

IS SYRIA UNDERGOING CHANGE?

Dimitri DOMBRET
ESISC Research Associate

By way of introduction

During these past few years, and even more so during these past few months, the Syrian regime has engaged in a vast operation to win over the West. Both the amount of resources deployed and the variety of actions carried out have undoubtedly allowed Damascus to reposition itself on the diplomatic stage and to appreciably improve its image.

However, Syrian foreign policy is full of contradictions: its wish for peace with Israel but its alliances with Iran, Hamas Hezbollah which call for the destruction of the Jewish state; the claim to be a secular state which, nonetheless, does not prevent the regime from supporting Islamic terrorist groups in Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza. Meanwhile, at home, in particular with respect to human rights, the results in Syria are largely negative.

The goodwill shown by the regime seems above all to be dictated by short term objectives: to put an end to its isolation, to initiate a *détente* in inter-Arab relations, to maintain a certain equilibrium in Lebanon and, with the assistance of Turkey, to re-launch the process of peace negotiations with Israel. Will these initiatives take a durable form and be strengthened in the months and years to come? Has Syria really begun a major turn-around with the objective of repositioning itself on the regional scene? Is it ready for painful compromise? The present analytical essay will try to answer these difficult questions.

A brief historical reminder

Although it has a Sunni majority, Syria is a country of considerable ethnic diversity; 80% of the population is Sunni, with Druze and Alawite minorities at their sides. Syrian Islam remains relatively tolerant, since the Christians do not find the practice of their religion to be constrained. During the 1950s and '60s, Syria experienced secularisation of the urban and educated population of the country.

Damascus has been long under French influence.¹ Syria had to wait until 1946 to declare its independence. The first parliamentary elections which took place in 1932 did not truly free Syria, because the candidates were selected in advance by Paris. The period immediately after the independence was marked by permanent political instability which ended only with the accession to power of the late Hafez El-Assad in a coup d'état in 1970. After becoming Head of State, Hafez El-Assad decided to lay the foundation of an institutional stability via a constitution and a popular assembly, but also and above all by establishing a regime which one might characterise as 'dictatorial.'

Syrian foreign policy is mostly focused on its neighbours in the region. Its relations with Tehran took shape only during the time of tension in the 1970s between the Syrian President and the ruler of Baghdad, Saddam Hussein. The arrival of Syria on the scene in Lebanon in 1975 put an end to two years of civil war but the intense relations between Syria and Lebanon, which it considered to be its 'province,' deprived the Land of Cedars until recently of full and complete sovereignty due to the occupation by an army of more than 30,000 men for 30 years.

At the heart of relations between Syria and Iran

a. Hezbollah

In the space of just a few years, relations between Damascus and Tehran which started out as strategic were rapidly transformed into those between lord and vassal. To be sure, the Syrian regime is partly dependent economically on its big Iranian brother, but this dependence quickly opened the door to an ideological domination which is everywhere in Syria, principally in the Iranian cultural and religious institutions. The *Pasdaran*² have also infiltrated the Syrian army and Iran provides Syria with military equipment. Yet Iran has not compensated for the loss of Moscow, which, until the end of the '80s, covered nearly all of the expenses of the Syrian army (arms, training and funds).

Though Iran provides a lot of support to Hezbollah, Syria is also not insignificant. Over the years, both its political and military support have become essential to Hezbollah for its activities in South Lebanon.

In its relations with Syria, Hezbollah enjoys 3 advantages:

- Its integration in the Shiite community and its ability to mobilise, thanks to its discipline and its methods of clandestine settlement.
- The prohibition by Israel of the presence of the Syrian army south of the Litani.
- The support of a large part of the Iranian leadership with whom Syria does not want to confront³

Meanwhile, Hezbollah depends on Syria in different ways. In fact, the main access route for getting arms to the terrorist organisation passes through this country. In addition, Hezbollah

¹ The French mandate in Syria was established by the League of Nations on 25 April 1920 after the First World War. It was supposed to officially allow the states in the Arab world to gain independence and sovereignty as soon as they reached a sufficient level of political maturity and economic development. Four mandates were created: the government of Palestine and Iraq was turned over to the British; the French were allocated the mandates for Lebanon and Syria. In 1936, France and Syria signed a treaty of independence but in fact the mandate continued to exist, because France did not ratify the document. Syria declared its independence from Vichy France in 1944.

² The *Pasdaran* are collectively called the Revolutionary Guards. This is a parallel army to the regular Iranian army which reports directly to the Revolutionary Guide.

³ E. Kheir, *'The long march of Hezbollah: from total refusal to integration'* in *Le Débat Stratégique*, March 2000, n°49, CIRPES, Paris, p. 2.

owes a large part of its legitimacy in Lebanon to Syria. The latter has dissuaded the Lebanese government from curbing the political predominance of Hezbollah. Finally it benefits from the assistance and political support of the authorities in Damascus. Though Syria has been supporting the 'Party of God' ever since the Taef Accords,⁴ they have nonetheless not constantly shared the same positions. Thus, during the war of the camps (1984-1987), Hezbollah went as far as to clash with the Syrian army which was supporting the Amal movement. However that may be, this dependence enables Syria to use Hezbollah to serve its own interests even though many ideological differences can lead these two actors to disagreement over the goals, strategy and tactics.

In fact, the ideological platforms are nearly antagonistic. The doctrine of Hezbollah is based on extreme religious fundamentalism, whereas the Syrian Establishment is secular, socialist and nationalist. Syria prefers to reach a more pragmatic goal (the withdrawal of Israel from the Golan Heights) by negotiation as it recognises the danger of the conflict escalating to the regional level. These differences explain the risks incurred by Hezbollah in its dependence on Syria.

Moreover, differences have also appeared between the two protectors of the Shiite movement. In 1999, the government in Damascus, which wanted a truce to allow the government of Ehoud Barak to re-launch the peace process, reacted in a muscular fashion towards Tehran, which had just incited Hezbollah to escalation. The latter led to violent Israeli reprisals against Lebanese targets. Meanwhile, the summer 2007 war between Hezbollah and Israel shows that despite ideological differences Damascus remains an important support for Hezbollah. The day after the war, as Nassir Al-Assaad explained: *'While difficult negotiations with Israel over the cease-fire were still underway, we already began to understand that a danger was threatening us inside Lebanon.'*⁵

'Victory' is the object of all desire, particularly on the part of the pro-Syrian movement, which hopes to use it to retake the initiative. By leading Hezbollah 'alone' into combat with Israel, Hassan Nasrallah touched off an unprecedented mobilisation of the Arab world for the Shiite cause. Transcending the Sunni-Shiite divide, he succeeded in creating a real mobilisation by uniting the masses around the Islamic aspect of his organisation and rejecting the Lebanese state: *[a] state which we loathe and which we revile with the worst insults, [a] state which has shown itself to be a traitor and powerless, [a] state which gives up before Israel and America.*⁶ This is an "aura" which the partisans of Damascus in Lebanon did not stop using to apply pressure on the Lebanese government of Rafic Hariri while trying to increase the representation of Hezbollah.

b. Inter-Islamic rapprochement

The Damascus-Tehran partnership has turned out to be problematic on a number of occasions. The announcement of an 'official alliance' in 2006 between the two represents a heavy 'price' for Damascus because this alliance comes at the expense of its relations with the Arab countries in the region. As a recent report of the ICG explains: *'Strengthening ties with Iran affects relations with the Arab countries and undermines a fundamental strategic interest of the state. In fact, underlining the Arab character is of special importance for a*

⁴ The Taef Accord signed on 22 October 1989 abolished the national pact of 1943 by reducing the powers of the Head of State, the Prime Minister and the President of the Assembly. This accord establishes the abandonment of political community principles as an essential national objective. The accord involves disarming the militias and regrouping of Syrian troops on the Bekaa Plain.

⁵ *'Should we fear a coup d'état in Beirut?'* by Nassir AL-Assaad in Al Mustaqbal cited by the *Courrier International*, n°825 –24 August 2006.

⁶ *'Nasrallah Super-Hero: Analysis – How do we explain such a success?'* by Dala Al-Bizri in *Courrier International* –n°825 –24 August 2006

regime with Baathist foundations and a pan-Arab ideology, with a regional role as champion of Arab causes remaining a crucial source of legitimacy, with a need for a minimum of Arab coordination of the peace process, with a fear of the emergence and spread of sectarianism, and with a hunger for more economic investments coming from the Gulf (...)'⁷

Despite the differences between Sunnis and Shiites, the religious authorities in Tehran have redoubled their efforts at developing an inter-Islamic rapprochement. From the authorisation given to Shiite believers to pray behind Sunni Imams and the crisis over caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed as well as support for the Palestinian cause, the Iranian leaders encourage this inter-Islamic convergence through unifying themes such as anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism. And it must be admitted that in many instances this 'pan-Islamic diplomacy' – to use the expression of Pierre Pahlavi⁸ – has functioned very well within the Sunni world. This is in particular what pushes the moderate Arab countries to exercise great care since the original mission of revolutionary Islam is to bring into its wake the various Shiite communities in: '*a revolution aiming at the general Islamisation of the world and the triumph of Shiite truth.*'⁹ This desire for exporting the faith, albeit utopian and limited despite some successes is still considered to be a threat.

The two nations have opted for a 'critical dialogue.' The Syrians and Iranians have banked on the victory of Barack Obama, because the Democratic candidate allowed an overture after a period of demonisation fostered by the Republicans. However, Tehran remains very critical towards a diplomatic overture by the Americans to Damascus because the Iranians would lose one of their most precious allies in the region.

The statements of Iranian Vice President Parviz Davoudi last year when he called upon Syria to show greater caution vis-à-vis the enemies were not innocent and came at a moment when Syrian foreign policy experienced a sort of feverishness as we shall see in the next chapters: setting up contact with Saudi Arabia, at least relative reconciliation with Egypt and the wish on the part of the Americans to test the goodwill of the Syrians.¹⁰ We can corroborate that Iran is concerned that these 'international overtures' might dissipate its relations with Syria. In this regard, we have to view the efforts made by Teheran to ensure the loyalty of its long time protégée.

Syria and Lebanon: three decades of relations in conflict and a return to the status quo ante!

Nostalgic for a Greater Syria, Damascus has never truly accepted an independent Lebanon. Under the French mandate, the autonomy of Lebanon vis-à-vis Damascus was always growing and this ended in effective independence in 1945.

Syrian forces occupied Lebanon for thirty years. Although the troops of Damascus completely left the Land of Cedars four years ago, one has to say that Syrian influence has not disappeared, quite the contrary. In the past few years, Syria has reminded everyone to what extent its grip remains in place: its role in the coordination of anti-Western attacks in Beirut following the publication of the caricatures of Mohammed by a Danish newspaper (setting

⁷ International Crisis Group, '*Reshuffling the cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*,' Middle East Report N°92 – 14 December 2009.

⁸ Pierre Pahlavi, '*The place of Shiites in the grand strategy of Iran*,' Geopolitics of the Black Sea : the issues and prospects, Défense nationale et sécurité collective, August –September 2008.

⁹ Thierry Dufour, '*The influence of Iran through the Shiite movement – Modus operandi, success and limits of the pro-Shiite Iranian policy*,' <http://www.diploweb.com>, octobre 2006.

¹⁰ Tariq Al-Homayed, '*Rififi between Damascus and Tehran*,' Courier International, Thursday, 12 March 2009, p.25.

fire to the Danish Embassy, etc...), its assumed role in many political assassinations via its security services which are still active in Lebanon. The wounds of this occupation are today still very visible.

However, the meeting in December 2009 between Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the Syrian President Bashar El-Assad in Damascus marked a turning point in the Lebanese policy of these past few years as the parties themselves indicated. The Syrian press agency SANA reports that the leaders viewed: *'this visit as a point of departure to restore cooperation between the governments of Syria and Lebanon.'*¹¹

The leader of the Alliance of 14th March who was elected in June 2009 on an anti-Syrian programme, Saad Hariri was forced to silence the critics, but a large part of the Lebanese press stress the major concession which this visit to Damascus represented considering the role, unclear at the very least, of Syria in the assassination of the father of the present Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, in February 2005.

The Syrians consider that they had nothing to do with the assassination of Rafic Hariri and analyse this meeting as something natural, knowing that all Lebanese Prime Ministers have traveled to Damascus since the 1940s.¹²

Saad Hariri understood very well that if he wanted to continue to govern in Lebanon, he could not avoid having good relations with Damascus, which controls a certain number of the Lebanese political actors. In fact, without the anointment of Damascus his position would be damaged vis-à-vis his pro-Syrian interlocutors, whether they be Hezbollah or the Patriotic Movement of General Michel Aoun, leader of the Maronite Christian community. In order to govern a multi-community country where the institutions reflect the religious equilibrium, Hariri cannot allow himself to be at odds with the Shiites and the Maronite Christians.

Hariri tried together with his supporters in the Alliance of 14th March to break the Hezbollah fighters in the streets of Beirut by force in May 2008. His militia was swept aside in several hours, proving the might of Syria and its allies on the ground. These clashes began following the attempt of the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to dismantle the network of telecommunications managed by Hezbollah at the international airport of Beirut.¹³

After failed attempts to dispose of Hezbollah, Hariri decided to bring them to court, as well as their Syrian mentor, all of which explains his visit to Damascus with great ceremony.

Following his victory in the parliamentary elections of June 2009, Hariri directly organised a meeting of reconciliation with Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, and gave in to the demands of the Party of God, accepting in particular the list of candidates for ministerial appointment presented by the pro-Syrian Christian General Michel Aoun and offering 11 ministries to the circles close to Hezbollah and Syria, including the strategic positions of Telecommunications and Foreign Affairs. In addition, a veritable right of veto over all legislation was offered to Hezbollah. All of these concessions by Hariri to the enemy of yesterday led to great tension with his partners in the Alliance of 14th March, in particular the Christian leaders Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel.

Overall, one may consider that Syria and its allies have succeeded in re-establishing the status quo which prevailed in the 1990s¹⁴ and in marginalising the anti-Syrian opposition in Lebanon despite its victory in the elections of June 2009. It is remarkable that personalities

¹¹ CNN, *'Lebanon and Syria move to thaw relations,'* Beirut, December 20, 2009.

¹² Asia Times, *'Hariri's Syria visit sets Lebanon on track,'* Sami Moubayed, December 23, 2009.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ When Rafic Hariri was Prime Minister, a tacit agreement existed between Syria and Lebanon by which Rafic Hariri ruled Lebanon with the support of Hezbollah, which in return obtained, on the one hand, the right to a place within Lebanese institutions and, on the other hand, the right to keep its arms, officially to 'fight the Israelis.'

like Prime Minister Hariri, leader of the Alliance of 14th March, General Michel Aoun, who fought the Syrians 20 years earlier and the Druze leader Whalid Joumblatt all seem ready to accept the re-establishment of Syrian suzerainty over Lebanon. One might conclude that Syria succeeded in coming back into Lebanese politics via the front door and that this small country is more than ever under its influence. As Syrian Vice President Farouk Al Shara said, the mark of Syria on Lebanon is stronger today than when it had its troops deployed there!¹⁵

Syria and Hamas

On 24 January 2009, the Syrian President congratulated Khaled Mechaal – the head of the political branch of Hamas who was living in asylum in Damascus – on the ‘legendary victory’¹⁶ of the Islamist movement following operation Cast Lead conducted by Israel in Gaza during the month of January 2009: ‘*The Syrian President emphasised that it was the duty of his country to support the resistance and that Syria would continue to do so until the national objectives of the Palestinians were achieved: to put an end to the occupation and to create an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.*’¹⁷

The regime in Damascus and Hamas maintain an ambiguous relationship. Though opposed to Islamic extremism – let us remember that Syria is secular – it uses its support for Hamas against Israel and the United States. Not content just to offer asylum to Khaled Mechaal, who coordinates the general policy of the terrorist movement within the country, Syria provides training to the militia of the Issedine al-Qassam Brigades; arms, explosive devices, rockets, etc.¹⁸ In this respect, it is interesting to denote the increased range and lethality of Hamas’ rockets, based on the modus operandi of Hezbollah.

Moreover, the leaders of Hamas have often looked to Damascus for the basic training of its men. It is believed that thousands of fighters have been likely trained in Syria by instructors who themselves learned their techniques in Iran.

Syria and Iraq

a. Financial support and logistics for the Jihad

Although financing several attacks does not require great amounts of money, it is not the same for maintaining a cell capable of recruiting and organising terrorist attacks. In fact, such an infrastructure and everything encompassing it requires very large funding. Today there can be no doubt that Syria has financed and probably continues to finance terrorist operations in Iraq blow by blow.

In October 2007, American troops operating in Sinjar (an Iraqi city near the Syrian border) captured documents which *in fine* make it possible to identify a terrorist cell supporting al-Qaida. The ‘Abu Ghadiyah’ network, named for its leader, controlled the whole chain of sending terrorists into Iraq: the movement of funds, arms and explosives, passports, hideouts, etc.

Though according to certain sources¹⁹ Syria collaborated on an American raid which eliminated Abu Ghadiyah in October 2008, the fight against terrorism is not, a priori, the main reason which prompted Damascus in this case. In fact, it would appear that the Syrian authorities were convinced that Abu Ghadiyah would have turned against them, especially given his hostility towards the secular regime in Damascus. Meanwhile, the main causes of Syrian support for terrorism are found elsewhere:

¹⁵ CBS News, ‘*Syria Seen Regaining Its Influence In Lebanon,*’ Beirut, October 2, 2009.

¹⁶ CBS News, ‘*Syria Congratulates Hamas on Gaza "Victory"*’, January 24, 2009.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ The Sunday Times, ‘*Hamas wages Iran’s proxy war on Israel,*’ Marie Colvin, March 9, 2008

¹⁹ The Sunday Times, November 2, 2008.

- First of all, there is Syria's wish to undermine efforts at forming a coalition in Iraq, an objective which it shares with the extremist Islamist insurgents as well as with the former members of the regime. This is a barely concealed desire, since a large number of passports seized by Coalition Forces in Iraq from 'candidate terrorists' coming from Syria bore visas saying 'volunteer for the Jihad' or 'going to join the Arab volunteers.'²⁰
- The large-scale smuggling operations on the border with Iraq benefits largely the Syrian regime since the "employment" arising from this trafficking generates sufficient revenue to: *'exonerate the central government of all investments in isolated areas during times of economic crisis.'*²¹ The day after the intervention of the Coalition, part of the colossal fortune of Saddam Hussein was found to be managed by the half-brother of the Iraqi leader, Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan al-Tikriti, the former head of the intelligence services. He was considered by the Americans to be the financial brain and the facilitator of the insurrection in Syria.
- Despite an appreciable reduction in the flow of insurgents mainly due to the increased efforts of the Syrian authorities, Damascus has never benefited from any lifting of sanctions – even partial – imposed ever since the country was placed on the list of terrorist states by the United States. Thus one can understand why the Syrian authorities are hesitant to get more involved in the fight against terrorism which is launched from their soil.

Syria and Saudi Arabia

After the opening of a Saudi embassy in the Syrian capital, the visit of King Abdallah to Damascus in October 2009 and then that of Bashar El-Assad to Saudi Arabia at the beginning of 2010 can be considered to be diplomatic victories for the Syrian President who became persona non grata in the international community following the presumed involvement of Syria in the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005.

In fact, apart from the West's making Syria an outlaw, the countries of the region, including Saudi Arabia, also 'ostracised' Damascus. This period of tension culminated in 2006 during the Israeli offensive in Lebanon, when Bashar El-Assad spoke of the Arab regimes as 'half-men' given their tepid support for Hezbollah, the armed wing of Iran in the Mashrek. Lebanon was the battlefield of this latent war, in particular when combat broke out in the Palestinian camp of Nahr El Bared near Tripoli in May-June 2007, as Lebanese government forces clashed with the extremist Sunnis of the Fatah Al Islam, which Syria accused of being supported by Saudi Arabia.

In March 2008, relations between Damascus and Riyadh had deteriorated to such an extent that the Saudi authorities recalled their ambassador to the Syrian capital and boycotted the summit of the Arab League in Damascus, delivering a personal affront to Bashar El-Assad²². However, a number of factors brought the two countries back together since then. Though Syria resisted the attempts of the Bush Administration and of Saudi Arabia to isolate it politically, it confronted enormous economic challenges. Syria wishes to move from having a Soviet style economic system to a market economy, and its objective is to fashion itself into a regional industrial and logistics hub. In order to do this, it needs the capital of the Saudis and the know-how of the Westerners. The corollary is to have better diplomatic relations with both.

²⁰ Testimony of Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of State for American Defense before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, *'Helping Win the War on Terror,'* on 9 September 2003, Washington D.C.

²¹ Matt Levitt, *'Syria's Financial Support for Jihad,'* The Middle East Quarterly, on 21 January 2010.

²² The National, *'New chapter for Syria-Saudi relations,'* Phil Sands, July 10, 2009

Thus, Syria launched a charm campaign vis-à-vis the Saudis and Westerners, dumping ballast on a whole range of points, opening an embassy in Beirut – thereby recognising, at least symbolically, Lebanese sovereignty – accepting the electoral defeat of its allies in Lebanon, and, as we mentioned above, slowing down the flow of foreign fighters heading for Iraq via its territory.

For its part, over these past few years Riyadh became increasingly anxious over the Iranian grip on the region. The Persian and Shiite will to dominate is both a religious and ethnic challenge to Saudi Arabia, which is Arab by definition, but also the champion of rigid and doctrinaire Sunni Islam which considers the Shiites to be heretics. In this regard, let us recall that despite their secular nature, Syrian leaders hail from the Alawite sect, a branch of Shiite faith. The Saudis are thus very sensitive of a potential arrangement between Syria and Iran to extend Shiite influence in the region.

Iran has in fact skillfully exploited the customary divisions in the Arab world, allying itself with the radical anti-Israeli movements (Hamas and Hezbollah), in concert with Syria. On the other hand, the development of a military nuclear programme by the Iranians increases still more the concerns of its Arab neighbours and Saudi Arabi in the end decided that it could no longer allow itself the luxury of a confrontation with Syria.²³

In the view of Peter Harling, an analyst in the International Crisis Group, what Saudi Arabia is seeking via its rapprochement with Damascus is to re-establish its image as regional leader since the Saudi Kingdom was somewhat discredited in the eyes of the Arab world by its closeness to the Bush Administration and by its overtures to Israel. On the Syrian side, while relations with the USA and the European Union are improving, it has lacked an Arab guarantee of this policy of détente, and that is precisely what rapprochement with Riyadh can offer it, as well as bringing in fresh capital for its economy.’²⁴

However, it is not certain that these Saudi approaches will result in something concrete, since Damascus is engaged in a double game more than ever before: rather than distancing themselves from Tehran, at the end of last year the Syrians gave Iran the green light to enlarge its embassy in Damascus, which is already the largest the Islamic Republic has in the region.

Thus we may consider that the visit of King Abdallah to Damascus is at best no more than an indicator that tensions are temporarily reduced. This is a simple ‘movement in a grand game,’ as Peter Harling recently said. The grand game remains more than ever marked by the duplicity of Damascus.

The position of the international community towards Syria

a. France

The relations between France and Syria are rooted in a multi-secular past. After a period of break in relations and especially hot confrontation between Paris and Damascus following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri²⁵ the renewal of ties is still uncertain and difficult, despite the accession to power of a French President who is disposed to dialogue, pragmatic and careful to distinguish himself from his predecessor.

²³ The Time, ‘ *Rapprochement Between Syria and Saudi Arabia ?* ‘ Andrew Lee Butters, October 8, 2009

²⁴ CBS News, ‘ *Better Syria-Saudi Ties Could Ease Mideast Tension* , October 9, 2009

²⁵ Rafic Hariri was a close friend of Chirac. His assassination was generally blamed on Syria. The Israeli press even mentioned the fact that Chirac asked Tsahal to push its offensive right to Damascus during its last action in Lebanon in 2006 in exchange for support to Israel in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian disputes.

See :<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/121878>

Unlike the United States, which believes that it can introduce democracy in an Arab country using military force to overthrow local potentates, France generally prefers to cooperate with them, hoping that they will become more kindly vis-à-vis the West and to harvest, on the side, the fruits of this relationship for the benefit of French companies.²⁶

French experience is characterised not by some pre-established plan but rather by pragmatism and flexibility as well as by periods of real closeness and by radical breaks in relations. Given the domination of the United States on the international stage, this pragmatic policy also allows France to adopt its customary Gaullist posture by appreciably distancing itself from the American strategy in the Arab world.²⁷

President Sarkozy already announced his wish to draw closer to certain Arab pariah states by resuming ties with the Libyan Mouammar Kadhafi, who was invited to Paris in December 2007 and with whom contracts worth billions of Euros were signed on behalf of French companies.

With respect to Syria, Paris believes that boycotts have never borne fruit. According to Paris, this approach has on the contrary prompted further radicalisation of the Syrian regime and a refusal on its part to act in accordance with many demands from the West and from the United Nations which were opposed to it. All of this took place against the background of chaos in Iraq and suffices to remind us about the precautions which must be taken when making any attempt at regime change by force in an Arab country.²⁸

Following an initial visit of the Syrian President to France in July 2008 and two trips of the President of the French Republic to Syria in September 2008 and January 2009, Syrian President Bashar El-Assad visited France again from 12 to 14 November 2009. This visit took place after that of Bernard Kouchner to Damascus on 11 and 12 July and that of his Syrian counterpart to Paris from 29 September to 1st October. For her part, Christine Lagarde, Minister of the Economy, went to Syria on 17 December 2009. These numerous mutual visits between France and Syria illustrate the will of France to resume contact with Damascus.

For the moment, the French diplomatic offensive with respect to Syria has not accrued in any real and tangible political results for Paris. The results have been essentially economic, assistance to restructuring the Syrian economy and via the signing of contracts (particularly in the domain of energy, transportation and construction²⁹). In fact, the economy of the country, which was built on the Soviet model, has been hit by senescence and can not absorb the massive arrival of new generations onto the labour market.

On the Syrian side, by playing the card of rapprochement with France, Damascus has shown its desire to enlarge its array of strategic alliances. Via his relationship with France, the Syrian President also wants to strengthen an institutionalised partnership with the EU, given that an EU-Syrian agreement of association was signed in October 2009. Bashar El-Assad never misses an opportunity to call upon the Europeans to show more 'political independence.' In the view of the Syrian President: *'the Europeans are completely aligned with the USA, to the detriment of Syria. A partner must be a friend and we have not seen this kind of behaviour on the part of Europe over these past few years.'*³⁰

²⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Engage in dialogue with Damascus? Lessons from the French experience.', Briefing Moyen-Orient N°27, 15 January 2009.

²⁷ BBC News, 'France and Syria: A tangled history,' September 7, 2004.

²⁸ Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS), «France-Syria: a zero-sum game,' Barah Mikail, December 2008.

²⁹ La Méditerranée, 'The visit of Sarkozy to Damascus, diplomatic but also economic,' 9 September 2008 .

³⁰ AlJazeera.net, 'France meets Syria over peace plan,' November 13, 2009

For France, apart from trade, the bet is on the following: a closer relationship with Damascus could allow it to re-assume influence in the Levant and to try to establish itself as a major actor in regional questions, whether they be stability in Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Iranian problem. However, it must remember that ever since the accession to power of Hafez El-Assad in the 1970s Syria has been an uncontrollable element in Middle Eastern politics. Damascus has perfected the art of reversing its alliances and fomenting trouble in neighbouring countries. Ever since his death in 2000, Hafez El-Assad has been replaced by his son Bashar, an ophthalmologist educated in the United Kingdom who was believed not to be very well informed on the subtleties of regional politics. But a person who was thought to be unable to show the skills and Macchiavellian ways of his father has proven that he is a cunning diplomat.³¹

b. The United States of America

In June 2009, the USA made a notable "upgrade" in its diplomatic relations with Syria. President Obama announced the dispatch of an ambassador to Damascus, the first since the recall of the American ambassador following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri³².

This decision followed a fruitful exploratory mission by Senator John Kerry and also by George Mitchell, the American President's Special Envoy for the Middle East and Jeffrey Feltman, a high official of the State Department in charge of the Middle East, accompanied by a member of the National Security Council, Daniel Shapiro. In the view of the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations: *'these discussions, their quality and their level of engagement are without precedent over the last 8 years.'*³³ In the wake of these visits, the Syrian authorities gave signs of good will, in particular by taking measures aimed at slowing the flow of Islamist fighters heading for Iraq via Syria.

Rather than proposing big regional bargaining, the approach of Feltman relied on a series of precise points: Syrian support to the Iraqi insurgents, to Hamas and to Hezbollah; attempts at destabilizing Lebanon and a possible Syrian programme of developing weapons of mass destruction. Progress on these issues was made a precondition for any resumption of complete diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria, the cancellation of the sanctions and American support for direct negotiations with Israel over the Golan. Until now, the attitude of Damascus has been disappointing. While there has been appreciable progress on control over the Syrian-Iraqi border, one must say that the 3 other topics have remained at a stand-still.

However, it is still too early to announce a setback or the success in warming of American-Syrian ties. In fact, firstly the sense of time is not the same in Damascus as in Washington: Bashar is President for life, whereas an American President is only there for a limited term in office. Secondly, there can be no doubt that Damascus will draw things out in order to avoid having to choose between its alliance with Iran and its friendly relations with the Americans, even if the latter are betting – somewhat naively – on a deterioration of this relationship given Syria's opening to the West.³⁴

Overall, we can conclude that the present approach of the American Administration vis-à-vis Syria is characteristic of a phase of taking stock and re-examining its foreign policy in the region: shuttles of modern-day 'missi dominici,' special envoys and high functionaries who go to Damascus, speak, listen and report back to Washington, where a new policy still does not seem to have been determined by the Department of State or by the National Security

³¹ The Nation, *'Syria's Dangerous Gambits,'* November 12, 2007

³² The USA was now represented there by only a chargé d'affaires

³³ CNN Politics.com, *'U.S. to send ambassador back to Syria,'* Elise Labott, June 23, 2009

³⁴ The Time, *'Despite U.S. Outreach, Syria Affirms Iran Ties,'* May 07, 2009

Council. The future will tell us whether the American intent is purely tactical, hoping to win concessions on a limited number of points, or if a new strategic deal is taking shape. However, Washington must realise that it will be very difficult to break the solidarity between Syria and its Iranian mentor.³⁵

The situation of human rights in Syria

The situation of human rights in Syria was already appalling and deteriorated further in 2009. The state of emergency imposed back in 1963 is still in effect and allows the intelligence agencies to arrest and hold individuals without a warrant. The year 2009 was also when trials resumed in the Supreme Court of State Security after a suspension of 8 months. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, to cite just the biggest international organisations defending human rights; have unanimously criticized the deplorable situation in Syria at the moment when the country is otherwise instituting ‘reforms.’

While a trial of five members of the Kurdish minority resumed last December, Malcom Smart, Director of the programme for North Africa and the Middle East of Amnesty International said with respect to the Supreme Court of State Security: *‘[It] has not shown any willingness to respect the rights of the accused to be defended and to have a fair trial. It has not ordered the opening of inquests into the allegations of torture and has not confronted the directors of the security forces. It has lost all credibility. It should be abolished and persons accused of crimes, especially political crimes, should have fair trials and be protected against any act of torture or other maltreatment.’*³⁶

Arbitrary arrests and the iniquitous trials of political opponents or activists from civil society are unfortunately not the only violations of human rights in Syria. In effect:

- Syria has no independent press; politically sensitive sites are hit by censure, and restrictions are imposed on the social networks like Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Blogger ;
- Torture remains an ongoing practice used by the security and intelligence services;
- The minorities – essentially the Kurds – are constantly the object of discrimination and repression. Last November, Human Right Watch devoted a long and well documented report to the situation of the Kurds in Syria.³⁷ It explains in particular that repression is not focused solely on political activists but also extends well beyond that. Five years after the ‘Kurdish intifada’³⁸ which saw clashes between the security forces and Kurdish demonstrators in many cities and in the North of Syria, the report details how repression towards the minority has been strengthened in many domains: suppression of demonstrations, repression of cultural celebrations,

³⁵ Brookings, ‘*On a New Footing: U.S.-Syria Relations,*’ Bilal Y. Saab, March 19, 2009

³⁶ Amnesty International, ‘*Syria: the trial of five Kurd risks becoming ‘a parody of justice,’* 15 December 2009.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘*Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria,*’ November 2009.

³⁸ In March 2004, many Kurdish cities and villages organised demonstrations (some of them violent) to protest against the treatment given to the Kurdish minority. Though these demonstrations came directly after clashes between security forces and football fans, they were the result of grievances accumulated over the years by the Kurdish community relating to their cultural rights and the discrimination to which they were exposed. The central government took fright at the extent of the Kurdish mobilisation and responded with force. According to Human Rights Watch, the clashes caused 36 deaths – mostly Kurds –, as well as 160 injured and 2000 were arrested and made to undergo acts of torture.

repressions during events to support or show solidarity with Kurds in Iraq and in Turkey, repression of Kurdish commemorative events, etc.

- For years we remain without news about the fate of many dozens of Lebanese who opposed the Syrian presence in their country, those who 'disappeared' in the jails of Damascus.

By way of conclusion

Despite Syria's wish to be well respected throughout the international community, its close ties with Iran forced it to keep a low profile. It is the conviction of Damascus that by adapting a discrete and non-confrontational, it could emerge from its isolation. In turn, this could ensure its ascendancy in the region and secure access to resources, allowing Syria to develop its economy, which has longtime been blighted by its 'socialist' experiment. At the same time, we have seen that the Syrian regime was sowing trouble in Iraq, supports Palestinian militia opposed to a peace with Israel, dominates more than ever its little Lebanese neighbour and continues to flout human rights – particularly by repressing its Kurdish minority. The demarches of Damascus have up to now borne fruit: for a country which has no energy resources in a region which is overflowing with them and which has little economic dynamism, the Arab Republic of Syria has managed to succeed in promoting its strategic position at the heart of the Middle East.

However, we must not forget that like the Iraq of Saddam hitherto, Syria is trying to develop weapons of mass destruction, supports terrorism, has an annoying tendency to intervene in the affairs of its neighbours and is oppressed by an illegitimate Baathist dictator who uses violence to keep himself in power.³⁹

All together, these elements form an explosive cocktail which imposes those in favour of unconditional negotiation with Syria to reconsider. Syria is beyond doubt an unavoidable regional actor but unless it changes its positions it seems utopian – even irresponsible – to move ahead 'as if nothing were wrong.'

Copyright © ESISC 2010

³⁹ The Middle-East Quarterly, 'When Rogues Defy Reason: Bashar's Syria,' Max Abrahms, Fall 2003.