



Asad Comes in from the Cold

THESE ARE HEADY TIMES FOR Syria's President Bashar al-Asad. Notwithstanding the unceasing efforts of his late father Hafiz to make Syria a politically stable regional power, Syria has usually found itself in a distinct minority in regional and international affairs, and often politically isolated.

This became even more the case during Bashar's first years in office, peaking with Syria's forced, precipitous withdrawal from Lebanon after a 30-year presence, and the harsh criticism leveled by the US administration, under George W. Bush, which included Syria as a member of the "axis of evil."

Now, however, it seems that Syria has numerous friends and can wield influence, a situation which also improves its strategic and diplomatic posture vis-à-vis Israel.

The recent visit to Damascus by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, the first ever by a Russian head of state, marked a deepening of the two countries' longstanding bilateral ties and a newly assertive Russian posture in the Middle East, thus strengthening Syria's position on Arab-Israeli issues. It also served to counter the decision by US President Barack Obama's Administration to keep Syria on its short list of states, which sponsor terrorist organizations.

While in Damascus, Medvedev also met Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, to Israel's dismay and to Assad's satisfaction. Just a few days earlier, Bashar had met in Istanbul with Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan and Qatar's ruling Emir Hamid Al-Thani, the former now a significant ally, as well as Syria's mediator of choice in Syrian-Israeli diplomacy; the latter, the head of a wealthy principality who takes pride in being a regional gadfly, to frequent Saudi displeasure.

As for the Lebanese arena, nothing epitomizes the restoration of Syria's preeminence there more than the kowtowing to Assad by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, both of whom had been key players in the anti-Syrian "March 14" coalition in recent years, and whose fathers had been assassinated by Syrian agents.



Of course, Syria's primary regional ally for more than three decades has been the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has provided important strategic depth vis-à-vis Israel, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which provided economic aid and support for Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. Indeed, the intimacy between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Assad has reached a point where many analysts have wondered whether Syria has become so entangled with Tehran and its Hizballah ally that it has lost its freedom to act independently.

This of course would be anathema to Sunni Arab monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, both of which had been extremely angered by Hizballah's provoking of the 2006 Lebanon war and remain extremely worried over Iran's nuclear program and power projection into the Arab world, beginning with Iraq. In response, both Riyadh and Amman have chosen to publicly mend fences with Damascus, undoubtedly hoping to offer Assad other options besides exclusive reliance on Iran.

When it comes to Iraq, at least, Syria has never been comfortable with the idea of either a pro-American regime or an Iranian-dominated one. Damascus, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are all currently watching Iraqi developments closely, in the aftermath of general elections and political maneuvering, which has yet to produce a new government and holds out the specter of an Iranian-influenced Shi'ite governing coalition, to the exclusion of the Sunni Arab minority, aligned with former prime minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite.

Syria has taken an active role in Iraqi politics in recent years, and like the Saudis and the Jordanians, would clearly prefer the creation of a unitary state with guarantees for Sunni influ-

ence, to a Shi'ite-dominated federative structure which is likely to be heavily influenced by Iran.

The disappearance of a Sunni-led Iraqi state, long deemed the "eastern flank of the Arab world," has severely upset the former balance of power between the mainly Sunni Arab world and Shi'ite Persian Iran. A recent indication of Syria's thinking was the publicizing of a gathering in Damascus of a bloc of Iraqi political parties and organizations, including one of the wings of the Iraqi Ba'ath party, the first such publicized gathering since the overthrow of Saddam seven years ago. The agenda was two-fold: supporting the "resistance" to foreign occupation, while opposing the "spilling of sacred Iraqi blood," and rejecting participation in the political process, overseen by Iranian-leaning Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Meanwhile, the one-year anniversary of the Iranian mass protests against the rigging of presidential elections is nearly upon us. The regime seems to have weathered the storm for now. As for the nuclear issue, even as Ahmadinejad thumbs his nose at the prospect of more international pressure, Iran may be looking to demonstrate flexibility on the issue of uranium enrichment in order to inhibit the UN Security Council from adopting tough new sanctions next month. Assad, for his part, will surely be watching the next round of Iranian-Western diplomatic wrangling closely. So will Israel.

The recent panic in Lebanon over fears of an Israeli attack, whether justified or not, demonstrated how jittery much of the region is as the summer approaches. However, given the low expectations for the upcoming Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks, Syria's improved regional standing, and the desire to provide an alternative to Iran's regional agenda, the attractiveness of the Syrian-Israeli diplomatic track has increased, at least for some.

Whether this is true for Assad and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and, if so, whether they are capable of acting on it, remains to be seen. ●