

Détente with Damascus?

By Khody Akhavi | December 19, 2007

When the George W. Bush administration asked Damascus to attend last month's Annapolis conference, Imad Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador to the United States, admits he was stunned.

"[The United States] was really obsessed with making wars. Then we heard that it's not only that they are not interested in brokering peace talks, they were proactively opposing any attempts to make peace talks between Syria and Israel," Moustapha said during a forum at Georgetown University last week.

Syria has, for all intents and purposes, remained a junior member of the much-maligned "axis of evil." Two years ago, Damascus was under fierce U.S. pressure for its alleged support of militants in Iraq, sponsorship of Hamas, purported negative influence on Lebanon's domestic politics, and long-standing "non-peace" with neighboring Israel.

The February 2005 assassination of the Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafik al-Hariri further alienated Arab and European support for Syria, and the United States withdrew its ambassador from Damascus in response to the killing. While Syria claimed it bore no responsibility, the regime was forced to end its 29-year military presence in Lebanon.

But if there's one thing the last two weeks have shown, it's that the Bush White House appears ready to discard its chief imperative—"don't talk to your enemies, especially not the evil ones"—in favor of a more conciliatory gesture: "Let's chat, even if we may not like you."

But it seems that Washington's move toward détente with Damascus is being strained again, and the latest flashpoint is Lebanon, or rather, the assassination of a political figure in Lebanon. The latest victim, Maj. Gen. Francois Al-Hajj, drove past a car packed with 35 kilos of TNT, which exploded, killing him and three of his colleagues.

Hajj's killing marks the first act of political violence in Lebanon since the end of President Émile Lahoud's term in late November and the country's ensuing political impasse over his succession. Hajj, who led the Lebanese military operation against the al-Qaida-linked militant group Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr El-Barid refugee camp,

was a prime candidate to replace former army chief Michel Suleiman, who may be a compromise candidate to replace Lahoud.

The parliament's failure to elect someone for the position vacated by Lahoud has thrown Lebanon into its worst political crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

To become president, Suleiman has to step down from the army, and the constitution has to be amended to allow a recently retired public servant to take the post. In Lebanon's political system, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament a Shiite Muslim.

As many analysts have suggested, the United States has been trying to lure Syria back into the Arab fold, presumably willing to end Damascus's international isolation and woo it away from reliance on another regional adversary: Iran. Syria is Iran's closest Arab ally. The two countries have had warm relations since 1980, when Syria sided with Iran against Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.

"Ultimately, the United States can get more out of [Syrian President Bashar al] Assad in exchange for the Golan than it can by isolating him. If there are serious negotiations, Washington can demand that Assad stop interfering in Lebanon and Iraq, carry out domestic reforms, and drop Syria support for Hamas and other Palestinian groups that reject peace with Israel," wrote Mohamad Bazzi of the Council on Foreign Relations in the opinion pages of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The usual suspect in Lebanon's latest political killing, as befits the narrative, is Syria. Wrote journalist Robert Fisk in the British *Independent* newspaper: "The Lebanese Information Minister Ghazi Aridi blamed the Syrians for the assassination although, interestingly, and with great concern for his use of words, Walid Jumblatt, who has constantly blamed the Syrians for attacks on democratic politicians in Lebanon, did not do so. Nor did Marwan Hamadi, one of Mr. Jumblatt's parliamentary colleagues.

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“It seems, therefore, that Lebanese politics are changing once again and that those who were enemies of the Syrians are no longer necessarily so,” said Fisk.

Jumblatt, the current head of Lebanon’s Progressive Socialist Party and the most prominent leader of the Druze community, is also one of the most outspoken anti-Syrian politicians and supports the March 14 Alliance, a coalition of parties led by Saad Hariri, son of the elder Hariri.

In a letter to UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora on December 12 requested “technical assistance” from the International Investigation Commission, the body already investigating political attacks in Lebanon.

The same commission is investigating the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri.

Because there was general agreement between competing factions—usually described in the media as pro- and anti-Syrian—that Gen. Michel Suleiman will fill the vacated presidential seat, and being that Syrian behavior in Lebanon is a measure of its willingness to cooperate with the United States and the West, Syria’s direct involvement in the assassination is by no means an unequivocal fact. After all, al-Hajj, a Christian Maronite, was seen as quite friendly with Hezbollah and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun.

The Bush administration warned Syria last week not to interfere in Lebanese politics.

“Like the many victims before him, General al-Hajj was a supporter of Lebanon’s independence and an opponent of Syria’s interference in Lebanon’s internal affairs,” said Bush.

Meanwhile, Syria condemned the killing of Hajj. The official state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) cited an unidentified government official as saying the assassination targeted the Lebanese Army and it was Israel that benefited from the killing of a national figure. SANA noted that Israel blew up Hajj’s car in 1976 in southern Lebanon after he refused to cooperate with its allies.

While Annapolis may have opened the door to diplomacy, the realities on the ground suggest that Syria will not end its relationship with Iran, nor will it bend to international pressure for its influence—positive or malicious—in Lebanon.

Syrian President Assad last week rejected claims that Syria’s alliance with Iran would be weakened as a result of Damascus’s participation at Annapolis.

“I confirm, on this occasion, that relations will not be shaken for any reason or under any circumstances,” said Assad, according to SANA.

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