



the present context of
syria's foreign policy
change in the region
and stagnation at home

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ABSTRACT

Once again there is talk of war in the Levant. Lebanon finds itself in the reticule of interests again, although this time the overarching issue is Iran. The recent turbulences are happening at a time when the Obama administration in Washington has prescribed itself a cautious rapprochement with Syria. The timing of Israel's allegations against Syria of delivering Scud missiles to Hezbollah is part of an effort to drive a wedge between Damascus and Washington.

Despite some déjà vus, the present scenario is different from 2006. Profound changes have happened in the region and are due to a new agility in Damascus' foreign policy. The most significant developments in recent years have been a) Syria's historical separation from Lebanon, b) the start of talks with representatives of anti-Syrian camps in Lebanon, c) indirect negotiations with Israel about the Golan Heights via Turkey, d) the rapid deepening of relations with Turkey, e) the start of diplomatic relations with Iraq, f) a détente with Saudi Arabia, g) silent resumption of intelligence cooperation with the US and the UK, and h) Syria has become presentable again in most European capitals.

Nevertheless, stagnation prevails at home both in Israel and in Syria. The hope that Syria would embark on political reforms if it did not continue to feel threatened from abroad has not been fulfilled. Of all actors, the secularist Baath regime has silenced the

moderate and secular voices while Islamist currents have gained ground.

Therefore, criticism of the cautious and strategically reasonable involvement of Syria by western governments becomes understandable. The question is if Syria is too easily getting out of its pariah role.

Policy Recommendations:

- Create diplomatic eye-level between Damascus and Washington by the deployment of the newly appointed US ambassador to Damascus
- Continue efforts to convince Syria of the benefits of an EU Association Agreement
- Keep the human rights problems constantly on the table and do not use them in a seasonal manner for short-term political purposes
- Express concern of the rising influence of Islamists
- Politically recognize Syria's achievements in overcoming past dogmas in its foreign policy and obstacles to peaceful coexistence with its Arab and Turkish neighbors
- Provide incentives for more economic reforms and keep up technocratic assistance
- Continue to include Syria in regional peace efforts

1. Introduction

Once again, analysts in the local media and people on the street talk of war. This scenario has already re-emerged in the Levant with the vast destruction perpetrated by Israel's government and Hezbollah, Lebanon's "co-government", which happened just four short years ago. It is true that talk of war does not mean much in the region: the more it is talked about, the less likely it is to happen. Nevertheless, the fears draw a picture of present tensions and cleavages.

The recent turbulences – so far on the rhetorical level only – are happening at a time when the Obama administration in Washington has prescribed itself a new, although cautious, rapprochement with Syria. Part of this scenario is the allegation by Israel in April 2010 that Syria had delivered Scud missiles to Hezbollah. Be it true or not, the timing is telling and can therefore be considered as an effort to drive a wedge between Damascus and Washington.

In a first reaction, the US administration expressed the usual "concern" about such a possible escalation. This was an opportunity to put pressure on Syria again in a carrot-and-stick approach. Very quickly, however, Washington lowered the tone on the issue and declared that there was no proof that complete missiles were delivered to Hezbollah.¹ The lessons of fishy allegations in the prelude to the Iraq war may have played a role here, but also a weighing of options may have contributed. The fact that Obama declared that the Middle East conflict is damaging US interests in the world means that the US will not go along with any kind of Israeli board game in the

region anymore without weighing its own options and interests.²

In their war-talk on the street, some Lebanese rumor that Israel could be aiming at intercepting arms deliveries from Iran via Syria by occupying parts of the country like the Beqaa Valley. Such a step is intended to weaken Hezbollah before attacks on nuclear facilities in Iran could take place. Preemptively, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah announced at the end of January that his organization was fit for a new fight and warned Israel that it would be vulnerable on its entire territory.³ This utterance may have been a first hint at new weaponry.

Lebanon finds itself in the reticule of interests again, although constellations shift slightly each time. It is not a simple *déjà-vu*. This time Iran is the main focus, and profound changes have taken place in the Levant since 2006. Above all, this is due to Damascus' new agility. Syria has taken its head out of the noose of isolation that has been tightened by the United States first and consequently also by European countries after the Iraq war. The cause of Syria's success lies in a series of decisions that, on the one hand, reflect a break with past shades, even changes of paradigm, and, on the other hand, display a growing maturity of President Bashar al-Asad in foreign policy matters. There is a new Syrian pragmatism after a phase of ideological encrustation during the Iraq war that can be explained by both *raison d'état* and emotional desperation in an environment that put the existence of the Syrian regime in danger.

Interestingly, the new agility in Damascus has nothing to do with Barack Obama being president of the United States. The most important decisions for this new course were taken in 2008, long before it was clear who

¹ "Unclear whether Syria Scuds reached Hezbollah, U.S. officials say", in: Haaretz/News Agencies, April 16, 2010

² "Obama Speech Signals a U.S. Shift on Middle East", in: New York Times, April 14, 2010

³ "Nasrallah's promise to defeat Israel is an announcement of readiness...", in *Al-Akhbar*, January 29, 2010 (Mideast Wire)

would become the new strongman in the White House. From a Syrian perspective, any change in Washington was to represent a glimpse of hope after the simplistic good-bad-rhetoric of former President George W. Bush who placed Syria within the extended “Axis of Evil,” despite their intelligence cooperation against militant Islamists after the 9/11 attacks which lasted long into 2003.

The most significant developments in Syria's foreign policy in recent years can be summed up as follows:

- Syria's historical separation from Lebanon both on the level of ideology and in constitutional terms (this, of course, does not exclude the continued exertion of strategic-political influence).
- The start of talks and personal encounters with representatives of anti-Syrian camps in Lebanon.
- Indirect negotiations with Israel about the Golan Heights via Turkey, although they have been interrupted before they could turn into direct talks due to the Gaza war in 2008/09.
- The rapid deepening of relations with Turkey.
- The start of diplomatic relations with Iraq and bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy and security, although not without frictions.
- Détente with Saudi Arabia and thus with the Hariri camp in Lebanon.
- Silent resumption of intelligence cooperation with the US and the UK which was interrupted in 2003.
- Syria has become presentable again in most European capitals, especially in Paris, and was invited to the Mediterranean Conference there in July 2008.

2. Syrian Foreign Policy

To investigate these developments in Syrian foreign policy further, this report will address the country's evolving relations with key international state actors.

2.1 Lebanon

Few were willing to bet on Bashar al-Asad's political future after the assassination of Lebanon's President Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, a man who had voiced growing criticism against Syria in his last months. International pressure on Syria grew and caused a hasty military withdrawal from Lebanon where Syrian troops had been present since 1976. The two following years after Hariri's assassination were probably the toughest to date for the Syrian president who, at age 34, had taken office from his father Hafez al-Asad in June 2000.

Today, Asad junior feels secure enough to openly concede Syrian mistakes in Lebanon and to receive Saad Hariri, today's prime minister in Beirut and son of the late Rafiq, in Damascus with a state reception that included a visit to the well-secured presidential palace. Even Druze leader Walid Junblat, who in the past years has been one of the hardest and most eloquent critics of Syria in Lebanon, travelled to Syria and met Asad for an ice-breaking encounter.

For the first time in post-colonial history, Syria and Lebanon are two sovereign countries who have exchanged ambassadors and agreed on its bilateral border drawing. This had been one of the main demands of Western actors towards Damascus. Step by step, the countries have established a relationship that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. After a long period of political bickering, Syria has finally played a constructive role in the difficult formation of a Lebanese government. The deeply divided Lebanese parties managed to negotiate a breakthrough in the

Doha agreement in May 2008. Thus, they cleared the way to the presidential election and in November 2009, after another tough tug-of-war, the government of National Unity under Saad Hariri could take up its work.

From their perspective, Syrians complain about a lack of recognition from Western states, given the significant change of direction in their policies. The government in Damascus has given up Greater Syria as an ideological premise of Syrian nationalism. Still today, many Syrians see Lebanon as a French colonial construct rather than a full-fledged state due to tight family bonds, cultural relations, Lebanon's primordial dissipation and the lively economic exchange between both countries.

At the same time, Syria has not stopped exerting political influence in Lebanon. The game is simply played with different means. As long as the conflict with Israel is not solved, the tiny neighboring state will continue to represent an indispensable strategic space. Syria knows that it would not have any chance in a direct military confrontation with Israel because of Syria's hopelessly corrupt, technically obsolete and underpaid troops. The country needs Hezbollah's asymmetric guerrilla qualities. At the moment, this alliance is without alternatives for Syria. Therefore, a continued influence of the Shiite organization in Lebanon's domestic politics remains important. In this respect, Syria has worked hard in the past months and years and will continue to do so.

Despite these efforts it was the Hariri alliance of March 14 that (surprisingly) won the parliamentary elections in June 2009, not the Hezbollah coalition. Hezbollah recognized its defeat, but has successfully pushed through its personnel in the Government of National Unity. All in all, Hezbollah today has more political influence over Lebanon's state institutions than in the

time before the summer war of 2006. In the long run, this war was not only a disaster for Israel from a public diplomacy perspective, but also a backlash with respect to Lebanon's domestic fabric.

The fact that “pro-Western” Saad Hariri said that Syria does *not* channel Scud missiles into Lebanon could be an indication to what extent even Hariri is already moving within the Syrian orbit.⁴

In other words: No problem has really been solved in Lebanon. The UNIFIL troops have taken their observation positions in southern Lebanon after 2006, but no one dares to mention Hezbollah's disarmament. The warnings were all too clear in May 2008 when Hezbollah's fighters for the first time turned their weapons inwards and occupied several Beirut neighbourhoods, stopping just short of a coup d'etat. Many non Shiites and Hezbollah critics still see the militia of “God's Party” as a guarantee of Lebanese sovereignty against Israel as the country's state organs remain fragile, including the military with its secular appearance.

The government of National Unity under Saad Hariri remains a fragile bracket that will not be able to resist major tensions. It is more important that external actors such as Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not lose their interest in a relative calm in Lebanon. The recent rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as between Syria and its Lebanese foes, is a constructive step - but it does not resolve fundamental clashes of interest.

2.2 Israel

In contrast to the changes in its neighborhood, Israel is caught in political stagnation. Since the war in the Gaza Strip and the start of the new legislative period in early 2009, Israel has not made any discernible gestures

⁴ Hariri in a press conference on his visit to Italy, see: “Hariri: Scuds story similar to US claims of Iraq WMDs”, in: Daily Star, 21.04.2010

toward its neighboring Arab countries nor toward the Palestinians. Turkey's confidence in Israel has been deeply shattered since the Gaza war, and the problems in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are far from resolved.

There is no visible strategy except a general push to extend Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Jewish presence in East Jerusalem. As Israel continues to feel very little pressure, time is running in favour of political hardliners. The security situation is relatively stable in comparison to previous years when Palestinian suicide bombers took their toll on Israeli civilians almost monthly. The launching of rockets from Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip has diminished, too, for the time being.

Insistence on the status quo is coupled with lagging impulses from Washington and deep divisions within the Israeli government itself. This becomes particularly obvious with regard to Syria. Benjamin Netanyahu and his foreign minister Avigdor Liebermann aired contrasting positions at the beginning of February this year. Liebermann warned Syria that if a war broke out, Israel's goal would be nothing short of the collapse of the Asad dynasty. Moreover, Syria should stop dreaming of getting back the Golan Heights. Netanyahu, however, declared that Israel was still interested in negotiating peace with Syria – without preconditions – and open to the mediation of a “fair third party”. Without preconditions means: Netanyahu distances himself from promises made to Syria by previous Israeli governments to hand back the (whole of the) Golan. Apart from that, the Prime Minister banned his cabinet members from speaking about Syria.

In his statement, Liebermann had reacted to an attack by Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem, who said that a future war would not stop short of Israeli cities. Before that, Asad had staged the apprehension that

Israel did not want peace but instead would try to push the region into war.⁵ Elsewhere, Asad added that only peace could protect Israel in the long run.⁶

Several times in his political career, Netanyahu has hinted that he was open to a deal with Syria. This would give him a free hand to be tough with the Palestinians. But after the Iraq war, Israel's enemies have linked up more tightly. This raises the question for Israel: Is a peace with Syria still equivalent to the pacification of the region? Or, have the interests of Hezbollah – increasingly in alliance with Hamas – and of Iran with its nuclear program meanwhile become self-sufficient enough that Syria could not moderate them anymore?

Syria did take a deterrent tone when “sources close to the power center” in Damascus leaked their vision of a war “imposed on us” by Israel. The decisive phrase was: “This command is now convinced that there will not be any future war in the region with Syria not being part of it.”⁷ Therefore, any regional conflict remains a real threat for Israel.

Even though Israel and Syria have a territorial conflict “only”, a peace treaty would be a strategic gain for Israel. But even if Netanyahu wanted, it is by far not clear if he – or any other Israeli head of government in the extremely fragile party landscape – would survive politically the handing over of parts or the whole of the Golan Heights.

⁵ “Israel warns Syria it would lose future war”, *AP*, February 4, 2010; “Why did Al-Muallem warn Israel against attacking Syria or South Lebanon?”, in: *Al-Akhbar*, February 5, 2010 (Mideast Wire); “Israels Aussenminister droht Asad mit Sturz”, in: *NZZ-Online*, February 4, 2010.

⁶ Conversation of Bashar al-Asad with Seymour M. Hersh, in: *The New Yorker* online, February 3, 2010 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2010/02/direct-quotes-bashar-assad.html>

⁷ “Syrian sources: here's what will happen if war is imposed on us“, in: *Al-Rai al-Aam*, Kuwait, April 26, 2010.

Both Syria and Israel (at least in words and at the top of their governments) have declared at various times that they would be interested in negotiations. Skeptics rightly ask: Do both sides need the process and are they aiming at real results? The Syrian side criticizes that there is no serious negotiating partner on the Israeli side. At the same time, the Syrians try to send positive signals towards Washington to demonstrate its readiness to negotiate in the hope of ending the sanctions from the Bush era step by step.

Two theses exist with regard to Syria that seem to contradict each other at first glance: (1) Bashar al-Asad needs the tug of war about the Golan for his ideological legitimacy as the Arab voice against Israel and to divert domestic problems; and/or (2) the liberation of the Golan would boost his legitimacy to a greater extent than the present situation.

The dialectical resolution of these theses contains the hypothesis that, indeed, Asad has had to swallow several domestic and foreign policy defeats up to the point that doubts have arisen about his capability to represent adequately the interests of his country. However, since the Lebanon crisis in 2005, these critical voices have decreased. Today Asad is in less need of a groundbreaking success in the short run than he was just a few years ago. Having said this, a perceived just negotiation about the Golan would be welcome and would improve his domestic and international standing. His strong backing in the population would turn into enthusiasm with many Syrians and give them a feeling of “historical justice”. The Syrian state media would accompany this accordingly, though this success could fade away in the run of time and give way to other problems caused by the economic opening, the depletion of natural resources or domestic or social tensions.

On the other hand, it can easily be imagined that Israel and Syria would find enough arguments to keep the image of the external enemy alive in order to divert attention from problems of their own, even if a peace treaty was signed. From the Syrian point of view, Israel would remain an occupying power, either because of the remaining occupation of the Shebaa farms at the border to Lebanon or because of the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians. Asad hinted in this direction in a conversation with US journalist Seymour M. Hersh at the end of December 2009: “If they [the Israelis] say you can have the entire Golan back, we will have a peace treaty. But they cannot expect me to give them the peace they expect” as long as other problems remained unsolved.⁸

For Israel, on the other hand, Syria would remain an anti-Zionist and pan-Arab mouthpiece. As long as no reform of the election law stabilizes the party spectrum in Israel, strong unpopular decisions will remain difficult, and an external enemy will remain beneficial as a projection screen to advance domestic agendas. An agreement between both sides could indeed aim to establish a peaceful neighborhood policy (as was discussed in the 1990s). But experiences in the Middle East have shown that both sides pull the stops of propaganda according to seasonal needs.

Hezbollah, too, has sufficiently diversified its basis of legitimacy so that it can continue to play a role even after the (although incomplete) withdrawal of Israeli troops from south Lebanon in May 2000. The Shebaa farms are only a small piece of the whole picture. Strictly speaking, Hezbollah does not need the argument of the occupied Shebaa farms any longer to justify its military role. Its mission has increasingly drifted away from its self-defined original

⁸ Conversation of Bashar al-Asad with Seymour M. Hersh, in: *The New Yorker* online, February 3, 2010 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2010/02/direct-quotes-bashar-assad.html>

task of defending the country towards the scenario of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by supporting Sunni Hamas.

Still, the interest for Israel to exert a moderating influence on Hezbollah by signing a peace agreement with Syria remains (since Hezbollah can hardly be destroyed militarily), as it could start the long path to regional pacification. Yet, the crucial issue will finally be the conflict surrounding the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

There are three main points of criticism that the West raises against Syria: a) relations with Iran, b) support of Hezbollah, and c) asylum for Palestinian organizations, also of Islamist color, like Hamas. Of these three the bond with Hezbollah appears to be the strongest one while the alliance with Iran the weakest component.

Israel's and the United States' difficult diplomatic task in the case of an attack against Iran would be to keep Syria quiet. A simultaneous war with Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon would be a disaster in the region. In this context, Netanyahu's cautious words in demarcation to his foreign minister Liebermann become clear.

2.3 Turkey

Relations between both countries have changed radically since Assad's groundbreaking visit to Turkey in January 2004 and countless follow-ups. From being at the edge of war because of the Kurdish problem and water issues, both hold common cabinet meetings today. There is a free exchange of trade, and citizens of both countries are allowed to cross the common border without a visa. In particular for Syria, which has been a closed country for decades, this means quite a lot. In Syria, only Iranian travelers enjoy the same privileges.

Almost unnoticeably, Syria has recognized the normative power of realities by giving up its demands on the Antakya region that, from a Syrian perspective, forms part of Greater

Syria but that the colonial French ceded to Turkey in 1939. Maps with a Turkish Antakya could even be seen in Syrian government papers. Syria's advantages from a friendship with Turkey are bigger today than potential rewards from national revisionism.

Animosities from Ottoman times seem forgotten as well. Historiography of the Arab provinces once tended to depict the period as the Dark Age of colonialism. Modern alliances of Turkey as a member of NATO and its tight and even military cooperation with Israel had not helped to brighten the Turkish-Syrian relationship. While both once faced each other with a high degree of suspicion, now each have ceded to a feeling and duty of "family bonds" – if one believes the words of leading politicians from both sides.

The moderate Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party) government under Tayyip Erdogan has started the difficult task to de-ethnicize the Turkish understanding of nation. According to Erdogan, Turkish is supposed to be defined as a civil citizenship that is able to integrate ethnic sub identities (such as the Kurdish one). Thus, religion becomes more meaningful again as a connecting link within the Turkish population and between them and their Arab neighbors, without the intention of renouncing Western duties and ambitions. The Turkish-Syrian cooperation suddenly appears in the light of a fertile common past.

The Turkish foreign policy of "zero problems" with all its neighbors has made Turkey a growing influential factor in the interface between Europe and the Middle East. Although the Turkish discourse – both in the street and in politics - is approaching the Arab one, including on the emotional level when it comes to the occupation of the Palestinian territories, and although the relations with Israel have cooled down considerably, Turkey still enjoys enough

confidence on both sides to play the broker between Syria and Israel.

The shuttle diplomacy that started in May 2008 was just about to enter direct talks when the Israeli delegation packed its suitcases with little pretext in December 2008. Shortly afterwards, Israel started to bomb the Gaza strip with the aim to stop the launching of rockets against Israel from Hamas positions. Turkey interpreted the Israeli behavior as a profound breach of confidence. What followed were verbal attacks by Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan against Israel's President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Summit in Davos in January 2009. Swiftly, the Turkish head of government turned into the hero of Arab public opinion since he condemned the Israeli line of action in the Gaza Strip like no Arab head of state (except Syria's).

The good relations with Turkey certainly represent the greatest success for Syria in the past years. Thus, Damascus aptly managed to diversify its foreign policy. The West cannot hold anything against relations with Turkey unlike with Iran. Syria gains as well because of its strategic situation between economically powerful Turkey and Arab markets. In this respect, Syria's escape from isolation has a regional component, too, (including the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia) and should not be seen with regard to the West only.

Optimists do not only see a strategic advantage for Syria, but also the possibility that the more relaxed dealing of Turkey with its ethnic minorities could radiate into the region. This could affect the Kurdish question in Syria's northeast in particular. So far, the central Arab-nationalist power in Damascus has not shown any signs of compromise applying harsher procedures that make it even more difficult for Kurds to purchase land, for example.

2.4 Iran

The shortsighted war in Iraq has led to results that, in many ways, are neither in the interest of the United States nor Israel, but rather endanger their security interests. One of many points in question is the Kurdish issue. A very practical community of interest has emerged between Syria, Turkey and, so far, Iran because of the drifting apart of Iraq's population groups and of Kurdish ambitions for autonomy in northern Iraq. None of the countries seem interested in Kurdish nationalism.

Turkey has chosen diplomatic tones instead of a policy of confrontation with Iraq, also because of its "zero problem policy" with its neighbors. The relations between Syria and Iran, in contrast, are shaped more by political opportunism than by a far-reaching congruency of interests or by ideological commonness.

Trade with Iran developed more sluggishly than with Turkey despite all the rhetoric. Representatives of the old school of Syrian diplomacy reject the term "alliance" with regard to Iran. A more one-dimensional adjustment of Syrian foreign policy toward Iran could damage Syria in the long run. Iran cannot even serve as an ideal partner when it comes to keeping Syria's military halfway up to date. But above all, it is in Iraq where dangers for the bilateral relationship between Syria and Iran lurk.⁹

At this point, it is still illusionary to try to push Syria to give up its cooperation with Iran. The country was Syria's staunch ally in time of urgent need as the world (including most Arab governments) turned away from Damascus and the voices of regime change became stronger and stronger in Washington.

⁹ Reshuffling the cards: Syria's evolving strategy (I), International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report* No. 92, December 2009, p.8

The more Syrian politicians feel dictated from western capitals, the more sensitively they react. Alternatives and incentives are missing. Under particular circumstances it may be even in the interest of the West that Syria holds a working connection with Iran.

Having said this, of Syria's three critical points mentioned above – cooperation with Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran - the relation with Iran could resolve itself most easily. Who would have thought only a few months or years ago that President Asad's standing, including with regard to soft power, is stronger than that of Iran's Ahmedinejad? Syria has already diversified its foreign policy and put the relationship with Iran in a broader context through its friendship with Turkey. Breaking with Iran would still entail more disadvantages than advantages for Syria at this point. But it remains open how far Syria would go to defend Iran. Until now, Syria has shied away from an automatic defence pact in case Iran was attacked.

As analysts in Damascus secretly concede, there is a breaking-point in the Iranian-Syrian relationship that could become more visible in the coming years.

Syria – as well as Turkey – is interested in keeping the Iraqi state as one piece whereas Tehran is gradually widening its influence in Iraq's Shiite south. If one day the Shiites were to demand autonomy or at least strive for an ideological union with Iran, the Kurds would certainly use the opportunity to leave the state structure and get behind a Sunni rump Iraq. Such a scenario would put a heavy strain on Syrian-Iranian relations. For a foreseeable period of time, however, Hezbollah will remain the strongest bracket of interests between both states. And, once again, each analysis ends with a reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

2.5 Iraq

Syria's view of Iraq has changed. Initially, the regime in Damascus was interested not

to let the unrest in the neighboring country die down. Thus, they kept the Americans busy and away from Damascus as survival insurance, so to speak. It was opportune for Damascus to let militant Islamists travel to Iraq and be killed by the Americans. Cooperation with the United States of George W. Bush bore no fruits. But in late 2008, Syria's interest of an Iraq that does not disintegrate any further started to prevail – also as pure self-protection.

After 24 years of interruption, both states took up diplomatic relations in 2006. They have started to cooperate in the fields of trade and security, although not without frictions. In August 2009, the Iraqi government blamed the Syrian government for letting terrorists cross the border who executed bomb attacks in Baghdad. Damascus acted in indignation and said that Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki wanted to divert interest from his own failure to deliver security to the Syrians. Iraq did not present any proof in this case.

Clearly, depending on the situation, Syria is able to exert constructive or destabilizing influence on Iraq's security. Therefore, the changed interest in favor of a stable Iraq as part of Syria's *raison d'état* is a positive sign. In any case, the relations between both countries are better than in recent history when the presidents Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Asad competed for the ideological leadership of pan-Arab Baathism in the Arab world.

2.6 Saudi Arabia

The geopolitical fortification of Iran after the Iraq war has brought the issue of Arab solidarity back on the table again. The Saudi-Syrian divergence (partly with Egypt in the anti-Syrian camp) had long been a determining factor after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who had strong economic links to Saudi Arabia and carried a Saudi passport. At times this led to a paralysis of the already fragile pan-

Arab cooperation – as demonstrated during the wide boycott of the Arab League summit in Damascus in March 2008.

However, many things have changed over the past two years. President Bashar al-Asad and King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz have exchanged a series of letters, political delegations and even personal visits. The détente in Lebanon between the pro-Syrian and pro-Saudi-Western camps is a consequence of more pragmatic relations between both countries. Riyadh and Damascus are still ideological and socio-political antipodes. In case of a war against Iran, being on better terms with Damascus will be of strategic significance for the Wahhabi kingdom.

There is another, somewhat unexpected reason, why Saudi Arabia has an interest to shoulder up with the other Arab players. The dualism between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the fight for regional hegemony in the Middle East has gained momentum with the fights in Yemen. Saudi Arabia needs support from the Sunni-Arab camp, as well as from Syria that (at least) has a Sunni majority, in order to confront Iran's ambitions in its neighborhood.

Apart from this, Saudi Arabia is not interested in Hezbollah gaining even more ground in Lebanon or relying on Syria, despite weakening in the past years, to maintain the key for the political pacification of Lebanon.

2.7 The United States

Although Syria and Israel entered negotiations with the mediation of Turkey, all participants know that an agreement between the archenemies could not be reached and or upheld without guarantees from the United States. Syria, in particular, is interested in walking the last mile with the US because no one else can press Israel for compromises. In his conversation with Seymour M. Hersh, Asad underlined that,

with regard to the global balance of power, a strong US is better for the world than a weak one.

But, right now the US is far from playing a dynamic role in the Middle East. Despite its changed tone toward the Muslim world, many Arabs are disappointed in the US administration. The expectations were high, though it appears that Obama held his Cairo speech too early - long before he could start to put into practice his new intentions.

This is due less to a lack of consciousness with regard to the problems, as Obama knows that his two predecessors displayed some form of hectic Middle East diplomacy in the last months of office instead of presenting themselves as peacemakers. It is domestic hurdles within the US that make impossible a Middle East policy according to Obama's ideas. The crisis of the economy and the labor market will set the tone of debates for some time, in the same manner as the debate on health care.

As soon as Obama would try to approach the issue of the Middle East conflict simultaneously, the political constellations would change even more to his disadvantage. Obama needs to resolve the most important domestic projects first before trying to find allies in political Washington to put pressure on Israel's leadership, to stop the building of settlements or to enter into concrete negotiations with the Palestinians and Syria. Otherwise, he would endanger his entire political legacy. After having taken the hurdles in his own country, he would forge new alliances in Congress in order to make things move in the Middle East - alliances that would not necessarily run along the present trenches of domestic politics.

US policy in the Middle East will most likely not shift before the elections in November this year. But the fact that the polarizing issue of healthcare is off the table helps Obama to gain more standing again and offers leeway for his foreign policy

projects. The Syrian side is waiting with concessions until Washington engages, and Asad has already invited Obama to Damascus. So far, however, political contacts have not gone beyond multiple visits of delegations.

Nevertheless, important progress is visible: Syria has declared itself ready again to take up an exchange of information with the CIA and the British MI6. At the same time, Asad made clear that the cooperation cannot be a one-way-street as it used to be under George W. Bush. Otherwise, Syria would once again stop to cooperate.¹⁰

Another positive sign is that after a long vacuum of almost five years, a new US ambassador was announced to Damascus at the end of January. Without any doubt, this is an important investment in bilateral relations because the reestablishment of a political eyelevel is a factor for Syrians that cannot be underestimated. The Syrian side, who is longing for recognition, would be ready to talk about many things if President Obama indeed travelled to Damascus one day. The irony is that right now, Obama would have a stronger influence to make things move in Syria than in Israel.

3. Domestic Developments in Syria

The hope that Syria would adopt domestic reforms if it did not continue to feel threatened from abroad has yet to materialize. In previous years, it could be discerned that with Syria's isolation and existential threat against its regime, the political leaders were less ready for experiments and cracked down all the more on opposition movements. The Damascene Spring of 2000/2001 at the beginning of Bashar al-Asad's first tenure remained nothing but a short flare-up of the secular intellectual Civil Society Movement.

Classifying Bashar al-Asad's first ten years in office in domestic and foreign policy phases sheds a light on external influences and constraints as well as on interests and motivations of the Damascus regime. Whereas the previous clampdowns on the predominantly secular opposition could somewhat be explained by foreign policy turbulences and dangers (Iraq war, Hariri assassination, sanctions, isolation, etc.), the present setback in human rights contradict a quite stable and successful, even liberating, phase of foreign policy from a Syrian perspective.

¹⁰ Conversation between Bashar al-Asad and Seymour M. Hersh at the end of December 2009, quotes published online in: *The New Yorker*, 03.02.2010 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2010/02/direct-quotes-bashar-assad.html>

Phases of Bashar's rule

June 2000 till now

Foreign Policy		Domestic Policy	
2000-2002	Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No significant steps, continuation of known problems and discourses. 	2000 – mid 2001	Cautious Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Damascus Spring, debating clubs, Civil Society Movement
2003-2005	Ideologization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stiff ideological positioning against the Iraq war, isolation, strengthening ties with Iran but mending relations with Turkey from 2004 onwards. 	mid 2001 – 2002	First clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suppression of the Damascus Spring, first losses of the Civil Society Movement, arrest of Riad Seif.
		2003-2004	Stagnation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil Society Movement simmers.
2005-2007	Contraction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hariri assassination and consequences, withdrawal from Lebanon, further isolation also by Europeans (France) and Arabs (Saudi Arabia). 	2005-2006	Confrontation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opposition gains courage, Damascus Declaration (Oct05), confrontational course between regime and Civil Society Movement; Rising influence of Islamists.
		2006	Second clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> End of open confrontation, silencing of the Civil Society Movement, arrest of Michel Kilo, Anwar al-Bounni.
2008-2010	Liberation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start of liberation from foreign policy dead-ends and pariah status, back on the international stage, well-thought alliances and decisions (Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia), consolidation of the regime. 	2007-2009	Silence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The comeback of fear to the streets, rest-opposition is in the underground; continued rise of Islamist influence.
		2009-2010	Third Clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrest of further senior opposition members and HR activists like Haitham Maleh, rising suppression of secularists and secular ideas; increased influence of Islamists up to the legislative level.

Of all actors, the secularist Baath regime has silenced the moderate and secular voices calling for a pluralization of Syrian society and piecemeal reforms as members of the Civil Society Movement have advocated. Islamist currents, however, have gained ground. Of course, this is partly due to the general trend of Islamization in the Arab Middle East from which Syria cannot wall itself off.

Yet, there are more reasons for this development: a) A strategy of the ruling class in Damascus is to let the Islamist danger simmer and present it as a deterrent in the sense of “its either them or us”; b) During the confrontation with the United States, violent Islamists served as a convenient instrument to weaken the occupying power in Iraq; c) Despite its secular orientation, Syria in its foreign policy has allied with Islamist partners like Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas (not necessarily with enthusiasm). The one who plays with fire abroad cannot ignore it at home; d) In a delicate international environment the Syrian regime cannot afford a war on two fronts, externally and domestically. A leading Syrian opposition figure expressed the relationship of the regime with the Islamists with the following pointed words: “Ours is the power, and you get the society.”¹¹

This has led to bizarre concessions in recent times. In May 2009, a draft for a new personal status law leaked from the justice ministry. The backward and conservative orientation of reform for the civil code from 1953 (which was amended in 1975) caused a scandal with civil society actors, with religious minorities as well as with moderate Islamic scholars. Many talked of “Afghan conditions” or “Talibanization” in Syria, the former bastion against the Muslim Brotherhood in times of Hafez al-Asad.

During this outrage, an interesting phenomena has emerged. Single-issue civil society movements have gained influence. They could finally prevent the enacting of the original reform draft of the personal status law through internet actions, the collection of signatures and lobbying, as public pressure made the government present a new draft. Even the otherwise toothless parliament rejected the proposal, a leading figure being the once influential moderate sheikh and Member of Parliament, Mohammed al-Habash, who has increasingly been sidelined and frustrated by the regime. The critics also assailed the occult formation of the paper through a commission whose members have never been made public.

Such a movement has been without precedent in Syria. The leeway of civil society associations, like the Syrian Women Observatory (SWO), seems to have grown as long as they do not use the word “democracy” or avoid fundamental ideological debates. Through single-issue organizations like SWO, successes have also been reached last year with regard to the murdering of female family members so-called honor killings. Asad issued a decree that increases punishment for those killings from a few months to two years, possibly in an attempt to dampen the outcry against the proposed new personal status law that he had been ready to sign. Women rights groups are now striving for the abolition of this crime and for equating it with murder. In Jordan, a similar initiative by King Abdullah failed a few years ago against the resistance of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliament.

Meanwhile, the wave of arrests of political representatives of human rights and the Civil Society Movement has not ebbed away. Haitham Maleh, aged 79 and president of the Human Rights Association of Syria (HRAS), was arrested in October 2009. The lawyer Anwar al-Bounni, who was supposed to run an EU-supported academy of human rights in Damascus, has been in prison since 2006.

¹¹ Interview with the author, November 2009.

Riad Seif, once an entrepreneur and a leading figure in the Damascene Spring, is sitting behind bars again despite advanced prostate cancer. Michel Kilo, journalist and the intellectual head of the Syrian Civil Society Movement, was released in June 2009 after three years in prison but is living under strict observation, is not allowed to engage in political activities or to travel abroad. Many other less-renowned intellectuals who were arrested in the past months or years could be added to the mix. In particular, secular-minded intellectuals have been threatened with travel bans as a first warning, often preceding arrests.

Given the increasing stability of the regime, these actions are counterproductive and exaggerate phobia, even more so because the members of the Civil Society Movement who remained inside Syria have not shown any ambitions to topple the Assad government and do share its secular fundamentals.

Therefore, criticism of the cautious and strategically reasonable involvement of Syria by western governments becomes understandable. The question is if Syria is too easily getting out of its pariah role. While appeals to human rights were raised with fervor internationally after the abatement of the Damascene Spring, they merely seem to be part of a dutiful exercise today. Others hold against this criticism that over the past years the country was equally uncritically isolated and stigmatized. So they consider it justified and plausible that recognition is given to Syria's importance and assets in the region. Moreover, a peaceful coexistence of religious minorities and the state's secularism should not be underestimated as values in that battered region.

An analyst in Damascus said: "The Europeans tend to underestimate Syria. And the Syrians tend to overestimate themselves. This is why both sides often talk to each

other like the deaf with the dumb."¹² Both tendencies can lead to a rash sense of security. This holds dangers in an extremely tense region in which talk is about war once again.

Only from Turkey can pragmatic tones be heard again. At the end of January, the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu answered the question if he could imagine a resumption of the mediation between Syria and Israel: "Yes, why not?"¹³ However, after Israel stormed a Turkish ship that formed part of a humanitarian maritime convoy for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and killed several of its members on May 31, another heavy blow was dealt to bilateral relations. Today it seems doubtful if Turkish-Israeli confidence will ever recover again to the point that a regional triangular peace mediation looks plausible. The ring lies in Washington's court again more than ever.

Dr. Phil. Carsten Wieland, April 2010

¹² Interview with the author in November 2009

¹³ "Turkey offers to resume Israel-Syria mediation", *Reuters*, January 29, 2010