

There is a role for Damascus

By Volker Perthes

Thursday, September 20, 2007

DAMASCUS:

Meeting President Bashar al-Assad of Syria these days gives you the impression of a much more relaxed, self-confident and, some Syrian observers would add, mature decision-maker than the man who assumed power upon the death of his father seven years ago.

This is not so much the result of his "re-election" in a referendum this summer, whose results were never in doubt, as of the fact that Assad is clearly in control of his regime - even if that regime may not be totally in control of all parts of the country. Assad makes the decisions, with no old guard or serious contenders in his way.

Syria is a complex and complicated country, not simply a rogue state. Even if the international tribunal establishes that members of the governing elite and some of their friends in Lebanon were responsible for the killing of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and other political murders, politics won't end. Syria remains a key element in any serious attempts to achieve peace in the Middle East.

In certain respects, Syria already plays a helpful role in the region. The country today hosts at least 1.2 million Iraqi refugees. Even though it has decided to restrict the entry of Iraqis, up till now it has been the only country that kept its doors open for those fleeing violence and chaos in Iraq.

Iraqis who reach Syria are given free access to Syria's overburdened education and health system. In proportion to Syria's population, the 1.2 million refugees in Syria would equal 6 million in Germany or more than 20 million in the United States.

Little wonder that Syrians increasingly complain that they have to pay an enormous part of the costs for a U.S. experiment in their neighborhood that went wrong.

Syria's main interest with regard to the region concerns Israel and the prospect of regaining the Golan Heights. Having followed Syrian affairs for some 20 years, and after recent discussions with the highest decision makers in Damascus, I believe Assad and his regime would grasp at the chance for a peaceful settlement with Israel if it was in the cards.

They want a settlement not out of any pacifist motives but out of enlightened self-interest. Assad knows that he would boost his legitimacy at home if he were to bring back national territory his father lost 40 years ago. Finding a peaceful settlement with Israel would also bring him back in sync with Syria's traditionally most important partners in the Middle East - Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Peace with Israel would improve his relations to the United States, and it would make the region a more attractive place for foreign investors who today are concerned about the tension in the region.

Attracting more Arab, Asian, European or even American capital is clearly part of Assad's vision for his country - not a democratization, but a modernization project.

Syria is also afraid of being left out if Israel was to make peace with the Palestinians and settle its remaining territorial issues with Lebanon. Syrians are probably right in assuming that in such a situation, there would be less interest internationally in resolving the Golan issue.

There have always been voices in Israel arguing that Syria is not really interested in an outcome of negotiations, but only in the process. Israel will only find out if it tries. What is certain now is that Syria seeks to avoid any confrontation that could undo the chances of a renewed process.

Whatever it was that Israeli fighter jets hit earlier this month in northern Syria, Damascus chose to react only with diplomatic protests. Israelis should also be aware that Syrians, even liberal elements critical of the regime, share the same doubts regarding Israel's intentions.

What I found particularly interesting during my latest discussions in Syria was that in contrast to the situation in the last couple of years, the Syrian leadership today has very concrete ideas about how negotiations should be brought back on track, where difficulties remain and where there might be movement.

They have certainly reviewed the experience of earlier negotiations - something they would not do if they were not interested in a different outcome.

If foreign powers are indeed interested in reaching a comprehensive, regional peace and nudging Syria into a more constructive role in the region, they should seize the opportunity which Syria's internal disposition offers.

Concretely, this means the Bush administration should invite Syria to the planned Middle East conference in November. Even if the main focus of this conference is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including Syria would underline that eventually a settlement has to be achieved on all tracks, and would acknowledge Syria's role as a legitimate stakeholder in a regional settlement - at least on a par with Saudi Arabia or Egypt.

Europeans should both continue their quiet diplomatic efforts to narrow the gaps of understanding between Jerusalem and Damascus, and help Syria prepare for a regional environment with open borders, economic and societal exchanges, and competition that includes Israel.

Negotiations for an association agreement between the European Union and Syria were concluded three years ago. If it was implemented, the agreement would give a boost to the economic reforms in Syria, and it would also institutionalize a political and a human-rights dialogue with Damascus.

Rather than continuing to keep the agreement on hold, the EU should begin the ratification process and thereby make use of an instrument designed to influence, not to reward Syria.

Such agreements are certainly not intended as instruments for regime change. But they can help the foundations for gradual, and thereby more sustainable, socioeconomic and sociopolitical exchange.

Volker Perthes is director of the the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin.