

# The Role of Syria in the Post-Iraq War Middle East

**Raymond Hinnebusch**

Deputy Director

Institute of Middle East, Central Asia  
and Caucasus Studies (MECACS)  
University of St. Andrews

In 2003-04, Syria struggled to cope with the consequences of its stand against the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. President Bashar al-Asad's defiance of Washington over the war, in striking contrast to the appeasement of other Arab leaders, was no idiosyncratic, easily reversible choice and reflected Syria's Arab nationalist foreign policy tangent that has endured through countless leadership changes. Washington's "Neo-Conservatives" made little secret of their desire to use forced "regime change" to reshape the Middle East with only the submission of Syria, Lebanon and Iran needed to complete this project after the fall of Saddam.<sup>1</sup> Sandwiched between Israeli military power in the East and American forces to the West, Syria faced a barrage of demands from Washington. Public outrage at the US invasion made regime legitimacy incompatible with submission to American dictates; yet, the regime's survival required some accommodation with Washington.

Syria was one of the few countries not to acquiesce in the US fait accompli in Iraq. Although Syria officially closed its borders to prevent the transit of resistance fighters to Iraq, it rejected US demands to devote major resources to policing its 500 mile long border. More-

over, Syria gave political, though not armed, support to the mainly Sunni Arab resistance and refused to recognize the US-installed Iraq Governing Council. There were conflicts with this council and the US over Iraqi assets that had allegedly been transferred to Syrian banks before the war. Syria campaigned in vain to prevent the council's wider recognition by both the Arab League and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). By the end of 2003, as debate raged in Iraq over the transition to self rule, Syria supported those, notably the Shia, demanding elections against the US attempt to manipulate representation to an Iraqi constituent assembly. Syria, Bashar affirmed, would recognize Iraq when elected and autonomous, not imposed, institutions were in place.<sup>2</sup> Syria did nevertheless later receive Iyad Alawi, the US-backed head of the Iraqi interim government. Syria hoped it might yet salvage an acceptable Iraqi outcome: if the resistance continued unabated, the US would be unlikely to take on Syria as well; if Iraq was democratized, Syria's historic relations with many key forces there might still secure a friendly Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

US-Syria relations remained in protracted crisis in the year after the invasion of Iraq. The US presented and continued to insist on a list of demands on Syria – to expel militant Palestinian factions, dismantle Hizbollah, withdraw from Lebanon and co-operate with the occupation regime in Iraq. These struck at Syria's most vital interests – its cards in the

struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world; no Syrian government could accede to them except under the direst and most imminent threat. Some diplomats in Damascus believed the US hostility stemmed from a desire to humiliate Syria for its opposition to the war.<sup>4</sup> In October, an Israeli air-raid on a Palestinian camp near Damascus was openly justified by Bush and widely seen as part of an American strategy to ratchet up the pressure on Syria; nearly a year later in October 2004, Israel assassinated a Hamas leader in Damascus. In November 2003 the so-called "Syria Accountability Act" passed congress, allowing Bush to apply a combination of diplomatic and economic sanctions against Syria. The measure, as Stephen Zunes put it, "is so filled with hyperbole and double-standards that it undermines its own credibility."<sup>5</sup>

The so-called "WMD" (weapons of mass destruction) issue typifies the US "neo-con" attempt, not merely to contest specific Syrian policies but to threaten Syria's most vital security interests and to manufacture a Syrian-American crisis. Although Syria's chemically-armed missile force is a purely defensive deterrent, crucial to its security against a vastly superior nuclear-armed Israeli military; and although, far from posing a threat to anyone, it is a key factor in the balance of power that has maintained two decades of peace on the Syrian-Israel border, the neo-cons repeatedly tried to paint Syrian capabilities as a threat to stability in the

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Seale, "Why Are The US and Israel Threatening Syria?," *al-Hayat* 2003/04/18.

<sup>2</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2003/12/01](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/01)

<sup>3</sup> Anders Strindberg and Mats Warn, "Syria, Hizbullah and the Iraqi dimension", *Middle East International*, 13th June 2003, pp. 27-9.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Strindberg, "America's nonsensical Syria policy," *MEI*, July 25, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Zunes, "The Syrian Accountability Act and the Triumph of Hegemony." *FPIF Policy Report*, October 2003.

Middle East and to the US itself. Syria proposed turning the Middle East into a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction under UN supervision but Washington was not interested: the neo-con aim was to force a unilateral disarmament on Syria, leaving it wholly open to Israeli power and vulnerable to an Israeli-dictated peace settlement.

Analysts close to the Syrian regime seemed, nevertheless, to believe that Syria could steer a middle way between unrealistic defiance of US power and surrender to its dictates. They believed Syria retained bargaining cards, namely its centrality to an Arab-Israel peace, to regional stability, to containing terrorism and to restraining Hizbollah with its proven ability to hurt Israel. Syria realized that the viability of this strategy depended on whether Washington's difficulties in Iraq brought it to the realization that its military power did not nullify its need for co-operation from regional states and that this depended on mutual respect based on sovereignty. Syrian elites also clung to the view that the US could not as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq because Syria did not violate international legitimacy and was not subject to international sanctions. Syria had little oil wealth to fund a US occupation and no opposition prepared to collaborate with the US.

In practice, Syria tried to make incremental concessions to mollify US moderates without giving up its "cards" in the regional power struggle. Syria discouraged the movement of resistance fighters to Iraq. Since the neo-con's quarrel with Syria was ultimately over Israel, Syria tried to meet their demands halfway. Hizbollah came under heavy pressure to refrain from challenging Israel in southern Lebanon, the offices of Palestinian

militant factions in Damascus were closed and Syria urged Islamic Jihad to agree to a cease-fire in Palestine. Syria did not obstruct the so-called "road map" for Middle East peace even though it excluded Syria at Israel's behest. Syria offered to resume negotiations with Israel at the point where the two had reached agreement under former Israeli Prime Minister Rabin. The hard-line Israel leader, Ariel Sharon had, however, no interest in this offer and the neo-cons believed peace and the Golan would be gifts to which Syria was not entitled to. Each Syrian concession merely whet Washington's appetite for more. William J. Burns, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs opined that "Syria harbours the illusion that cosmetic steps will be enough to defuse our concerns... from a misplaced belief that U. S. engagement in Iraq and with the Israelis and Palestinians will prevent us from pursuing a robust agenda with Syria." Burns acknowledged that Syrian cooperation against al-Qaeda had saved American lives but this was not sufficient to outweigh Damascus continued support for other "terror groups" – i.e. those contesting Israel's hold over occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>6</sup>

Damascus pursued a diplomacy of diversifying ties in order avoid the international isolation that had allowed the US to target Iraq. Syria and Turkey shared an interest in containing Kurdish "separatism" in Iraq and amicable relations developed. Bashar also pursued alignment with Europe as crucial to Syria's economic re-generation and as providing a political shield against US hostility. Specifically, Syria negotiated a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership agreement with the EU which when implemented would require Syria to increasingly open its economy, adopt European business

practices and norms, reduce the role of the state and the favouritism enjoyed by regime-connected crony capitalists and open space for a more competitive indigenous capitalist class that would have a stake in Syria's alignment with the West. The agreement carried serious risks of de-industrialization and social unrest in Syria, but Bashar's reformist leadership saw no alternative to Syria's integration into the world capitalist order. From the EU's point of view, the adherence of Syria to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership would complete the ring of agreements with the Arab countries by which it hoped to encourage political stability and economic development on its periphery.

The EU and Syria initialled Syria's adherence to the Euro-Med agreement at the end of 2003, but certain European governments insisted on making it conditional on Syria's adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention – a virtual unilateral disarmament that Damascus could not accept. When this issue was finessed and the accord finally signed, France chose to throw another monkey wrench into the machinery, threatening to block it if Syria did not withdraw from Lebanon. Moreover, the US and France combined to push through a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution in September 2004 demanding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in defiance of the Lebanese government's rejection of such interference in its domestic affairs. Thus, European alignment with Washington's dubious policy of threats against Syria's vital interests created an external environment that obstructed economic liberalization from within, undermined Bashar's reform project and threatened to sacrifice a Euro-Med arrangement certain to rapidly attach Syria's interests to the Western world.

<sup>6</sup> Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Washington, DC, October 30, 2003.