

# Syria 2007: Outcome and Outlook

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Several centuries before the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership that is currently experiencing the pressure of the French administration to bury it alive and invent a Union for the Mediterranean, an agreement was signed in the 13th century between the Republic of Venice and the Principality of Aleppo. That accord included, in addition to commercial clauses that were dear to both “entities,” certain articles that referred to religious (cultural?) relations and to mutual respect for the differences between the two parties.

The relationship between Syria and the Mediterranean is therefore age-old and can even trace back its roots to the Phoenicians who sailed out from Syrian coasts to exploit, in the economic sense, the other shores of this basin well before our era, leaving their footprint there.

An ancestral relationship, that nowadays faces obstacles that appear less surmountable than they did thousands of years ago, in spite of the new communication technologies. How comes that a Syria, which still keeps a watchful eye on the opposite shore, is going through this period where the ports of the North seem to be closed to it and the sun of the far East attracts it without dazzling it?

### **An Interior in Ferment or in Stagnation?**

The years when Syrians experienced a glimmer of democracy seem very far away. The new generations know little of the experiences the Syrian political scene went through after its independence between 1946 and 1949 and later between 1953 and 1958 – short episodes of a relatively free parliamentary life

with “proper” elections and a press which in its time was rich in both quantitative and qualitative terms. After that, internal political life was hijacked so as to “promote progress and the emancipation of the masses.” These masses appeared to some to be immature and unfit to live “normally” without a “ruling” party and an “emblematic” leader. Down with all “imperialist” inventions that aim to “poison” a population seeking “unity, liberty and socialism.”

This atmosphere is the order of the day, with timid political improvements whose impact is not really felt by Syrians. On the other hand, the “socialist” economy has, since the turn of the century, undergone a liberalisation bordering on anarchy in a gloomy atmosphere where real unemployment rate, according to the most optimistic analysis, is closed to 20% in a very young society that, despite all efforts, continues to have a relatively high birth rate.

The withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 did not resolve the economic situation but rather brought back into the labour market thousands of workers previously absorbed by Lebanese demand. The disappearance of a parallel economy benefiting a privileged class also contributed to aggravating an economic crisis, alongside the drop in crude oil production from 600,000 to 300,000 barrels.

Paradoxically, opening up the banking system has, somehow or other, benefited the Lebanese banking sector, badly affected by the withdrawal of billions of dollars by the Syrian “parasitic” bourgeoisie which has grown rich through an opaque economic and political system. Meanwhile, this last year has seen the birth of tens of projects financed by funds from Gulf countries, and particularly Qatar which still has very good relations with Syria, unlike those maintained by its larger neighbour Saudi Arabia. The majority of these projects are concentrated on the areas of services, tourism and construction. There are very few investments in industry, suffering on the

public side from neglect and corruption and, on the private, from a whole *armada* of complicated and contradictory rules that produce corruption and the establishment of relationships of favouritism with decision makers.

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Similarly, subsidies have been cut back as a result of the global rise in the cost of commodities. Prices shoot up and there is a constant failure to find solutions. Poorly considered alternatives, by economists with little experience, risk to further complicate the situation of poorer families. Every pretext is used to try and defend the failures of a decaying administration. Since these events arose, Iraqi immigration has served as a useful alibi, alongside the world economic crisis and, lastly, the boycott applied against Syria in respect of new technologies. While these issues are not entirely to be discounted as impacts on the Syrian economy, it is certain that good governance and transparency, as well as judicial independence, could be highly useful factors in restructuring the economy and society. While the economy is being opened up, the public arena remains restricted. Freedom of expression and association are not prime elements in the state vision of Syrian society. Working within an “ideology” that condemns practically any critical opinion because the country “opposes external pressures and so too the wish of enemy forces to destabilise it,” the media remain tightly controlled, as are other tools of public expression. Some attempts – more courageous than well-organised – result in an intellectual expression that seeks to find its way around undefined and shifting red lines.

One internal factor that should not be ignored is growing religiosity at the heart of a society that is alien to radical tendencies. This phenomenon is not surprising in the regional and international context. Nevertheless, it has been broadly influenced and “moderated” by a desire on the part of the political authorities to tame a scourge that they see as “dangerous” and has succeeded in destabilising several regimes in the region. Following the bloody confrontations of the 1980s with the Muslim Brotherhood,

the “official” religion has reclaimed centre stage successfully for the time being, notably through pan-Islamic alliances that the political powers are developing in the region. That gives it a margin of credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of some writers. It should be noted that this growing religiosity does not fit in at all with the ruling Ba’ath party’s, but it seems to be the way of things in this region that the best is made of influential temporary factors.

## Contested Regional Role

Since the 1970s, Syria has become a required player at the political chessboard of the Near East. This place was attributable to the unquestionable weight carried by its late President Hafez al-Assad. His successor and son, Bashar al-Assad, has attempted to perpetuate this inheritance but that appears to have been excessively hard to do. Is it he who has been unable to preserve the desired “weight” or has it been rather the political circumstances that have prevented him from exercising it? Wisdom appears to dictate that time will be needed to answer this question – as simple as it is complex. Changes, manoeuvres, plots and other factors ceaselessly appear on the regional scene and the years to come may explain what we are going through at the moment.

2007 was an extension of those recent precedents relating to the crisis of relations with the West, but also simultaneously brought with it some new developments under the same agenda. The American wish to demonise Iran and its “faithful” Syrian ally was unable to go any further than rhetoric. The close relations between Syria and Iran, while being relations of strategic interest put in place by the previous leaders of both countries, seemed to be reinforced during that year notably through large-scale Iranian investments in Syrian industry.

Despite appearances, it is important to make clear that this alliance is not a “catholic” marriage and that there are points of divergence in play particularly as regards the issues of Lebanon and Iraq. On the other hand, it is also not easy to envisage a distancing by Syria from Iran demanded by the West and some Arab rulers in order for the doors to be reopened for its readmission into the international fold. Thus, the thesis that predicates the creation and the danger of a Shi’ite upsurge that would threaten the preponderantly Sunni region, propounded by the Americans and accepted by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, does not seem

to have any logical foundation. It remains in the domain of fantasies that comfort politicians from those countries on which the Americans bestow the title of moderate States...

During 2007 the Europeans were unable to arrive at a common policy in the region. Positions diverged as to worrying matters such as the Lebanon crisis and the Israel-Palestine conflict. It was therefore easy to distinguish between French diplomacy (if diplomacy it is) and those of Spain or Germany. Because, in contrast to the French desire set on boycotting Syrian diplomacy (at least officially), the Germans and the Spanish kept open their channels with Damascus without thereby seeing satisfactory results. The deployment of European forces in southern Lebanon following the Israeli assault in July 2006 led certain European countries to keep in place their channels for consultation and exchange with Syria.

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A political change at the head of the French executive seemed to offer a glimmer of hope for a dialogue process to be set in motion between Paris and Damascus. That was not impossible, particularly bearing in mind the presence of advisors in Nicolas Sarkozy's entourage, who enjoy a good knowledge of the road to Damascus. However, American hegemony over issues and in particular as regards the Lebanon crisis, blocked that approach and led the French to follow "instructions" to stall or, at best, to abstain and give way to an American administration whose members are often not singing from the same hymn-book in the positions they adopt.

Paradoxically in a "demand market," the European Union's diplomatic machinery remains totally absent from the Syrian stage. Yet economic co-operation between Syria and Europe continues to be built discreetly and modestly, not determined by any strict correlation with the poor degree of political relations. Meanwhile, several projects have been developed in response to European prompting in the areas of economic and administrative reform.

Within its Arab environment Syria maintains stable relations with certain countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia...) and more turbulent ones with others (Egypt, Saudi Arabia...). The latter group contest Syria's role

in Lebanon and its alliance with Iran which, in their eyes, represents a threat in the region. The Saudi context is more complex as it includes consideration of "dealings" with the Americans in relation to various matters (Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon). It appears that this US-Saudi pact has come up against certain reservations at the heart of the Washington administration and even at that of the royal family in Riyadh. The policy for a diplomatic embargo adopted in relation to Syria is not leading to a softening of the stand taken by Damascus, but is rather, on the contrary, buttressing it. Syria no longer dictates events in Lebanon, but it can play a major role in blocking or unblocking the situation. Similarly, Syria continues to have influence on the chief players (Sunnis and Shi'ites) in the Iraqi scenario, even though they do not wield the same political power as the Iranians.

Good relations with Turkey give comfort to Damascus as well as a significant economic and political breathing space in the region. In addition to that, Turkey is happy to offer its services in fulfilling the role of intermediary in possible negotiations with Israel. That role is accepted – indeed demanded – by both countries.

Contrary to the perceptions of some and the wishes of others, the political powers in Syria are not undergoing a period of weakness or even agnosia. They feel protected by events and because they have a series of cards they can still play. They also know their existence is not a foremost preoccupation except for an "extremist minority" in the American and Saudi administration. Their alliance with Iran gives them an advantage in pursuing negotiations with all the Arab or Western "enemy." Their attitude in respect of Mediterranean institutions and projects does not present them with any concerns. Since the failure to sign an agreement of association, Syria has developed its strategy towards the region (Turkey, Iran) and has also extended its exchanges in the direction of China.

## Conclusion

Several challenges confront the immediate future of this small country that retains a real importance on the regional political scene.

The economic reforms which Syria is seeking to undertake risk having pernicious consequences at a social level. Recent months have seen alarming rises in the price of consumer products as well as en-

### 19th SUMMIT OF THE ARAB LEAGUE IN RIYADH, 28th-29th MARCH

Heads of state, Kings and Presidents of 22 Arab countries belonging to the Arab League, except Libya, met in the Saudi capital for the 19th Arab Summit. Other international personalities also attended the meeting: UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) Javier Solana, and representatives of several Asian, South American and European countries.

The main item on the agenda was the relaunching of the peace process with Israel based on the "land for peace" principle in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative approved by the Beirut Summit in 2002. Under the plan, Arab nations would recognise Israel if Israel withdraws from land occupied in the 1967 War and a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital is created with a "just settlement" of the Palestinian refugee problem. Support for the Palestinian people and Palestinian National Authority are other topics tackled in the discussions. A second crucial issue was the ongoing Lebanese crisis. Lebanon itself was represented in the summit with two delegations: one led by pro-Syrian President Émile Laoud and the other headed by pro-western Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The Summit reiterated full Arab solidarity with Lebanon and provided political and economic support to the Lebanese state while emphasizing the need to achieve a firm and lasting ceasefire as well as the need for unearthing the truth behind the terrorist assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The gathering stressed the brotherly and historical ties between Lebanon and Syria based on mutual

respect for sovereignty and independence. Another important topic tackled during the meeting was the need for respecting the will of the Iraqi people to determine their political future stressing that a security solution is based on respect for Iraq's unity and sovereignty.

The conference expressed appreciation for efforts being made by the Arab League in cooperation with the UN, EU and African Union to resolve the Darfur crisis.

The Summit called on the Arab States to expand the use of peaceful nuclear energy and technology while stressing the need to free the region of all weapons of mass destruction.

Efforts and contact with the EU Presidency and European Commission were envisaged to develop and enhance Arab-European Dialogue. Relations with China and Latin America should also be improved. To this extent the conference welcomed the convening of the 2nd Summit of Arab and Latin American Countries scheduled for Morocco in 2008. Finally, Arab leaders decided to convene the 20th Arab League Council under the chairmanship of the Syrian Republic on 11th-12th March 2008.

For further information:

The Riyadh Declaration

[www.mofa.gov.sa/Detail.asp?InNewsItemID=62681](http://www.mofa.gov.sa/Detail.asp?InNewsItemID=62681)

[www.mideastweb.org/arabsummit2007.htm](http://www.mideastweb.org/arabsummit2007.htm)

ergy costs. Despite wage increases, the market still shows itself able to absorb them mercilessly and uncontrollably. The middle classes are dropping out of their status level and joining the lower layers with all that implies from every aspect. The fundamental importance of that class in developing a cultural and intellectual appetite in any society is widely recognised. Its disappearance thus causes an impoverishment that goes beyond the economic.

Reform of the economy and possibly of the administration requires to be accompanied politically in the form of democratisation of the system. It is that which seems to present an obstacle to every positive solution sought.

There is a further challenge that appears formidable even if it is not at the forefront of issues to be resolved: the recovery of the Golan Heights occupied in 1967 and then annexed in 1980 by Israel. A just peace accord with that State can defuse a large part of the tension in the region. However, will it be possible to achieve it bearing in mind that war remains one of the primary means of welding Israeli society together? Syria is trying to reformulate its new regional role within the framework of new regional and international circumstances. The outcome will depend greatly on the Lebanon crisis being resolved and on a reconciliation with influential Arab countries in this re-

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gion. However, such a reconciliation requires willingness to be shown not just regionally but also internationally.

Europe remains for Syria a near neighbour and an "old" continent that brings hope and modernity. Both the rulers and the general population make a big distinction between the European West and the American one. The players must be found on both sides to take advantage of that. It is also important that a just peace is applied to the region but that is still in the realms of wishful thinking since, with the policy of "organised chaos" favoured by the Americans and the "follow-my-leader" attitude shown in the case of the majority of European countries, Israel continues to be an "untouchable" state in a region where daily retaliations by regimes in place or by foreign forces are becoming common currency and risk developing into new modes of response. These will not just threaten the region but also and most importantly the Mediterranean Basin as a whole.