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# The Syrian Solution

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**Summary: Damascus did not commission Hezbollah's raid into Israel, but it did see the ensuing crisis as a chance to prove its importance. Western powers should realize that Syria is ready to be part of a regional solution -- as long as its own interests are recognized.**

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## DOING NOTHING

Despite a flurry of charges to the contrary, the Syrian government hardly "commissioned" Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers on July 12. According to accusations, Damascus wanted to divert international attention from the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, and so it sent its Lebanese proxy to start a war -- with devastating consequences for Lebanon and for regional stability. But Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, was not acting on behalf of Assad when he ordered the cross-border attack. Especially since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah has become much more independent of Damascus. Most likely, high-level Syrian officials did not know about the July 12 raid until after it happened.

Nonetheless, Damascus quickly realized that the ensuing regional crisis could work to its advantage. Although the Syrian government clearly had no interest in being drawn into the war, as the fighting erupted, it began to emphasize just how easily the entire Middle East could flare up if it remained isolated and the broader Arab-Israeli conflict was not solved. Simply by doing nothing and letting the conflict continue, the thinking went, Damascus could prove that its help would be necessary to bring stability and avert a larger conflagration.

Western leaders should indeed take this opportunity to reengage Damascus, recognizing that Syria is a major player that can be ignored only at the risk of continuing turmoil. By taking into account legitimate Syrian interests, they could persuade Assad to work constructively with the Lebanese government and with international efforts to stabilize Lebanon, withdraw support from forces trying to undermine an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, and prepare his own country for diplomatic reengagement and eventual peace with Israel. All this would also separate Syria's agenda in the Arab-Israeli conflict from that of Iran.

## ASSAD'S FOLLIES

Understanding Syria's behavior during the crisis requires taking into account the domestic and regional challenges that the Syrian regime currently faces. Since Bashar al-Assad took over after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, six years ago, state institutions have weakened and lost considerable authority. The regime has yielded little on demands for reform: there has been some cautious economic liberalization, but dissent is still being suppressed, and corruption has, according to all available accounts, increased tremendously.

Meanwhile, regional dynamics and mistakes on the part of the Assad government have left Damascus more isolated than ever, both internationally and among key Arab partners, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia. One mistake has been underestimating American anger over Syria's tolerance of Iraqi insurgents. Assad also misjudged the international and Lebanese reactions to his decision to have the mandate of the Damascus-backed Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, extended in 2004 and failed to anticipate the storm that would ensue after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minster Rafiq Hariri, which forced Syrian troops to leave Lebanon.

Conflicts from neighboring Iraq are slowly creeping into Syria. Although the government has made some efforts, and is willing to cooperate with the Iraqi government, to better control the Syrian-Iraqi border, young Syrians are being recruited for jihad in Iraq in local mosques. There is a real risk that after honing their skills and becoming radicalized in Iraq, these young jihadists will return to Syria as a new generation of Islamists prepared to take up arms. The Assad regime could easily become their next target.

The sectarian tensions unleashed in Iraq also threaten Syria's stability. The Syrian population is roughly 50 percent Sunni Arab and 20 percent Sunni Kurdish, with the rest composed of other Arab groups (Alawites, Christians, Druze) and smaller non-Arab minorities. Compared to some of its neighbors, Syria looks like a showcase of sectarian toleration. Yet some remote regions in northeastern Syria, where tensions between Arabs and Kurds run high, are no longer fully under the central government's control. Sunni notables complain about growing Shiite influence, especially Iranian money flowing into the country to buy, among other things, real estate around the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The growing Sunni-Shiite polarization in the region has also prompted other powers, notably Saudi Arabia, to try to persuade Syria to downgrade its relationship with Iran -- in an effort to prevent the formation of a "Shiite crescent" that could one day stretch from Iran, over a Shiite-dominated Iraq and Alawite-ruled Syria, and to a Lebanon dominated by the Shiite Hezbollah. All of this gives Syria good reason to fear the breakup of Iraq, the

extension of civil war, and any further escalation of sectarian (or "confessionalist") tensions in the region.

In the postcrisis atmosphere of regional instability, the Assad regime feels vindicated in some of its domestic and regional stances, including its refusal to give in to demands to open the political system. One member of the ruling elite told me that any discussion about giving up Article 8 -- the provision in the Syrian constitution that defines the ruling Baath Party as the "leading party" in state and society -- was over.

## IN CRISIS, OPPORTUNITY

Hezbollah depends on Iran for financial support, arms, training, and ideological guidance, and on Syria for supply routes. But despite Hezbollah's dependence on Iran -- and the fact that Nasrallah accepts Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as his spiritual guide -- Tehran has never overseen Hezbollah's operational planning. That task long fell to Damascus, the priority of whose interests in Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict Tehran accepted after the Lebanese civil war ended in 1991. Hezbollah's strategic and tactical coordination was with Syria rather than Iran -- at least as long as Syria had some 20,000 troops stationed in Lebanon and controlled political life there.

Until last year, the chiefs of the Syrian istikhbarat (military intelligence) in Lebanon exerted considerable influence over Hezbollah's political and military activities. Ghazi Kanaan, the istikhbarat chief who was a de facto proconsul, saw to it that Hezbollah's military actions did not exceed Damascus-determined bounds, as was apparent when, for example, Syria ensured that the militia accepted the U.S.-brokered "April understanding" that ended a two-month war between Hezbollah and Israel in 1996. It was understood by all that Syria -- rather than the Lebanese government -- would both represent Hezbollah's interests and discipline the group when necessary. The arrangement worked, more or less, for many years.

Two events undermined it. The first was the death of Hafez al-Assad and the ascension of Bashar in 2000, which came just a month after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon, a triumph that Hezbollah claimed as its own. Whereas the father never left any doubt about who had the upper hand in the regime's relationship with Hezbollah, the son allowed it to move closer to an equal partnership, and the Syrian government has sought to benefit from Hezbollah's popularity. Nasrallah has become a frequent distinguished guest at the presidential palace. Militia fighters have been allowed to parade in Syrian cities, and photos of Nasrallah are now often posted alongside those of the Syrian president -- not a sight that Hafez al-Assad would have appreciated.

More important was Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, forced by the Hariri assassination and the subsequent "Cedar Revolution." Because Syria no longer has its own military and intelligence in Lebanon, its means of putting pressure on the militia are limited: it can withhold arms shipments that pass through its territory, but it can no longer directly threaten Hezbollah on the ground.

In private, many officials in Damascus admitted their initial uneasiness over Hezbollah's cross-border abduction in July. But the leadership quickly recognized how the confrontation in Lebanon could prove beneficial to its own strategic interests. Consequently, it refrained from taking any steps that could have helped to de-escalate the situation.

This calculation was largely correct. Indeed, European governments began almost immediately to think about how to reengage Syria, rather than continuing to ostracize it. The war also gave Damascus a chance to improve its strained relationship with Beirut -- which has been especially bad since the Hariri assassination -- without ceding any ground politically or ideologically. To the astonishment of both Lebanese and international observers, Syria has worked to help relieve the humanitarian disaster in Lebanon, sending aid and welcoming 200,000 Lebanese refugees. Damascus has deftly used the crisis as an opportunity to present a benign face to the Lebanese.

## THE POLITICS OF INSINUATION

Syria's negotiating strategy has traditionally been one of insinuation, treating politics like a game in which one should hold one's cards as close to one's chest as possible until one is certain of the benefit of playing them. The regime's behavior during the recent crisis was no exception. Damascus sent only tentative signals that it could become a more constructive player -- for example, by supporting the Lebanese government's efforts to get the country back on its feet. Still, the meaning of these signals should not be in doubt: as Spain's foreign minister, Miguel Moratinos, put it after meeting with officials in Damascus, Syria "wants to be part of the solution ... not of the problem."

There are a number of things that Syria could do to help improve stability. It could, among other things, agree to the exchange of embassies with Lebanon. More important, Syria could help settle the dispute over Shebaa Farms (an Israeli-occupied strip of land that Israel seized from Syria in 1967 but is now claimed by Lebanon) by signing an international agreement that recognizes it as Lebanese territory. Regionally, Damascus could use its influence on Palestinian parties to encourage them to resume a constructive dialogue on forming a national unity government in the Palestinian territories. It could also work with the government in Baghdad to improve security in Iraq; Syria has been a haven not only for Iraqi insurgents but also for the fortunes of former Iraqi officials.

This is not to say that there are no divisions within the Syrian government about how to handle the current situation. Hard-liners, such as Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa, reportedly believe that a confrontational stance would serve Syria better than open signs of moderation. But a Western offer to reengage Syria could tip the balance in favor of moderates, weakening the influence of such hard-line opinions.

Meanwhile, Syria's alliance with Iran is largely a marriage of convenience, based on a commonality of interests that will persist as long as both parties are isolated. Damascus and Tehran do not have the same agenda. As one high-ranking Syrian official put it to me, "We want a peace process, they don't." But reengaging Syria would not break up the political relationship between Damascus

and Tehran, nor end the social and economic exchanges between the two countries. Most likely, it would lead to an agreement to disagree on certain goals, particularly related to the Middle East peace process, along with an acceptance of the preponderance of each country's national influence in its immediate neighborhood, as there was when Syria and Israel engaged diplomatically between 1991 and 2000.

Syrian officials have made clear what they want in return for cooperating with the West on regional issues. They want the United States to stop ostracizing Syria and threatening the Assad government with "regime change," they want to establish a role for Syria in the region, and, most important, they want to regain their Israeli-occupied territory through a renewed peace process. A high-ranking member of the Baath Party explained that "after [Syria] left Lebanon, [the West] thought the regime was dead," and so Damascus used its support of Hamas and Hezbollah to prove that it was still alive. If the regime in Damascus is made to feel secure, it will, among other things, be easier for it to declare publicly that Hezbollah should be just one political party among others in Lebanon (rather than continuing to sing the praises of resistance), to cooperate with the Lebanese government rather than accuse it and the political majority in Lebanon of shilling for the West or Israel (as Assad did in an August 15 speech), and to thereby improve its relations with other Arab states. All of this would be good for Syria's own economy and could allow the regime to embark on some domestic reforms.

## PREEMPTIVE REENGAGEMENT

A policy of sidelining Syria will neither stabilize Lebanon nor advance U.S. or European interests in the rest of the region. Nor will it lead to any correction of Syria's course. The end result could even be state failure, with the government becoming largely ineffectual and the country becoming another battleground for dangerous and destabilizing transnational forces. Engaging Syria on the basis of its national interests is the best way to avert such a scenario -- and to help bring Lebanon back from the disaster of recent months.

The European Union should resume the ratification process for the EU-Syria Association Agreement, which would lay the groundwork for closer cooperation (the process has been frozen since 2004). That may be hard to swallow for those who want to punish Syria, but it is a realist tradeoff that would, among other things, give the EU some leverage over governance and human rights issues in Syria.

The United States, meanwhile, could reengage Syria by pushing for new peace talks with Israel. The recent confrontations in Gaza and southern Lebanon have underscored the fact that no "new" Middle East will emerge without a broad settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; cease-fires, buffer zones, and multinational troops may bring short-term stability, but they will never be sufficient on their own. Accordingly, Western policymakers should restart an internationally sponsored negotiation that involves all the parties with a direct stake: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, and Syria. The international sponsors of such a conference could be the parties that now form the so-called Quartet: the United States, the EU, Russia, and the United Nations. Their prime objective would be to devise a comprehensive road map for the region that would guarantee -- to the extent this is possible through diplomatic processes -- that the respective legitimate interests of all participants are met. Such a conference would make clear to Syria where its legitimate interests lie in the eyes of the international community: namely, in the return, through a peace agreement, of the Golan Heights in its entirety (certain details and conditions of the transfer would be up for discussion), rather than in the reestablishment of Syrian predominance in Lebanon.

Syria's willingness to cooperate with the international community will depend on whether its ruling elite sees the return of Israeli-occupied territory as a possibility. As long as it does not, the current leadership will choose noncooperation and rhetorical confrontation, even at the cost of continued isolation. But if it does, the Assad regime will try to demonstrate that it can be a reliable partner in the search for regional stability. As Assad has made clear, peace is still Syria's preferred "strategic option."

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