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Washington in Pursuit of Damascus

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The initial visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the Middle East during the first week of March inaugurated the Obama era's approach to the region. Her excursion ended more with a whimper than a bang. Secretary Clinton participated in the Sharm el-Sheikh conference for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, where she also sought to bolster the spirits of the moderate Arab, anti-Iranian forces in the Middle East. In addition to the conference, Clinton journeyed to a number of capitals, including Jerusalem, where she met with members of the outgoing Israeli government, but also with Prime Minister-designate Binyamin Netanyahu. Overall, it appears that the trip's importance was mainly in the fact that it occurred, as it was designed to convey the new Administration's commitment to a greater degree of involvement in Middle East issues, particularly the Arab-Israeli peace process.

In the absence of any specific policy message from Clinton, the American and international media's attention focused on her announcement that two US diplomats would be sent to Damascus. Their mission was to examine the ways by which a Syrian-US dialogue could be renewed, after the years of deep freeze under George W. Bush. Clinton's declaration immediately raised expectations for a warming of bilateral ties, and perhaps even a possible end of Syria's long-standing alliance with Iran. It was as if all that was necessary to end Syria's generation-long alliance with Iran and to fundamentally alter its world view and basic positions was for Washington to respond favorably to Syria's desire for improved ties.

As opposed to the US, where 2009 promises change in both style and substance, Syrian politics at this moment in time is marked more by

continuity than change. Damascus is likely to adhere to established policies in both the domestic and foreign policy spheres, the latter including Lebanon, Iraq, Israel and Iran. It appears that the assumption that Syria is prepared, and even desires to bolt from the Iranian embrace and embrace America has no basis in fact. In fact, the opposite is the case. In Syrian eyes, what is actually happening is that the Americans are the ones doing the embracing. Indeed, Syria expects the US to comply entirely with Syria's demands: in Iraq – a total American withdrawal; in Lebanon – handing it back over to Syrian control; and with regard to Israel – the complete return of the Golan Heights to Syria in return for minimal Syrian concessions. In return for all of these things, Syria will be prepared to maintain friendly relations with the US, but is definitely not prepared to follow Jordan's and Egypt's lead and become a client state dependent on the good will and whims of Washington, especially with regard to matters dealing with human rights and democracy. President Bashar al-Asad explains to all those who want to listen that it is actually in America's interest that Syria maintain its ties to Iran so that Damascus can act as a bridge and a mediator between Washington and Tehran.

Seemingly, the goodwill that the Obama Administration has demonstrated towards Damascus has opened up opportunities for Syria to promote its interests, but it appears likely that Damascus will fail to capitalize on the new circumstances, just as it did in the past. In order to do so, a leader of the caliber of Anwar al-Sadat is required. However, Bashar is neither capable of, nor interested in following the Sadat example. Rather, he is comfortable with his standing as the leader of the radical camp in the Arab world. The role is less dangerous to his life, and also confers upon him considerable popularity among the Arab public. In addition, from the standpoint of cold hard strategic analysis, Syria will not break off its ties from Iran so long as it is in a state of war with Israel, and so long as it does not attain a political settlement which insures the return of the Golan.

Moreover, Syrian foreign policy has always been characterized by hesitation, caution and passivity. It does not appear that Syria is seeking to promote a new direction, but rather to maintain the status quo, internally and in its foreign policy. According to the Syrian view, this policy has produced results, without obligating it to abandon its positions and principles. Hence, during the last few years, Syria's work has been done by others. The US under Obama is closer than ever to withdrawing from Iraq. Israel under Olmert displayed a willingness to sign a peace agreement with Syria which would include a total withdrawal from the Golan Heights. And finally, with regard to the Lebanese arena, the assumption that it was possible to bring an end to Syrian influence in Lebanon turns out to have been exaggerated and unrealistic. It seems that only Syria is capable of insuring the existence of a

stable Lebanese entity.

Incidentally, and against expectations, the Obama Administration has displayed an entirely realistic approach to Syria. Its newly-appointed Special Envoy to the region, George Mitchell, avoided visiting Damascus himself. Instead, two lower level diplomats were dispatched to make the first contact there. The US made it clear that it still expects a change in Syrian behavior with regard to the issues of terrorism, Lebanon and Iraq. And it seems that the bulk of US energies are going to be invested in trying to develop a dialogue with Iran. The degree of success of such an effort will clearly have ramifications for Syria, which in recent years essentially made itself a client state of Iran. If Bashar is sorry about this, he need blame no one but himself.

In conclusion, the Syrian-American relationship has returned to the spotlight and is likely to witness a flurry of diplomatic activity in the coming months. Its importance will only increase in light of the upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections in June 2009, which are likely to result in a further strengthening of Syrian power and influence in Lebanon. A possible failure of the dialogue which the US is seeking with Iran would only increase Damascus's standing in Washington. At the same time, it seems doubtful that the American effort to warm up relations with Syria will be sufficient to bring about a real change in Syrian foreign policy, particularly with regard to Iran, as well the peace process with Israel. Nor is it likely to free Lebanon from its clutches, nor effect real social, economic or political change at home. The experience of the last few years taught Bashar that by sticking to his positions and refusing to alter them, he was able to break out of isolation and survive in power. Hence, there is no reason, according to his understanding, to change his positions, particularly as there is no compelling reason or pressure to do so. The fact that the chances of advancing the Israeli-Syrian peace process appears less likely than ever in light of the expected composition of the next Israeli government will also serve to prevent Damascus from accepting the terms of Washington's embrace.

Nevertheless, in light of the failure of Washington's policies towards Damascus in recent years, the notion of instituting a dialogue with it is not a bad idea. Dialogue is always preferable to tension and violence, and can potentially prepare the ground for breakthroughs when conditions have sufficiently ripened. Still, such a dialogue also requires a realistic and nuanced understanding of what may or may not be achievable at any particular point in time. Currently, at any rate, the answer to the question of what can be achieved is a simple one: very little.

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