gas in the Persian Gulf area, but given the great concentration of these vital resources (and the systems for transporting them elsewhere) there, it becomes arguably the globe's most compelling issue.

Thus, given the premise that Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons and the missiles capable of delivering them, even in small numbers, how would politics and policies in the Arabic-speaking world be changed?

The Search for a Defensive Shield

Clearly, one step that Arab states would take--especially Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)--would be to seek a nuclear umbrella

from the West, especially from the United States. These governments would ask Washington for assurances of defense against any Iranian threat or attack, especially a stated willingness by the United States to strike at Iran with nuclear weapons in the event of their being used against any of Iran's neighbors.

It should be noted that the European Union would not play a central role here, being unwilling and unable to provide such a guarantee. Nevertheless, the position taken by the EU would be important, for any sign of doubt or opposition to such an umbrella would be interpreted both by Tehran and its neighbors as implying that no one can provide the ultimate defense against Iran.

There would also likely be other conventional military components to such a defensive umbrella. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could be involved; the GCC might seek to buy anti-missile defenses or warplanes capable of striking at Iran from Western states. Western forces might be placed in the Gulf as tripwires to deter Iran from attacking, since then a nuclear strike against, say, Saudi Arabia, would be an attack on the whole Western world.

Yet there is a major problem with the idea of direct military aid or involvement that would give Arab states, especially those in the Gulf, a greater sense of security vis-à-vis Iran. For one of Tehran's demands--supported by domestic opinion in Arab states as well as Iran's own threat--would surely be not to engage in such activities (see below). Furthermore, most or all Arab states would probably comply at least up to a point with this attempt to deny them a strong defensive alliance.

Nukes of Their Own

Another potential response of at least some Arab states would be to seek their own nuclear weapons and delivery systems. It is easy to underestimate what a big undertaking this would be. After all, it is not just a matter of purchasing some nuclear technology. Either the country has to be capable of building both workable weapons and missiles capable of

carrying them or of purchasing them readymade.

Yet only the Saudis among Gulf Arab states are likely to be willing and able to undertake such an effort. It is most unlikely that Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, or others would either seek or have much prospect of obtaining nuclear weapons or sophisticated, comprehensive anti-missile defenses.

Moreover, even if Arab countries do obtain such weapons, they must be maintained properly, amply protected, and carefully managed in deciding under what conditions they might be used, who would control them, and many other difficult questions. The dangers are enormous, including the possibility of provoking a stronger Iran, thus weakening rather than strengthening deterrence. It is likely that all Arab countries, even Saudi Arabia, would reach the conclusion that seeking an independent nuclear capability is more trouble than benefit.

One factor here is that having nuclear weapons is a risky matter in several strategic respects. This is especially true for a country whose stability and technical skills are not assured, as well one where dissident elements or opposition terrorists might seek to seize such arms or facilities. Taking these points into account, aside from their own anti-proliferation stance, Western states, including the United States, are not going to help Arab countries get nuclear weapons or missiles capable of carrying them.

Consequently, simply saying that countries would respond to an Iranian nuclear capability by getting their own weapons is no answer to the new situation created by Tehran's having atomic weapons.

Appeasement

In connection with seeking an American umbrella, the most attractive strategy for Arab states is appeasement of Iran. The fact that most or all European countries would move in a parallel direction would only reinforce this trend.

The key question here is: What would Iran demand and Arab states be willing to give in order to achieve this goal? One possibility is a lack of cooperation with the United States in combating Iranian ambitions and threatening its nuclear arsenal, which might also include pressure not to grant basing rights to American forces--at least any new ones--as well as not taking part in any campaign to isolate or impose sanctions on Iran. Other demands might include no peace agreements with Israel, acceding to Iranian demands for high oil prices, non-interference with Iranian influence in Iraq, and minimizing verbal criticism of Iran, its system, interests, and allies. Somewhat harder to swallow would be acceptance of Iran's leading role in Gulf security. Tehran's position has been that security arrangements should involve only the local states, thus minimizing outside defensive support for Gulf Arab states and further enhancing Iranian goals. This may also involve a more positive attitude toward Iran's allies. This could include friendlier policies toward Syria, not opposing Hizballah's efforts to gain veto power or hegemony over Lebanon's government, and accepting the primacy of Hamas over Fatah in the Palestinian arena.

These concessions taken together would further weaken Arab resistance to Iranian regional (or at least Gulf) hegemony and undermine Western (or at least American) efforts to construct an anti-Iranian alliance. If Arab states are too frightened to admit they fear Iran having nuclear arms before it has even obtained them--much less being willing to act to avoid this outcome--how will they react when Tehran actually does have such weapons of mass destruction?

HISH Power

The central issue in the Middle East today is the conflict between the radical HISH alliance (Hamas-Iran-Syria-Hizballah) and the Arab nationalist Sunni regimes. HISH projects its power through a variety of means, including radical Islamist ideology, sponsorship of terrorism, covert or overt

backing for revolutionary clients, and the direct power of Iran and Syria. What would happen to Arab politics in a situation in which Iran had nuclear weapons must be considered in this context.

At present, the main battlefronts are in Iraq and Lebanon, and for control of the Palestinian leadership. Moreover, in every Arabic-speaking country (except for in Syria itself, where they have been largely though perhaps temporarily coopted) radical Islamist forces are the main opposition to the existing governments.

Historically, of course, Iran faced serious problems in projecting its influence into the Arabic-speaking world. There were three barriers in particular, and all of them have eroded. First, Iran is a non-Arab state, directed by ethnic Persians. Though it also includes other ethnic elements, few of them are Arabs. Arab nationalism has thus been antagonistic toward Iran, a factor manipulated by its Arab rivals and accepted by their people. (A notable example was Iraq's use of anti-Persian propaganda during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.)

Through the HISH alliance, however, Iran has passed through this barricade by having three major Arab allies--Palestinian Hamas, Lebanese Hizballah, and Syria--as well as considerable assets among Iraq's Shi'a Arabs. In addition, the appeal of Iran's line using Islamism, anti-Westernism, total opposition to Israel's existence, and revolutionary passion has appealed to many Arabs.

On the Arab-Persian issue, many Arabs are still totally opposed to any power by Tehran over "their" region. The GCC countries view Iran as a direct threat. Egypt sees it as an unwanted rival for leadership. Fatah is suspicious of Iran's sponsorship for Hamas and plays the "anti-Persian" card, as does the governing coalition in Lebanon. Still, many Arabs are no longer persuaded that they must oppose Iran as a non-Arab force.

Second, Iran is a predominantly Shi'a Muslim country, and the "Islamic" regime is very much a Shi'a and not a Sunni one. The majority of the Arabic-speaking world is Sunni and has certainly been ruled by Sunnis

even when they are in the minority (Iraq, Bahrain, and in a sense Lebanon).

Through the HISH alliance, though, Iran has also passed this barricade. Hamas is Sunni, and Syria has a Sunni Muslim majority that supports the regime even if it does not comprise it. Using the methods discussed above, Iran can claim more appeal than ever before on the basis of Islamism, even with Sunni forces. However, many Sunnis--including Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood--and especially the Saudis are still mobilized by hatred and fear of the Shi'a.

Third, leadership in the Arabic-speaking world was dominated by the battle among the strongest Arab states (Egypt, Iraq, and Syria), leaving no room for an outside contender. Today, however, there is a leadership vacuum in the Arab world. Iraq will be in too much disorder to be concerned with regional issues for some years to come. The leadership bid by its ruler, Saddam Hussein, not only failed but contributed greatly to the regime's downfall. A weaker Syria has hitched itself to Iranian leadership while Egypt has turned very much inward, unable to project any influence outside its own borders. Even Jordan's King Hussein, who ruled a small country but cast a giant shadow, is no more. The door is open to Iran's bid for hegemony.

Iran's success is by no means complete. Still, it is hovering on the verge of serious success. Its clients are close to power in Iraq, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians. Its popularity among Arabs and Sunnis is at an all-time high. One can understand if leaders in Tehran believe that the future belongs to them, even though this might be a major miscalculation. Indeed, making such a misestimate of the balance of force might produce a giant crisis, especially if Iran has nuclear weapons.

Springtime for Tehran

In this context, then, it is possible to analyze the tremendous boost that possessing nuclear weapons would give to Iran, its allies, and its ideology.

Islamism

Buoyed by having a "superpower-type" sponsor and the "proof" of how effective an Islamist government is, radical Islamist forces around the region would grow rapidly in numbers and boldness. They would argue that Iran can stand up to America, subvert the existing Arab regimes, and destroy Israel.

The rush to Islamism would parallel the growth of radical Arab nationalism after such "successes" as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company and survival of an international assault in the 1950s. A tidal wave of recruitment to radical Islamist movements throughout the Arab world would take place, and these groups would be more aggressive in fighting regimes (notably in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt), including the use of violence. The appeal of Arab nationalism could collapse, at least in specific countries, and several more Islamist regimes might very well take power.

Syria

Under the protection of Iran's nuclear umbrella, Damascus would be more aggressive toward Israel, in subverting the Lebanese government, and in promoting insurgency in Iraq. Such adventurism could lead to direct war with Israel, even if that is not the Syrian regime's conscious intention.

Lebanon

Hizballah and Syria's politician clients might succeed in either forming their own government there or at least in getting veto power over the regime's decisionmaking process. With control over the country ensured, Hizballah would be more likely to launch a campaign that would lead to another war with Israel.

Iraq

Iran's influence among Iraqi Shi'as would skyrocket. Tehran could and probably would use this to force out any U.S. presence and

move Iraq in the direction of being a satellite state (even if it did not succeed completely). Even an independent-minded Iraqi government would feel that a strong, neighboring Iran was a more important factor to please than a distant and fickle United States.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

The chance of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict diplomatically would be zero, as the growing numbers of radicals would believe they could win completely, and the relatively moderate would be too scared to take any action that might be defined as treasonous. With Hamas winning even more over Fatah--and Fatah pushed toward a harder line, perhaps even a deal with Iran--no Palestinian leader would negotiate seriously. This is already true, and it would be even more so.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf

The Saudis and other Gulf countries would be very intimidated by Iran's growing power. They would try to survive by propitiating Iran and by ensuring Western support, but their priority would swing toward the former factor. Internal revolutionary and terrorist movements would probably increase and be disruptive, even if they did not come into power. Oil and natural gas prices would skyrocket in view of the market's fear of regional instability.

Conclusions

All in all, the outcome would be incredibly damaging for Western interests. The kind of postwar interventionism that took place in Kuwait in 1991 and Iraq in 2003 would be impossible, since now Iran--in place of the USSR--would hold the balance. The type of hopeful diplomacy contained in the 1990s peace process would be impossible since the Arab side would be held in thrall to Iranian and radical Islamist pressures.

Western attempts to conciliate Iran would be tougher since Tehran could maintain that it achieved nuclear weapons despite opposition

from the West. Since it is so powerful, why should it make any concessions at all to a side it sees as frightened and in historic decline? That idea--that Iran is on the winning side of history--would have enormous appeal in the Arabic-speaking world.

This is a very gloomy assessment, but it is hard to see how a different one is more likely. To reiterate, even assuming that Iran never uses nuclear weapons, the possession of them alone is likely to create an enormous, earthquake-like strategic shift in the region and in Arab politics.

SYRIA AND IRAQ: THE STRUGGLE FOR ARAB HEGEMONY

Syria has been a major exporter of instability to Iraq, and thus the Damascus regime. It is a major promoter of disorder there and clearly does not fear the radical Islamists it is helping as either a force in Iraq or as a threat to Syria itself. Some Western observers have argued that Syrian interests are parallel to those of their own countries. If this is true at all it is due only to the fact that parallel lines never meet.

American and Iraqi officials have consistently made this point in no uncertain words, and in increasingly specific terms. In November 2005, then Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari explained, "We demand that [Syria] control [its] borders, prevent infiltration and terrorism. We want good relations with Syria, but this cannot be achieved when such violations exist."¹

In September 2006, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salah said that Iraq wanted to "get our Syrian neighbors to behave more responsibly... and to clamp down on the presence and activity of some of the former regime leaders" there "as well as some of the terrorists that are going across the borders."² A few months later, the deputy governor of Mosul, Khasro Goran, added that Syria could easily control terrorism from its territory since it had thrown out the Kurdish PKK leaders in 1998, responding to a threat from Turkey.³

The U.S. military spokesman in Iraq, Major General William Caldwell, estimated that

between 70 and 100 foreign fighters, one-fifth of whom were Syrian, were caught crossing the Syrian border into Iraq every month throughout 2005 and 2006.⁴

In late 2006, Syria added to its strategy by opening diplomatic relations with Iraq, a relationship broken more than two decades earlier, though the two countries had worked together closely in the years before Saddam Hussein's overthrow. Syria's foreign minister visited Baghdad, and Iraq's President Jalal Talabani made a January 2007 week-long return visit to Damascus, where he had lived in exile during the Saddam era. Syria and Iraq signed several accords and made public statements pledging to work together on all sorts of security, political, and economic matters of mutual interest.

The problem, however, was that Syria did not fulfill those pledges, particularly on the all-important security issue. In February 2007, Iraqi government spokesman Ali Dabbagh could still assert that "50 percent of murders and bombings are by extremists coming from Syria... and we have evidence to prove it." Equally striking was the March 2007 statement by State Department Iraq Coordinator Ambassador David Satterfield that at least 80 percent of suicide bombers in Iraq had transited through Syria.

To some extent, both Iraq and the U.S. government might well be exaggerating the high proportion of the terrorism coming from Syria. Nevertheless, this factor is clearly both important and continuing, showing Syria's effort to maintain a high state of instability in Iraq and drive out U.S. forces.

By being willing to play this role, Syria shows that it does not fear all-out civil war in Iraq (it merely wants its side to win). Similarly, the Syrian regime does not seem to take seriously the possibility of partition or large-scale Turkish intervention. Moreover, it certainly does not worry about large-scale Iranian influence, since that country is its close ally.

In fact, this strategy closely follows Syrian interests, which are quite different than those of the United States and run along the following lines: The regime of President

Bashar al-Asad would prefer an Iraq that was under Syrian control or one under Iranian influence as long as Tehran did not forget about the needs of its Syrian ally. This means an Iraq that is Arab nationalist, anti-American, ready to pursue the conflict against Israel actively, and a sponsor of international terrorism (especially if this means backing Syrian clients such as Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad).

In the words of Syrian Vice-President Faruq al-Shar'a on March 7, 2007, Syria "supports any solution that leads to... the establishment of a new Iraq that is Arab in affiliation and that... is a brother of Syria..."⁵

It may seem paradoxical on the surface, but makes it perfect sense that Syria does not care so much whether or not the Sunni or Shi'a rule in Iraq as long as they fulfill its agenda. Naturally, Syria would prefer that the type of Sunni communalists or Islamists who have been its direct clients come into power, but it would certainly be happy with Iranian-influenced Shi'a who would follow the kind of policies it seeks.

In this context, it should be noted that Syria has excellent relations with radical Shi'a leader Muqtada Sadr, as well as with a wild variety of Sunni insurgents--ex-Saddam backers, al-Qa'ida supporters, and Sunni communalists. As Asad himself stated in a little-noticed interview with French television on March 21, 2007, as reported by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "What we are doing is to start dialogue with all parties, whether they are supporting the political process or opposing it" in Iraq.

In the absence of this preferred outcome, Syria will pursue that kind of solution to the Iraq issue through its present policies. This means ensuring that Iraq remains unstable and that U.S. influence is under attack there. A U.S. withdrawal would please Damascus as a sign of a retreating American role on its border. Yet violence and disorder within Iraq should clearly be seen as in Syria's interest, not something that frightens Damascus with the threat of chaos on its frontier.

What Syria does fear is a stable Iraq under a U.S.-allied regime that defeats the

insurgency. Whether or not Sunnis are offered more or reconciled with the existing Iraqi government is not of interest to Syria in and of itself, since Damascus cares nothing about Sunni rights within Iraq.

The real issue for Damascus is to avoid any stable, moderate outcome in Iraq for five reasons. First, a U.S. client state on its border is in itself a strategic danger to Syria, given the clashes between the two countries' goals and interests. The battle over Iraq is whether that country will be part of the Iran-Syria or of the U.S.-oriented Saudi-Egyptian-Jordanian bloc.

Second, a success for democracy in Iraq sends a dangerous message to its own citizens, who might view this system as preferable to their existing dictatorship. Third, a victory for U.S. policy in Iraq is also an obstacle in the way of the Iran-Syria alliance and the "resistance" strategy Asad advocates in the region. Fourth, an end to the insurgency would free up U.S. assets to be used against Syria itself and its ally Iran. As long as the United States is tied down in Iraq, America has little power to spare to use against Syria directly. It should be noted, however, that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could to some degree have the same effect. Finally, an end to ethnic strife in Iraq would remove a Syrian argument against internal reform that any change could lead to anarchy and civil war.

All of these points must be understood before any "spillover" or impact of Iraq on Syria can be evaluated. What is most essential to comprehend is that factors that seem negative to the United States, Egypt, Europe, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf Arab states are in fact positive from the Syrian perspective. In general, Syrian interests (along with those of Iran) are the exact opposite of all the other countries.

The Insurgency

An intensive, bloody insurgency has wracked Iraq since it started after Saddam's overthrow in 2003. There are several ways this instability could spread to other Arab countries. The terrorists using Iraq as a base or

a battlefield could attack elsewhere, buoyed by their success. Alternatively, they could leave Iraq, in victory or defeat, just as their ideological "ancestors" spread out from Afghanistan after the war ended there. Another option is that the same forces that supported the insurgency could sponsor or inspire similar efforts in other countries. However, these issues do not scare Syria much at all. After all, it is the main outside sponsor of the Sunni insurgency.

This problem was the centerpiece--to no apparent avail--of the highest-level U.S.-Syrian meeting in Damascus since Bashar al-Asad inherited power in 2000. Lame-duck Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Damascus in January 2005. This was followed in summer 2005 by a very public spat between U.S., Iraqi, and Syrian officials about the role of Syria in Iraq's insurgency. Syrian officials variously claimed to have posted 4,500, 6,000, or even 10,000 soldiers to patrol that border, demanding that other "should appreciate" that effort.

By early 2007, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Abdallah al-Dardari raised that claim to 12,000 troops. U.S. and Iraqi officials retorted that far too many insurgents were still coming across into Iraq.⁶ In January 2007, President Bush again accused Syria of supporting cross-border "networks" of those killing American soldiers and Iraqi civilians inside Iraq.

A Syrian spokesman made a quite transparently false response in claiming:

There is not a single Iraqi or American soldier there to secure the border. We have asked the Americans and the Iraqis to work together with us to secure the border, but they turned down our request. Maybe they want a scapegoat to explain their failure in Iraq.⁷

In March 2007, President Asad offered Diane Sawyer an equally poor excuse, saying, "You cannot control your border with Mexico, can you? You're the greatest power in the

world, you cannot control it with Mexico, so how do you want Syria to control its border with Iraq?" As disingenuous as this riposte may be, it does reflect Asad's genuine lack of concern about any potential "spillover" back into Syria from the insurgents in Iraq. The terrorists are not going to target their paymaster, and the ones who would be attacked are Syria's enemies or rivals. Who is going to imitate the insurgents within Syria itself?

The answer to that question, in theory, is that Sunni Muslim Islamists inside Syria might copy their co-communalists by rising up against a regime dominated by someone else, in this case Alawites, a purportedly Shi'a but actually non-Muslim minority of only 12 percent ruling over a 60 percent Sunni majority. Yet Syria's support for the insurgency has consolidated its reputation--among its own Sunni majority as well as abroad--as a fighter for Sunni and Islamist causes. By supporting the insurgency, Syria has made itself less liable to face such an insurgency of its own.

Jihadi Terrorism and Blowback

According to the U.S. and Iraqi governments, as well as others, Syria has played a major role in supporting and inspiring not just "communal nationalist" Sunni insurgents--who merely want to return to the historic situation of their own supremacy--but also jihadi ones--who want a radical Islamist state in Iraq.

This help includes housing headquarters, leaders, and large amounts of funds, as well as allowing Islamist volunteers for the insurgency to enter, transit, receive arms, and get training in Syria. These people are mainly radical Islamists who would like to overthrow all existing Arab governments and install Islamist states.

In theory, Syria could fear similar treatment. In reality, however, Syria has reinvented itself as the main Arab sponsor of radical Islamist movements. True, the Ba'athist regime there was long a secular one in orientation, but this has not been true for a

number of years, certainly not since Bashar al-Asad became president in 2000. Within Syria, mosques have been built and restrictions loosened (for example, on women wearing veils and on soldiers praying on bases), and government propaganda often sounds like variations or clones of radical Islamist arguments. Syria is in no way an Islamist regime, but it often talks and acts as if it is one.

Syria's Relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia

A very intriguing and ironic outcome of Syria's support for Sunni insurgents and jihadists in Iraq is the apparent--but not substantive--contradiction with another key aspect of Syria's foreign policy: its alliance with Iran, which is not only the major Shi'a power in the world today but also actively supports Shi'a government officials and sectarian militias inside Iraq.

On the surface, Iran backs the current Iraqi government, which Syria is so energetically subverting. In fact, though, Iran's main priorities are to push out the U.S. forces and establish a pro-Iranian regime in Iraq that would be part of the existing Hamas-Iran-Syria-Hizballah alliance. Both Iran and Syria also support Sadr, who represents one of the main forces that might produce such an outcome. Of course, Iran's influence with Shi'a factions within the government coalition is far more extensive than anything Syria possesses, yet that in itself is not a problem for Syria.

Thus, the seemingly amazing point that the two allies, Syria and Iran, are backing opposite sides in a war--two groups that are murdering each other--is reconciled in strategic terms.

Another factor here is that Syria continues to maintain it is the best of all Arab nationalists while abandoning the camp of Arab states for an alliance with Iran. Asad's insulting talk toward Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia has not been defused by talks with leaders of those countries. These regimes oppose Syria's posture but--it is important to note--they, too, are sympathetic toward the

insurgency and want to maintain Sunni rule in Iraq. At any rate, they are not taking substantive anti-Syrian action, so the cost to Damascus is minimal.

Sectarian Conflict

Aside from foreign policy and the profitable alliance with Iran, there are ample domestic reasons for Syria's behavior. By supporting Sunni Islam with the Iraqi insurgency and Hamas--and even by its backing for Shi'a (but Islamist) Hizballah in Lebanon--the regime has increased its support among Syria's Sunni Muslim majority as the champion and defender of their community, Sunnis abroad, and Islamism. At a time when the Syrian economy is in terrible shape, freedoms are limited, and the minority (and non-Muslim or at least pseudo-Shi'a) nature of the regime might be otherwise controversial, Bashar is at the peak of his popularity. Anti-American and anti-Israeli policies and rhetoric intensify this populist, demagogic success.

What is particularly notable is that the main and potentially most effective opposition group, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, has been undercut. For instance, at a meeting of Muslim Brotherhood cadre in Amman, Jordan, Jordanian Muslim Brothers criticized their Syrian counterparts, saying it was forbidden to fight the Syrian regime since it was doing such a good job of promoting Islamism.

Yet at precisely the same time, the regime effectively uses the Islamist--which in Syria also means Sunni sectarian--threat at home to solidify support among those who fear such a danger. Those who might otherwise become liberal critics of the regime are afraid to speak, or even back Asad, because they fear that the alternative is a Sunni Islamist regime. This is true not only among Alawites and intellectuals and educated urban women (who might themselves be Sunni), but also among the sizeable Christian population. It might also be a factor among the Druze minority too.

Thus, rather than threaten to spill over, sectarian strife in Iraq contributes to Syrian regime maintenance. Those Syrians who support the insurgency count it to Syria's

credit; those who are horrified at the bloodshed support the regime to ensure that it does not spill over and that Syria does not face the perils of democracy.

Exception Number One: Kurdish Ethnic Spillover

In March 2004, during a soccer game in Qamishli, Syria, Kurds in the crowd shouted slogans about Iraq's new constitution, which gave their counterparts there autonomy. Syrian Arabs, including police, responded with chants backing Shi'a hardliners in the neighboring country. The security forces fired at the Kurds, killing several people. Police again opened fire during the funeral, setting off two days of riots. Many Kurds were arrested, beaten, and tortured. Kurdish groups have aligned themselves with the pro-democratic opposition.

Clearly, the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq does inspire Syrian Kurds to demand more. Still, however, the situation largely seems under control by the Syrian authorities. Moreover, some Iraqi Kurdish leaders, including President Talabani, are sympathetic to Syria for hosting them in exile, while foreign Kurdish militants in Iraq are focused on Turkey or Iran rather than Syria. Finally, Syrian Kurds are only one-quarter proportionately as many as their counterparts in Iraq or Turkey.

Exception Number Two: Refugees

The only actual cost Syria is facing due to the instability in Iraq is the flow of many refugees into Syria. This has a real financial cost to the regime. At the same time, though, even this has advantages by giving Syria an opportunity to show humanitarian credentials and serving as a first-hand warning to its own citizens as to the cost of putting faith in America, trying out democracy, and overthrowing a dictatorial regime.

As of early 2007, according to one Syrian official, Syria was hosting well over one million Iraqi "visitors," at a high financial cost:

No economy can simply absorb so many. In Damascus alone 25,000 children are attending our elementary schools--free of charge, it goes without saying. For us that means that we have to build dozens of new schools. One must emphasize that the U.S. in particular has a moral obligation in this matter.⁸

In March 2007, in the highest-level direct contact since the February 2005 Hariri assassination, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Migration, and Refugees Ellen Sauerbrey journeyed to Damascus for a "useful exchange" focused "exclusively on Iraq refugee issues" with Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Maqdad. The United States apparently agreed to keep funding UNHCR aid to Iraqi refugees, while the Syrians expressed their willingness to continue hosting displaced Iraqis, although noting the burden that this does place on them and on their system.⁹

Syrian Options

For Syria, instability in Iraq--or rather its own ability to promote or curtail it--is not a threatening crisis but a major asset for achieving leverage on other issues. The very deniability built into sponsoring terrorism allows Syria to continue backing the insurgency while claiming innocence and even that it deserves credit for countering it.

There are many media outlets, experts, and politicians in the West quite ready to credit Syrian statements about its alleged efforts for peace in Iraq or the high value of its efforts in ending the violence there, and to urge rewarding Damascus for what it claims to have already done or might do. There is a long list of benefits Syria hopes to get by promising or pretending to implement help on Iraq.

Engagement

Syria hopes that its ability to help resolve the Iraq issue will lead the West in general and

the United States in particular to engage in a diplomatic process with itself. The purpose of this is not so much to reach an agreement, but to gain three other objectives.

First, if Western states are in negotiations with Syria, they are more likely not to attack it or to inflict other costs on it. Thus, a long-term process in effect gives Syria a license to do what it wants on such questions as supporting terrorist operations; backing its political clients such as Hamas, Hizballah, and Islamic Jihad; subverting Lebanon; sabotaging any Arab-Israeli peace efforts, and so on.

Second, Western states are more likely to make concessions to Syria in order to get it to engage, keep it engaged, and try to persuade it to reach some kind of agreement. This kind of argument is constantly being voiced.

Third, it sends a message to Syria's own people that their government is strong and successful, giving them the impression that it will make big gains in future so they will ignore the current lack of rights and low living standards.

The model for this strategy is its experience with the United States in the 1990s. At that time, Syria supported the coalition against Iraq during the Kuwait crisis and then engaged in talks with Israel. As a result, Syria received huge amounts of aid from Saudi Arabia and a free pass on Lebanon and other issues. In the end, Syria gave nothing and reaped great benefits.

Lebanon

The number-one goal of Syrian policy is to revive its long domination over Lebanon. This occupation not only brought strategic advantages but also tremendous material ones. For wealthier Syrians and regime supporters--including army officers--there were the profitable areas of looting, smuggling, investing and real estate, counterfeiting, and drug production. For poorer Syrians, there were hundreds of thousands of jobs in Lebanon that paid far better than their counterparts in Syria (and certainly much better than the unemployment they would have suffered at home) and low-level

participation in smuggling and other such enterprises.

Syria has tried to get back into control of Lebanon through terrorism (including assassinations) aimed to convince the Lebanese that without the Syrian presence they can know no security. Its assets include traditional pro-Syrian politicians, the Christian faction of Michel Aoun, some small Sunni Islamist groups, and first and foremost Hizballah. It has a wide variety of schemes to regain a pro-Syrian government.

If, the regime argues, the West were to give Lebanon back to Damascus, it would kill two insurgencies with one stone, so to speak. Syria would rein in both the Iraqi insurgency and Hizballah in attacking Israel. Not only is this the crudest form of terrorism as blackmail, but Syria would probably not deliver on its promises even as it swallowed its prizes.

The Hariri Investigation

If Lebanon is the regime's greatest desire, the Hariri investigation is its biggest fear. It is increasingly clear that the highest levels of the Syrian regime ordered the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. The UN investigation has been moving toward this conclusion. It is quite conceivable that if it continues as an honest and independent investigation, the process will end with the indictment of the Syrian regime. In this case, a joint international tribunal of Lebanese and foreign judges would be set up to try Syrian officials. If some start testifying about what they know in order to save themselves, higher-ups will be implicated.

The Syrian regime has been desperate to kill this tribunal. One way has been to take over Lebanon or to intimidate the Lebanese government into watering down or dispensing with the investigation. The other way is to get the West to drop it. The Iraq issue is seen as a way of saving the regime by doing a trade-off.

The Golan Heights

This issue is far more ambiguous than it might appear from the standpoint of Syrian

interests. First, Syria does not want to pay anything for getting back the Golan Heights in terms of peace with Israel or other concessions because such a deal--as the following points show--has far more negatives than positives for the Syrian regime.

While these factors apply both to Hafiz--who, after all, turned down such a deal in 2000--and his successor, Bashar is simultaneously more insecure and more committed to a consistently radical strategy. In contrast to actually reaching a deal, however, being engaged in a protracted negotiating process is advantageous, as the analysis below will show.

Second, the Golan Heights are a poisoned prize for Syria. If the regime loses the excuse of the conflict with Israel, it has precious little otherwise to use to rationalize its continued rule.

A rational analysis of regime interest shows many more reasons for Syria to avoid rather than to make peace with Israel. Syria has a great deal to lose if diplomacy succeeds. It does not want to see an increase in regional stability, a greater U.S. role, or the normalization of Israel's position in the area. Extremely dissatisfied with the status quo, Syria's rulers have seen the Arab world's return to past militancy as a way to escape isolation and seize leadership. Otherwise, their hope of gaining, or keeping, influence over neighbors and becoming the area's dominant power would be lost forever. The existence of a Western-oriented Palestinian state that did not side with Syria's ambitions but whose existence might even reduce tensions or end the Arab-Israeli conflict would do nothing for them either.

An Israel-Syria peace treaty would be equally bad for the regime. Such a diplomatic achievement would open the door for most other Arab states to have relations with Israel and to work with it on matters of common interest. Yet Israel would remain determined--and be far more able--to oppose Syria's ambitions for sway over Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinians. The United States would also use its stronger influence to block Syrian goals. An Israel-Lebanon agreement would

follow any Israel-Syria accord, reducing Damascus's leverage in that country and bringing international pressure for a Syrian withdrawal.

These strategic costs would not be matched by many economic or political gains for Syria, certainly not on the all-important domestic front. A Syrian agreement with Israel would not bring much Western aid or investment. More open access for foreigners to invest or do business directly in Syria and more open commercial opportunities for Syrian businesspeople would actually weaken the dictatorship's hold over its own subjects. Freer communications would give Syria more access to news and information, including ideas and facts the regime does not want them to know.

As a result of such changes, Syria would lose prestige, aid, and deferral to its interests, all the advantages that being a militant confrontation state had long given it. Today, these same factors make Syria a superpower in terms of the demagogic appeal used to keep its people in line, marching behind the regime.

In short, the existence of the Arab-Israeli conflict was and continues to be good for Syria. If it were to disappear, this would be worse than being defeated in a dozen battles against Israel. Syria would be relegated into permanent status as a secondary power in the Middle East. At home, the result could be the regime's overthrow and a devastating civil war or revolution. This was the meaning of the warning given by one pro-regime Syrian writer that Israel's proposal to give Syria the Golan Heights in exchange for real peace "is like a minefield; it conceals things that are not apparent on the surface."¹⁰

A peace agreement would also advance U.S. influence in the region and against Syrian interests. It would promote moderation, undercut radicalism, introduce Israel as a normal political (and economic) factor, and promote a regional stability that would strengthen the status quo. On every aspect of its impact, a successful peace process runs counter to Syrian interests.

Consequently, the Syrians are not interested in "trading" Iraq for the Golan Heights. However, they are more interested in

trading the pretense of being helpful for a long-term process, Lebanon, and an end to the Hariri investigation.

Material Benefits

Given the bad shape of its economy and the regime's refusal to make meaningful economic reforms, Syria is also interested in using Iraq to gain material benefits. In 2005, officially reported Syrian exports to Iraq totaled approximately \$800 million, not far behind Iran's roughly \$1 billion figure. Since diplomatic relations were restored in late 2006, Syrian officials have voiced greater interest in expanding formal economic ties with Iraq. In March 2007, to cite one example, their ministers of electricity signed an agreement to plan links between the two national grids so that Syria could sell electricity to Iraq.¹¹ If, however, obtaining such advantages would require concessions or compromises on Syria's part, the regime would rather give up the gains than pay for them. This is clear from the government's meager record in this regard.

At the same time, Syria might well offer cosmetic overtures to Iraq and pay lip service to good neighborly relations. For instance, in March 2007, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdallah al-Dardari made the following declaration: "Stability, development, prosperity and unity in Iraq will be beneficial for Syria more than any other country. Our economic outlook depends on economic growth and development in Iraq."¹²

After all, if Syria can have normal relations with the Iraqi government while still subverting it--a goal that is quite obtainable--it would be the best of all possible situations for the Damascus regime. Furthermore, in this context, the economic benefits are also an attraction for Iraq to ignore some of Syria's unfriendly, but covert, activities.

There is one more extremely important aspect of Syria's posture. In February 2007, President Asad asserted in *Newsweek* magazine that Syria is "the main player" in Iraq; his deputy prime minister echoed that line, telling *Der Spiegel* that "everyone who

wants to bring peace to Iraq has to work closely with Syria.”¹³

This concept is an important element in the Syrian policy conception. Asad seeks to portray himself as the key player in the region who can pose far-reaching demands in exchange for his cooperation. Yet if Syria is so valuable an interlocutor, it can expect to receive unilateral concessions. Certainly, Asad seems to believe genuinely that he is operating from a position of strength. Every hint of the West’s uncertainty or weakness--such as the visit of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and others in April 2007--is portrayed in Syria as a major victory and proof that its strategy is working.

Always in the regime’s thinking are its objectives beyond Iraq. Its aims include eliminating or rendering impotent the Hariri investigation, its removal from the U.S. terrorist list, reopening the Iraq oil pipeline through Syria (which the same regime used to violate the sanctions before Saddam Hussein was overthrown), completing a trade agreement with the European Union, and getting security equipment (in some cases, items it has previously given Hizballah and the Iraqi insurgency, such as night-vision goggles) to “patrol” the Syria-Iraq border.

Conclusions

The problem in analyzing Syria is misunderstanding the government’s interests. At the top of the list is regime maintenance. In this vein, for example, peace with Israel in exchange for the Golan Heights would weaken the regime, and the same is true for democratization or economic reform, changes that are superficially thought to benefit the country.

Next on the regime’s list is killing the Hariri investigation and reestablishing its domination of Lebanon. In this connection, continued backing for Hizballah and strengthening it are absolutely necessary, since it is Syria’s main asset in Lebanon. Similarly, there is nothing the West can offer Syria in any realistic context that would make it worthwhile for Damascus to split from

Tehran, which gives it so much geopolitical leverage, Islamist legitimacy, and material benefits.

The bottom line is that Syria likes the instability and insurgency in neighboring Iraq, preferring instability in its neighbor unless it can dominate that country itself--or in tandem with its ally Iran. The fact is that Syria’s interests are diametrically opposed to the United States on this issue.

The Syrians would welcome a U.S. withdrawal, though they might worry it would free up U.S. assets to be used against itself. While they would not like to see Iran have a monopoly on influence in Iraq, the idea of an Iraq in Iran’s orbit does not scare them. After all, it is a member of what would be the Iran-Syria-Iraq alignment.

The regime in Damascus would like to use its ability to disrupt Iraq as a bargaining chip to make gains elsewhere. Yet even if in receipt of these gains, Syria would not be inclined to favor a moderate, pro-Western, stable, democratic Iraq.

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NOTES

¹ Associated Press (AP), November 12, 2005.

² AP, September 14, 2006.

³ *The Guardian*, November 21, 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ BBC Monitoring, March 8, 2007, cited in iraqupdates.com.

⁶ Arabicnews.com, July 22 and 28, August 6 and 20, 2005; Der Spiegel Online, February 21, 2007.

⁷ Der Spiegel Online, March 21, 2007.

⁸ Deputy PM Abdullah Al-Dardari, Der Spiegel Online, February 21, 2007.

⁹ Arabicnews.com, quoting U.S. State Department spokesman.

¹⁰ Majid Muawwad in *al-Thawra*, July 9, 1999. Translation by FBIS.

¹¹ *Al-Zaman*, March 20, 2007.

¹² Arabicnews.com, March 21, 2007.

¹³ Der Spiegel Online, February 21, 2007.