

SYRIA: AMERICA'S NEW ALLY?

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Syria's participation in the international coalition meant that the Middle East's most radically anti-Western, nationalist regime had allied itself with the United States against a fellow Arab state. Surprising as it was, the move brought many advantages to the Assad regime—winning it a freer hand in Lebanon and dramatically improved relations with the West. The Syrian decision is best understood against the background of the two shocks that took place in 1989-90.

The Two Shocks

Nineteen eighty-nine revealed the Soviet Union's decline and the end of communist government throughout Eastern Europe—a double blow to the Syrian regime. As the USSR's leading client state in the Middle East, Syria felt the effects of Soviet decline in the form of decreased arms sales. While military cooperation continued on a superficial level—military advisers were exchanged, ports shared, etc.—Syria had lost its primary sponsor in its bid for strategic parity with Israel.

The loss of Eastern Europe also had a profound impact on Assad. In addition to the loss of commercial, educational and military exchanges, the fall of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe made Assad, like the rest

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of the world's despots, fearful for their own political security. Thus, after the fall of the communist regime in Romania, Assad suddenly re-established relations with Egypt, toned down his anti-U.S. rhetoric, appeared to soften his stance against Israel, sponsored the Ta'if Accords, and took a number of modest steps toward domestic liberalization.

The second shock came in August of 1990, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. While this development had both positive and negative implications for the regime, the crisis ultimately enhanced Syria's position in the region. Militarily, the Iraqi defeat enhanced Syria's standing in the Arab East. Politically, it allowed him to switch to a pro-Western stance without cost. Economically, it brought a windfall thanks to the sharp

rise in oil prices and the economic aid that flowed to Damascus from grateful Gulf and Western states.

Syria and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Once the war was over, there were hopes that Syria would participate in a U.S.-backed peace process. This is of critical importance, for there is little chance for any settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, or even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, without full Syrian cooperation. Unfortunately, despite its apparent smile toward the West, Syria remains essentially intransigent on this issue. If they have given up their insistence on a strictly "international conference," and demonstrated some willingness to move beyond merely ending the state of belligerency, there has been a hardening on the issue of partial solutions, with Syria now demanding a resolution of the Palestinian problem prior to its conciliation with Israel. Furthermore, neither Syria nor Israel seem prepared to make a deal on the Golan Heights, and there can be no peace between the two states without such a deal.

Domestic constraints on the Alawite regime, which is drawn from a small and much-despised minority, are as stringent now as they were before the war, if not more so. Assad's regime rules over perhaps the most anti-Zionist Arab population in the Middle East outside of the Palestinians themselves, and its rhetoric against Israel must be maintained. Syria's alliance with the U.S. coalition tarnished the regime's anti-imperialist credentials, making movement toward peace with Israel even more costly than previously.

U.S. Policy Toward Syria

While it is true that there is much to gain from improved relations with Syria, we must pursue them on our terms. Secretary of State Baker has given Assad the benefit of the doubt since August 1990, and while this may be useful and necessary, the fact remains that Syrians need the United States more than it needs them. We now retain a great deal of influence over the USSR and the Gulf states—two sources that have traditionally fuelled and funded the regime's military build-up. The U.S. may now be able to use economic pressure as means to influence Syrian policy, both in relations with Israel and on a number of issues including human rights and terrorism.

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