

The challenges of normalization

Mahdi Abdul Hadi

1 May 2008

Many contradicting trends and confusing political signals have been exchanged in recent months in the Middle East, making it a daunting task to untangle the intertwining motives in the region. The revelation of talks between Israel and Syria adds yet another twist in the political knot, and we are once again reminded that the fates of the Middle East states are connected. Syria has now opened important diplomatic and other fronts with Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel, and it is likely that the same concerns will be shared by all parties--namely, state and societal security within recognized borders, management of oil and water resources, economic cooperation, and protection of the rights of minority populations and the right of refugees to return to their homelands. Still, the question remains: are the leaders in Syria and Israel genuine in their efforts toward normalization between their nations, and if so, are they up to the challenge?

On the surface, it looks like Syria holds a strong hand in the politics of Middle Eastern conflict. President Bashar al-Assad has received high-level visitors like US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Former US president Jimmy Carter, each of whom came away convinced that the US should invite the Syrians into the "peace process". Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was also welcomed to Damascus on an official visit. Assad even managed to save an Arab summit in April that was threatened with collapse due to the absence of the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians. At the same time, Syria's relationships with Hizballah, Hamas and Iran have proven to be lasting in the face of outside pressure, and Assad has opened an economic partnership with Turkey. To paint Syria as an important player in the region is an easy task when it has all of these elements working in its favor. Unfortunately for the regime in Damascus, its position is not as comfortable as it may seem.

For evidence of Syrian vulnerability one need look no further than the lack of response to the string of affronts that have come Syria's way over the last few years. For example, Israel tested Syria's commitment to Hizballah during its war in June of 2006, executed an air strike in Deir-a-Zour in September 2007 and managed to assassinate Hizballah leader Imad Mugniyeh in the heart of Damascus in February. Each of these actions passed without Syrian reprisal. For all the posturing of the two sides, the border between Syria and Israel has been a quiet front for the last four decades. This inaction has led the Israeli leadership to believe that in Syria it has found a partner that will be responsive and pliable, one that can be led along slowly in a process of normalization.

This fact is an important one for Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, as his hold on power is tenuous at best. The negotiations with the Palestinians have irreparably stalled, with no hope of being revived by the weak leadership of Olmert and his counterparts in Ramallah and Washington. With political opponents breathing down his neck and Israeli public opinion turning increasingly against him, Olmert is seeking to buy more time by opening up a dialogue with Syria. He has made no promises to the Syrians and has committed to nothing, yet this new Syrian intrigue could prove useful in turning the public's attention away from the predictable but politically damaging impasse that has befallen the negotiations with the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership faces internal crisis and a deeply divided society and has become dependent on the political interests and direction of Riyadh, Cairo and Amman. Gaza continues to be strangled by the hands of the Israeli army and military incursions occur throughout the occupied territories on a regular basis. With regard to Syria, Palestinians can only sit back and watch as a story with many similarities to their own unfolds. Just as Palestinian society--including everything from the rule of law to political governance to the educational system--has been revealed to Israeli eyes, so will the Syrian national structure. If Olmert is successful, Bashar al-Assad could soon be as recognizable to the residents of Tel Aviv as the tame Mahmoud Abbas, a man whose platform is a far cry from the revolutionary tone of Yasser Arafat.

The Syrians and Israelis will also find that no matter what they can agree upon, nothing can be concluded or implemented without a comprehensive regional solution. Any discussion on the status of the Golan Heights will inevitably spur immediate speculation on the prospects of Israel withdrawing to pre-1967 borders. Rabin, Netanyahu, Barak and now Olmert have all claimed to be willing to cede the Golan and yet there has been no serious follow-up. Even if Israel were to make partial concessions in the Golan in exchange for normalization with Syria, this would only strengthen the Israeli grip on the West Bank and Jerusalem, much like what has transpired in the aftermath of the "disengagement" from Gaza.

No one, especially not the Palestinians, should be so naive as to expect that empty political normalization between Israel and Syria could lead to progress in breaking the impasse of the Middle East conflict.-
Published 1/5/2008 © bitterlemons-international.org

Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi is head of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, PASSIA, in Jerusalem.