



THE TRUTH ABOUT SYRIA

By Barry Rubin

Negotiating with Syria, as advocated by so many in the United States--including many members of Congress--can produce nothing positive. The problem is not so much "talking" to Syria, in a manner equivalent to a date. The real issue is that the West is looking for a long-term, meaningful relationship. But that is foreclosed by the real interests of the Assad regime and its very structure.

We should begin by discarding the idea that "talking" is a risk-free proposition. The Syrian regime and its apologists, along with well-intentioned but poorly informed people, advocate making concessions to get talks started and keep them going to prove Western good intentions. How, they say, could Syria negotiate while under investigation by the UN for the murder of popular Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's in 2005? How can it be asked to stop instability in Lebanon unless it is given power there? While the taking process is beset by these questions, Syria need not act with restraint because there are no preconditions.

And which of Syria's desired items can negotiators offer without further destabilizing the region? Should they force Lebanon once again to be a Syrian colony? Implant a government Syria likes in Iraq? Give the regime money so it can better pursue its ambitions? Hand it all the Golan Heights plus a slice of Israeli territory without Syria making full and permanent peace with Israel? To illustrate just what mere "talking gets us, a fully frank U.S.-Syrian dialogue over Iraq's future would go something like this:

American negotiator: "So, President Bashar, what kind of Iraq would you like?"

Bashar: "An Iraq that would be anti-American, dominated by Iran, supporting Hezbollah and Hamas, ready to fight the Arab-Israeli conflict forever, dominated by the Sunni minority holding down the Shia-Kurdish majority or an Islamist state, and not too democratic, so as to avoid giving my own people a bad example."

It won't do much good for the American negotiator to say, "I'm sure we can work something out if we only talk about it."

Similarly, the regime will not soften its enmity to an independent Lebanon or Israel under any circumstances because it needs to control the former and fight the latter in order to retain popular support at home. Thus, the issues on which it has grievances cannot be resolved because its own actions and inflexibly maximalist demands are the very factors blocking a solution.

Syria has been brilliant at creating and maintaining such Catch-22 situations, where the only way to "solve" a problem is to buy Syrian "cooperation" with deals that would make things worse. Over decades, Syria has perfected how to act first as an arsonist, then the fireman who would put out the fire only on condition that the burning property be given to him. This was how Syria fomented terrorism in Lebanon against Western peacekeeping forces in the early 1980s, driving them out and then offering to stabilize Lebanon by controlling it completely. The same approach was applied to the Palestinians, post-Saddam Iraq, and to Lebanon again.

Lebanon was indeed the masterpiece of this political genre. Thus, Syrian Minister of Information Muhsin Bilal explained, "How can we be asked to disarm Hezbollah [since] we're out of Lebanon?" (2006) But what if Syria was allowed to return to Lebanon in force, would it then clamp down on Hizballah? Well, on another occasion, Bilal was asked, "Will you be using your influence to persuade Hezbollah to disarm, or not?" His response: "Why on earth should we?" (2005) In fact, Hezbollah is the main element in Syria's plan to recapture Lebanon entirely. If the West wants a stable Lebanon or to avoid more Lebanon-Israel wars it has to battle Syria, not make a deal with it.

To deal with Syria, the West needs to form a realistic assessment of Bashar, the regime, and the country. Syria is a weak and fragile entity, dependent largely on oil income and European commerce. The regime has flourished to the degree it has from enjoying a free ride, a lack of pressure except for American economic sanctions.

The traditional realpolitik way to handle such problems is not to propitiate aggressors and beg them to make a deal on their terms, but to pressure and deter them. To do so requires credibility and patience, to demonstrate that the West will not cave in or be worn down to surrender. In Syria's case, that country must be denied assets and isolated, and its endeavors frustrated. This requires the use of everything in the foreign policy arsenal from trade sanctions, to counter-alliances, serious criticism, and covert operations.

Likewise, Syrians must be shown that their leaders are a failure and can offer neither lasting glory nor material gains. The regime must be contained until it crumbles or retreats. This can be a long process, but it is ultimately a less costly one than the alternatives.

And yet, recently, a lot of Americans have been dropping in on Assad. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other members of Congress visited Damascus, flattered their hosts, and called for talks. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice broke the previous U.S. government boycott by meeting her Syrian counterpart.

What has happened since then shows this approach to be totally wrong. As demonstrated in the state-controlled Syrian media, the regime took all the calls in America for U.S. concessions as a victory, as proof that it could continue its policies.

Syria's democrats have been treated with special harshness even as the Syrian government calls for new relationships with the West. Mamoun Homsy is a courageous pro-democracy activist who had been one of the few independent members of Syria's puppet parliament. In March 2002 he was thrown out of the legislature and sentenced to five years in prison. As he was dragged off to jail, Homsy shouted, "This is a badge of honor to me and others like me. Long live the people!" Released in 2006, Homsy immediately left the country, saying there was no possibility of changing the regime by reform and that any criticism would bring more imprisonment. He wrote Pelosi a letter urging her not to visit Syria as such a step would only strengthen the regime. In late May, the government seized all of his assets in the country, leaving his family destitute.

Kamal Labwani, head of Syria's Liberal Democratic Gathering, visited the United States in 2005, meeting with human rights groups and visiting the White House. He told the Americans he saw that he would be arrested once he got back home. Sure enough, the Syrian police grabbed him at Damascus airport in November 2005. But he was not tried. After all, the regime reasoned, perhaps the United States might get even tougher with Syria if it repressed a man who had just been a White House guest. Last week, confident that the current administration and its presumed Democratic successors were caving in, the government sentenced Labwani to life imprisonment, "kindly" commuted to 12 years with hard labor. The charge? "Inciting a foreign state to attack Syria."

Anwar al-Bunni, a lawyer and another brave dissident, knew what held back Syria from crushing any dissent. Back in 2003 he explained, "The government's fear that it will be next on America's 'regime change' list may make it wary of committing gross violations of human rights. . . . Some of us say that it is only because of what America did in Iraq, the fright it gave our rulers, that we reformers stand a chance here."

Bunni was proven right. Once Syria no longer had any fear, the regime sentenced him to five years' imprisonment. Two more democratic activists, one of them Michel Kilo, a journalist who most clearly expressed the hope of peaceful change in Syria, will be sentenced soon.

The White House condemned the sentencing of Labwani and Bunni, and credible information that they were tortured in prison, in an eight-line-long press release. No doubt, Syria is not intimidated.

Damascus knows that it can continue helping insurgents next door kill Americans and murder Iraqis. The regime understands that it can continue to sponsor terrorism against Israel and Lebanon. It has a good hope of escaping indictment in the investigation of its involvement in the murder of Hariri.

Those who call for engaging Syria and giving it concessions are only helping the worst dictatorship in the Arab world and the leading Arab sponsor of terrorism in the post-9/11 world. Syria is the main partner of radical Islamist Iran, which is now seizing American-Iranian hostages. In May, Iran arrested on trumped-up spying charges Haleh Esfandiari, director of Middle East programs for the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington D.C. and an American citizen. Her boss is former Congressman Lee Hamilton, co-sponsor of the Iraq Study Group report that called for engagement with Syria and Iran.

The lessons about these regimes' extremist behavior should be clear by now. When someone extends its hand in offered friendship, they interpret this as hands raised in surrender.

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