

# Syria in a dilemma over US' Middle East policy

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Relations between the US and Syria have deteriorated markedly in recent months. Last week the endorsement of the Syria Accountability Act (SAA) by the US Congress was prevented only at a request from the CIA. The SAA is a draft bill mandating economic sanctions against Syria if it does not suspend an alleged programme to develop weapons of mass destruction, refrain from supporting anti-US elements in Iraq and end its military presence in Lebanon.

The debate in Congress coincided with the killing of two Syrian villagers by US army fire near the border with Iraq. A similar incident took place on June 18 when American Special Forces attacked a Syrian border post injuring several people. This sustained pressure is intended to remind Syria of the new political realities in the region and force it to accept the change which took place in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Indeed, Syria had hoped that the US would not win the war against Iraq and is struggling to cope with the strategic change that resulted from it. In early April President Bashar Al Assad told the Lebanese newspaper, *Al Safir*, that he hoped the invasion of Iraq would fail and that "popular resistance" would prevent the US from controlling the country.

For many, Syria's position was, to say the least, an uncalculated defiance to US hegemony. There has been an attempt to explain this position on the grounds that Syria, by reason of being a hotbed of Arab nationalism, has always been paranoid about western designs to keep the Arabs weak and divided. This "paranoia" forced Syria to adopt anti-western policies during the Cold War. But Syria's policy on the Iraqi crisis has nothing to do with the legacy of the Cold War nor does it with the bitter experience of the colonial era. Syria's position can be explained solely on pragmatic grounds and in geopolitical terms which are directly related to its security dilemma.

After all, Syria supported the US-led war against Iraq in 1991 and participated in the Madrid peace conference and came close to cut a peace deal with the former Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. The ascendance of Benjamin Netanyahu to power in Israel put an end to Syria's hopes to regain the occupied Golan Heights. Protracted economic crises — as Arab financial aid dried up and oil prices plummeted in the international

market — also contributed to Syria's vulnerability. As a result, the Syrian government was forced to look for other options and Iraq was the only one available.

Syria has no love lost of the former Iraqi regime. For more than three decades relations between the two wings of the ruling Baath party in Damascus and Baghdad were shaped by mistrust and antagonism. In addition, the two countries were involved in numerous attempts and counter attempts to unseat one another. Syria also supported Iran in the eight-year war against Iraq, whereas Iraq backed the Lebanese anti-Syrian government of General Michel Aoun. One feature was, nevertheless, common between the two regimes is that of utmost pragmatism.

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Consequently, and from 1997, Syria and Iraq came to see one another as possible allies. The late Syrian President Hafez Al Assad started cautiously, but steadily, developing relations with his life-long enemy, Saddam Hussein. The ascendance of Assad's son, Bashar, to power hastened this process as the new president lacked the personal enmity which marked the relation between Saddam and his father.

Over the past few years Syria has been trying to develop its political and economic ties with Iraq but was careful not to provoke the US. The September 11, 2001 attacks provided Syria with a mixed fortune to proceed on a *quid pro quo* policy. Damascus supplied Washington with valuable information about Islamic activists; in return Washington turned a blind eye to the smuggling of Iraqi oil through Syria.

This tacit understanding did not last long as the Taliban regime crumbled quickly and Iraq became the focus of US policy. Syria and the US were also at pains to hide their differences concern-

ing the activities of Hizbullah and Hamas.

Relations between the two countries reached the point of confrontation over the UN Security Council resolution 1441, for which Syria, after long and painful arm-twisting, voted in favour. Syria also played an important role in aborting US attempts to secure another UN resolution that authorises the use of force against Iraq. When the US decided to abandon the UN process and go after Saddam, a clash of interests seemed inevitable. Syria could not but oppose the war and its policy was based on legitimate concerns.

From a strategic perspective, Syria is almost certain that the war against Iraq was fought by the US on behalf of Israel. A perception that cannot be easily dismissed since the invasion was planned and advocated by Israel's friends in Washington.

In a region that is still very much dominated by a realpolitik approach and a delicate balance of power, Syria fears that a Karazi-like government in Baghdad would almost certainly place it in between two hostile powers: Israel and a pro-US Iraq. Syria is also concerned about the possible disintegration of Iraq and the likelihood of it affecting its own Kurdish minority. More importantly, perhaps, Syria fears that it could be next on the US hit-list and Washington has made no effort to calm these fears.

Economically, Syria has benefited for years from profitable economic relations with Iraq. Since October 2000, Syria has received 200,000 barrel of Iraqi oil daily at a low price. This oil allowed Syria to increase its share in the oil market and generate \$2 billion annually. The advent of an unfriendly regime in Iraq deprived Syria of this important economic privilege at a time when it is most needed.

From a domestic perspective, Bashar's regime is young and lacks the strength and experience of his father. A pro-US stand would damage his standing and weaken his position vis-a-vis the opposition. In Syria, Islamists, pan-Arab nationalists as well as remnants of the communist parties are all united in their opposition to US policies in Iraq and Palestine.

In conclusion, the US pressure seems to have succeeded in forcing Syria to change its policies toward Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, but in the long run it is very likely to bring instability to Syria and to the whole region.

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