

Diplomatic Responses to Strategic Challenges: The Syrian Case

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I will address the topic of Syria and discuss its potential role as part of the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

During the American electoral campaign and in the period of the transition when the Obama administration was taking shape, there was a lot of speculation about an overture to Syria. Obama the candidate borrowed a page from the Baker-Hamilton report and said that he would “engage” with Iran and with Syria, which was indeed one of the recommendations of the report.

During the transition period, as position papers were put on desks in Washington, there were those who argued that given the choice between a “Syria first” or a “Palestine first” policy – and assuming that no Israeli government is capable or willing to do heavy lifting on both tracks at the same time – the familiar advantages to a “Syria first” policy were sounded. First, it is a much simpler conflict, essentially a territorial conflict between two states, unlike the national conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Moreover, in the case of Syria, there is a coherent government. By now most of the question marks regarding Bashar al-Asad’s efficacy as a ruler have been removed, and he is perceived as firmly in control and capable of delivering once he signs a peace agreement. In addition, Syria is Iran’s close ally, and therefore if the United States manages to implement a package deal that includes both a Syrian and an Israeli agreement, the Americans believe that this rapprochement would draw Syria away from Iran. This would be a spectacular diplomatic coup, comparable to

Kissinger's success in the seventies of pulling Egypt away from the Soviet orbit and into the American one.

However, this is not the decision that was made, and the administration did not begin with a "Syria first" policy. Nonetheless, the United States decided to engage with Syria, and this engagement began by sending mid-level officials, including a seasoned assistant secretary of state, Jeff Feldman, and eventually George Mitchell. Then the Syrians went to Washington and sent the senior deputy foreign secretary. Yet in the end, although quite a few Congressional delegations traveled to Syria and there was a certain easing of sanctions, these first initiatives were not followed by more substantial ones. Why?

First, the administration decided that it wanted to implement a "Palestine first" policy. Officials realized that if one of the Obama administration's highest priorities is to come to terms with the Islamic and Arab worlds, then what concerns most Muslims and Arabs is not the Syrian or the Golan issue, rather the Palestinian issue. Accordingly, it is quite important to remove that obstacle to the course of America's reconciliation with Muslims and Arabs.

Second, the Obama administration discovered what previous administrations had found out when they dealt with the Syrians, namely, that it is very difficult to deal with them. The Syrians oscillate between moments of anxiety or a sense of persecution and moments of elation. Once it began to "engage" with Syria, the Obama administration discovered that it had to court the Syrian regime, and that Syria had begun to play hard to get.

Third, the geostrategic dynamics in the Middle East shifted from a simple Iranian-Syrian alliance leading what is known as the "resistance" axis in the Middle East, to a more complex alignment that now includes a third important actor, Turkey. As a result, we now face a much more serious grouping of states in the Middle East that represents a more substantial challenge to US policy or to the policy of any state trying to resolve current regional problems.

At the same time, this new alignment also grants Syria a much more comfortable regional position. If one looks at Syria's diplomatic record in recent weeks, one notices that it is pretty successful. It has managed to reverse the election results in Lebanon by forcing the creation of a

government that is more to its liking than what was indicated by the outcome of the elections. Syria also received a visit from the Saudis and is building a strong relationship with Turkey. Syria feels fairly comfortable, and thus pulling Syria away not just from Iran but from its current fairly convenient regional position, as it sees it, is going to be much more difficult. Therefore it is my sense that in the near future Syria is not going to become part of the solution, but rather it is going to remain part of the problem.

Very briefly, what can change? Two things could modify the current situation. First, if the Palestinian track proves to be intractable, then there could be a shifting of attention both by the United States and by Israel to the Syrian track. In addition, if Israel and the Palestinians agree on a solution that does not amount to a final status agreement, then the Israeli government would be able to deal simultaneously with both tracks. But these changes will not occur rapidly, and it will take at least a few months before such a scenario can materialize. So at this point, as I said, Syria remains part of the problem.