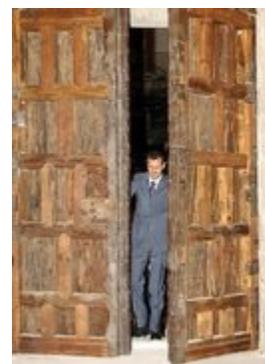


A Crack in the Door

Can Damascus Help Stop the Violence?

By Carsten Wieland

Syria's traditional foreign policy can be summed up as a three-step approach: taking advantage of a crisis, allowing the crisis to simmer for a while and, finally, becoming part of the solution. But will it work this time? After years of isolation, the latest Middle East crisis has suddenly put Damascus back on the political map.



AP

Potential political openings: Can Syrian President Bashar Assad help negotiate a halt to the violence?

Syria's most effective export product is its foreign policy. This, at least, was the widely held view in Damascus in the days of former President Hafez Assad. The old man was a master at playing the foreign policy shuffle with his ever-changing allies. His source of foreign aid would shift from the Soviet Union to Saudi Arabia, he would align himself first with America in its campaign against Iraq and then with the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. And his alliances were just as fluctuating when it came to arch rivals Tehran and Washington. The list goes on and on.

His son, Bashar, has been less successful. After taking office in 2000, he gambled one foreign policy trump card after the other, and now Syria is largely isolated on the foreign policy front and stigmatized in the West. In the aftermath of the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the younger Assad was forced to bow to world pressure and withdraw Syrian troops from Lebanon after 29 years.

Yet, despite everything, Syria's proven concept could be at work again: taking advantage of a crisis, allowing the crisis to simmer for a while and, finally, becoming part of the solution. As the conflict in the Middle East escalates, an increasing number of public figures are calling on Syria to play a key role in extinguishing the region's flames. One of them is German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who sees gaining Syria's cooperation as an opportunity.

But there are also those who worry about reopening a backdoor into Lebanon for Syria. That would be a deep setback for the tens of thousands of Lebanese who took to the streets in last year's Cedar Revolution to finally gain Lebanon's full independence from Syria. Of course, the regime in Syria has a different take on the matter. The more bombs are dropped on Lebanese civilians, the more it hopes the Lebanese might recognize the benefits of the former Syrian occupation over the current power vacuum and bloodshed.

Not just ideological hardliners in Damascus

So would the best approach be a bit of Syrian involvement, but not too much? The real issue that will have to be confronted in seeking a solution is not as much the current proxy war in Lebanon as it is the larger Israeli-Arab conflict. Lebanon and Hezbollah have always been Syria's security in its ongoing confrontation with Israel. The Baathist regime in Damascus knows that its outdated military equipment would be no match for Israel, a nuclear power, in a direct military confrontation between the two countries. Syria has already lost two wars against Israel, in 1967 and 1973, which also led to its loss of the Golan Heights. But roles have changed. In the past, Syria controlled Hezbollah as an extended arm of its foreign policy. Today Syria needs Hezbollah to maintain its influence in Lebanon.

Because of this imbalance of power, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem's recent statements that his country would be prepared to join in a regional war if Israel invaded large parts of Lebanon or bombed targets along the Syrian border are either deterrence rhetoric or a sign of desperation. This doesn't mean that Syria's threats should not be taken seriously. But an escalation on that scale is by no means inevitable.

Damascus, unlike Tehran, is not a place filled with ideological hardliners, and certainly not with religious fanatics. And Syrian pragmatism was not necessarily buried with the elder Assad. Syria opened diplomatic relations with Iraq's new government, which many in Damascus see as a US puppet, faster than expected. Since 2003, President Bashar Assad has repeatedly offered Israel direct peace negotiations. He has even abandoned his

BIO BOX

Dr. Carsten Wieland is a Middle East expert, political consultant and journalist. He was a research fellow at Georgetown University in Washington, DC until July. He spent several



demand that Israel deliver on a promise murdered former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin once made to return almost the entire Golan Heights to Syria.

years living in various countries of the Middle East. Wieland studied history, political science, international relations and philosophy at Humboldt University in Berlin, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and Duke University in North Carolina.

No "Pakistani U-turn" in Damascus

But with the United States still treating Syria as a key adversary in its war on terrorism, Israel sees no reason to agree to negotiations -- nor is it being pressured to do so by the US. Israel's position is essentially this: As long as the United States continues to soften up Syria, Israel's negotiating position in the dispute over the Golan Heights can only improve. Damascus, for its part, can continue to bolster its image by offering negotiations, knowing full well that the Israelis are unlikely to accept and force Syria's pan-Arab Baathist regime into making embarrassing ideological concessions. This is only one of the Middle East's many vicious circles, and without external pressure there will be no progress.

But the current conflict is a theater with weak national actors, making it difficult to obtain concessions. Israel's new administration is trying to make up for its lack of military experience with a show of strength. The US administration is widely criticized, even in the American media, as being weakened and helpless as a result of the Iraq war. And Syrian President Bashar Assad's government has been undermined by foreign policy gaffes, sluggish economic reforms, growing disgruntlement within the Syrian opposition and Islamist infiltration. But despite its problems, the Assad regime has remained steadfast. Domestic calm and an extremely low crime rate currently make Syria a secular oasis in the region, even softening Israeli and US calls for regime change in Damascus in the last few months.



Carsten Wieland's latest book, "Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism and 'Pax Americana'" has just been published by Hurst in London. An American edition was published under the title: "Syria - Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism and Secularism in the Levant."

Nevertheless, Syria has failed to achieve a "Pakistani U-turn" in the wake of the terrorists attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Pakistan's leader, General Pervez Musharraf, has positioned himself as America's ally and a staunch opponent of Islamist terrorism -- despite the fact that the Taliban originated in Pakistan and Pakistani intelligence continues to play a questionable role in the country's official stance against Islamists. But Syria -- which has been more committed to excluding Islamic fanatics from political and social life than any other Arab country, has encouraged moderate Islamists and provided the United States with importance intelligence against terrorist organization al-Qaida after Sept. 11 -- has merely ended up being added to an expanded "axis of evil."

Potential openings in Damascus

Above all, it is Syria's standing territorial and political conflict with Israel that keeps it from attaining the status of a second Pakistan in Washington. One problem is the definition of terrorism. As recently as 1990, the US government was on the same page with Syria, which held that violence in the Israeli-occupied territories was resistance, not terrorism. But now the Bush administration has adopted Israel's definition, which makes no such distinction. Since Damascus refuses to expel Palestinian organizations from Syria, it's been disqualified by Washington and has essentially become part of the post-Sept. 11 "terrorist camp."

Nevertheless, there are potential openings that could be used to entice Syria to abandon the Hezbollah-Tehran axis:

- When push comes to shove, the Syrians, even under former President Hafez Assad, have always been willing to place their interests ahead of the Palestinian cause. This suggests that Syria might even be prepared to sign a peace treaty with Israel if the Israeli-Palestinian question had not yet been satisfactorily resolved.
- Syria's Baathists are no fans of, and in fact actively combat, Sunni extremists. Indeed, the Syrians would not permit Hamas to open an office in Damascus until a few years ago. The war in Iraq and the US's emergence as a common enemy have given secularists and Islamists a common denominator -- but one that is not necessarily permanent.
- The Syrian regime's ties to dogmatically radical Shiites like Hezbollah and the regime in Tehran are just as tenuous. Its current alliances are dictated by foreign policy constraints. If these constraints are set aside and Syria manages to find other allies, even its partnership with Iran and support of Hezbollah could crumble.
- The Syrian people are highly intolerant of religious fanaticism. The country has already taken in almost 1 million Iraqi refugees, most of them Christians, as well as more than 150,000 mostly Shiite Lebanese refugees. Peaceful coexistence among various religious groups has a longer tradition in Syria than the Baath party, and the ruling Alevites see religious diversity as an important aspect of their legitimacy.

- Bashar Assad, well acquainted with the Western world, began his presidency in 2000 as a reformer. But international isolation and a number of his own mistakes prompted Assad to place security ahead of experimentation. The opposition civil society movement has suffered the most as a result of this about-face. But secular and moderate Islamic elements in the country are still interested in dialogue with Assad. Economic and foreign policy successes could encourage the regime to revive domestic political reform efforts. For example, a new party law that would break the Baath Party's monopoly has long been in the works, but has yet to be enacted.

Bashar Assad is currently playing with fire -- domestically and internationally -- and is allowing the crisis to simmer. Whether he will succeed in presenting himself as a last-minute savior, as his father did on several occasions, is questionable. So far political dexterity has rarely been his strong suit. His claim that hardliners could stand in his way, an excuse he has used before, is no longer valid, now that Assad has filled all of the country's key political and military posts with his own supporters.

Syria is the only country on America's list of states that sponsor terrorism that still maintains diplomatic relations with Washington. But this contradiction is typical: The international community has always found more than one way to deal with Syria. In light of the bloodbath in the Middle East, this is certainly a good time for key players to start pulling strings in Damascus once again.

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2006

All Rights Reserved

Reproduction only allowed with the permission of SPIEGELnet GmbH

More about this issue:

Related SPIEGEL ONLINE links: [From the Archive: SPIEGEL's Full Middle East Coverage
http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,k-6863,00.html](http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,k-6863,00.html)

