

THE MIDEAST

The Syrian situation

Clinton sends Assad the wrong signal

BY DANIEL PIPES

The score in the Arab-Israeli peace process is now two down, one on the way and one to go.

In other words, the Egyptians signed a peace treaty with Israel 15 years ago and the Jordanians followed suit last week. Some of the Palestinians have agreed to take the first steps toward peace with Israel. That leaves only the Syrians — which isn't wholly surprising, for their leader, Hafez Assad, is a wily, tough negotiator.

President Clinton made a 5-hour visit to Damascus Thursday in hopes of getting the Syrians to make a commitment to end the conflict with Israel. Before assessing the results of his visit, it is important to understand how it fits into a larger context.

Assad has so dominated the public life of Syria for a quarter-century that it's hardly an exaggeration to say the political debate in that country consists of the contending ideas in his head. He consults others, to be sure, but in the end, he alone makes the key decisions. So tightly does he control Syria, it is

said that no two camels can meet in the desert without the president knowing within an hour.

Assad has for many years ruled Syria in the Soviet style. The whole of society is militarized: Sixth-graders wear army fatigues in class and learn how to dismantle automatic weapons. He presides over a ubiquitous cult of personality. Regime slogans are repeated endlessly in schoolbooks, on radio and television shows, in movies and virtually every other public source of information.

On the international level, Syria used to have an assigned part to play in the "socialist division of labor." In return, the leadership in Damascus gained much from the Soviet Union, including weapons, military training, intelligence, financial aid, political support and diplomatic cover. In addition, the leadership in Damascus gained psychological secu-

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Daniel Pipes is editor of Middle East Quarterly and author of a forthcoming book, "Syria Beyond the Peace Process" (Washington Institute for Near East Policy).



AP FILE PHOTO

A 30-foot statue of President Hafez Assad dominates a plaza in Damascus last week before President Clinton's arrival.

rity by participating in a global network.

A new era began for Assad in April 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev publicly signaled his intention to reduce Soviet support. The failure of the Soviet model and its complete collapse over the next four years turned the psychological benefit of belonging to a powerful international alliance into the liability of association with a losing team. It cut off Syria's advantageous trade relations with the Soviet bloc. It deprived Assad of his security umbrella and dealt a nearly mortal blow to his dream of attaining "strategic parity" with Israel.

As a supremely capable politician, the Syrian dictator responded to dreadful circumstances not by passively succumbing but by actively making changes in his domestic and foreign policies. He slightly eased up on his own population, starting in 1989, by letting the first of many political prisoners win their freedom. Political restrictions softened for the rest of the citizenry, too.

Despite these reversible and superficial improvements, Assad's rule in Syria remained deeply repressive. An individual enjoys precious few rights and continues to fear the state. The authorities made adjustments at the margin in hopes that these would prove sufficient.

In foreign policy, too, Assad made some superficial changes. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait induced Assad to put aside a lifetime of anti-Americanism in September 1990 and join the US-led coalition. He swallowed decades of anti-Zionist rhetoric in July 1991 and instructed Syrian diplomats to meet Israeli negotiators across a table at the US State Department.

At the same time, Assad also continued many of his ugly and bellicose policies. Syria remained Terror Central, home to many of the world's most dangerous groups. The Syrian republic belongs to a select list of states singled out by the US government as involved in drug trafficking. It frequently offers safe haven for Western criminals, with a specialization in fanatical Germans (Nazis and extreme leftists alike).

Damascus remains a hostile neighbor. Its troops occupy the whole of Lebanon. It supports the PKK, a Kurdish group that has caused death and destruction throughout much of southeastern Turkey. As for Israel, Assad continues his aggressive policies even as his diplomats sit across a table from Israelis. More than half the Syrian budget continues to go for military-related purposes. Syrian forces have engaged in impressive military buildups several times before, but the post-1991 effort has been unprecedented in size, quality and reach; for the first time, Syrian armaments challenge not just the Israel Defense Forces but Israel's civilian population.

The picture, in short, is one of reluctance and half-measures. In response to acute problems, Assad has changed his policies sufficiently to win Western favor. He gives the West just enough so that he not only averts sanctions but even wins a visit by the US president - a source of great prestige.

Assad's policies resemble those of Sad-

dam Hussein and Libya's leader, Col. Moammar Khadafy, but, by dint of his superior talents, he does not get punished as they do. For example, Washington deems missile acquisitions by those other states totally unacceptable, but it portrays Syria's as having a "defensive" purpose. The State Department points a finger at Baghdad and Tripoli for supporting terrorism but finds reasons to excuse Damascus.

In short, Assad has the political genius to induce US officials not only to play down his trespasses but also to work to redeem him and lure Syria into the family of nations. If Saddam is treated as the delinquent dispatched to reform school, Assad is the naughty child sent to his room without dessert. And other Western states, not surprisingly, then give him dessert.

But this can't work. To achieve real progress toward a Syria-Israel peace treaty, the US government has to get tough. We can no longer accept Assad's minuscule improvements. For results, we need to break with the old more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger policy toward Assad and replace it with something much more demanding: End your repression at home and your aggressiveness abroad.

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Assad would probably acquiesce to such demands, for alliance with the United States would bring him much that he seeks, including trade and aid, political legitimacy and an enhanced position vis-a-vis his opponents at home and abroad. In addition, the leadership in Damascus seems to harbor outlandish fears about US efforts to rule the world, making it inclined to get on the right side of history.

It's time, in short, to get tough with Assad. The US government should demand decisive and fundamental changes in Syrian behavior - no middle position and no excuses.

Unfortunately, this appears to be precisely what Clinton did not do during his visit to Damascus. He did not press Assad to end his support for terrorist groups, nor to pull his troops out of Lebanon, nor to cut back on the military buildup. Instead, Clinton focused on the details of the peace process with Israel - and even there he got nothing more than a vague assurance that Assad seeks "peaceful, normal relations" with Israel.

It appears that the visit is a setback for the effort to induce fundamental changes in Damascus. Rather than show the Syrian dictator he must mend his ways, it signaled that he can continue his bad old habits.