

Syria the Neighbor

By

William R. Polk

Syria is a small country, about the size of the American state of Oklahoma, 185,000 square kilometers, of which more than half is desert. Roughly 1,000 square kilometers, the Golan Heights, has been occupied illegally by Israel since the 1967 war. So it is effectively only the size of Indiana. It has a population of only about 15 million or roughly the size of New York city. Relative to its neighbors, Israel and Turkey, it has no significant military force. Unlike neighboring Iraq, it has little energy or industrial potential. However, it is situated in a strategic location: it joins Turkey on the north and Iraq on the east. Overlapping with Lebanon, its natural outlet to the sea, it is the most important of Israel's Arab neighbors.

Like the other Arab countries in the Middle East, Syria emerged from the breakup of the Ottoman empire at the end of the First World War. Great Britain allowed it to set up an independent government under the leader of the Arab Rebellion, King Faisal, but also promised the French government that France would get Syria as its part of the peace settlement. When the Syrian government tried to resist, the French invaded in July 1920, overthrew the government and divided the country into five autonomous areas under French rule. The French also added a piece to the little Christian-Druze province of Lebanon, making it five times larger than it had been. The result was chronic instability in Lebanon, which then had a Muslim majority, and periodic revolt in Syria until the French were forced out during the Second World War.

While French efforts at replacing Arabic culture with French failed, the years of the French occupation left a confused political heritage. Having been given its independence in 1944, Syria was not able to achieve domestic stability. Governments fell to coups, some of which were engineered by the American CIA and the British MI-6, until, in 1970, a 40-year-old former air force pilot named Hafiz al-Assad seized power.

General Hafiz al-Assad was an anomaly in Arab affairs. He was born into the minority Allawi community which follows a religion that is a Christian-influenced offshoot of Islam. As a young student in 1946, he joined the Syrian *Baath* party which had been founded by the French-educated, Christian socialist philosopher Michel Aflaq. Under Aflaq's influence, the *Baath* gathered together Arab nationalists in Syria and Iraq and attempted to bring about a union with Egypt under President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Not only did that union fail but the *Baath* movements in Iraq and Syria split apart as violently as the Russian Communists had under Stalin and Trotsky. So sharp was this break that Syria supported Iran during the 1980-1990 Iraq-Iran war, closed the oil pipeline upon which the Iraqi economy was heavily dependent and sent more than 20,000 Syrian soldiers to aid the American-led 1991 liberation of Kuwait.

Domestically, the Assad regime was dictatorial and repressive. But, like the *Baath* regime in Iraq, it was also secular. Syrian Christians and foreign missionaries proclaimed it the most tolerant Arab country; notably, Christians and Muslims mingle freely even at pilgrimage sites and each, in the Muslim tradition, is free to express its own beliefs. When Islamic fundamentalists, under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, attempted to revolt in 1982, the Assad regime brutally repressed them, killing thousands and virtually destroying the city of Hama where they were located. Civil rights were not as brutally trampled as in Iraq, but the Syrian record was certainly bad.

Syria is a poor country with a rich history. Pride in its past is offset by current disappointments. After initially profiting from small oil discoveries and better utilization of the waters of the Euphrates and Orantes, the economy stagnated in recent years. Significant support, particularly in military equipment, came from the Soviet Union and, when that dried up, from China, but there is not much any regime can do to alter the fact that Syria is essentially an agricultural economy in a mainly desert environment.

It is regionally where the troubles are sharpest. Syria has always been involved in Lebanon. Under the French mandate, the two countries were more or less united economically although Lebanon was favored whereas Syria was repressed. Four fifths of what is today Lebanon used to be “Syrian” and Lebanon is Syria’s natural outlet to the Mediterranean. No Syrian government could be indifferent to events in Lebanon. And nearly always one faction or another in Lebanon sought to involve Syria as its ally. Druze, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians almost constantly struggle against one another, and Lebanon is also the home of roughly half a million increasingly bitter and politicized Palestinian refugees. In this volatile mix, both Israel and Syria have often intervened. In 1982 Israel sent 60,000 soldiers under Ariel Sharon into Lebanon, favoring a Christian faction which massacred over a thousand Palestinians in refugee camps. Meanwhile, Syria occupied a large part of Lebanon from 1976 and today, in violation of a UN resolution, has a about 20,000 troops stationed in the Lebanese Biqaa valley half way between Damascus and Beirut, under a 1991 treaty.

Syrian relations with Lebanon are “stable” but those with Israel are critical. Syria was one of the countries to which the Palestinian refugees fled in 1948-1949 and about half a million are now resident there. As these people have been influenced by growing Palestinian anger, many have participated in resistance and terrorist groups and the Syrian government has been occasionally supportive and generally permissive because it too harbors grievances against Israel. Thus, while the Syrian government does not tolerate Islamic fundamentalists, like Usama bin Ladin’s *al-Qaida*, it does provide sanctuary for anti-Israeli groups like *Hizbullah*, *Islamic Jihad* and *Hamas*. With American government approval, Israeli aircraft struck what they said was a Palestinian training base near Damascus on October 5, 2003 after a young Palestinian woman lawyer blew herself up and Israeli agents assassinated one of the leaders of Hamas on September 25 in Damascus.

While international press attention focuses on events and proclamations, the crucial issue from the point of view of the Sharon government and its American

Neoconservative supporters is the very existence of an Arab nationalist regime in Syria. This is because both believe that there is no hope of crushing the Palestinian *intifada* as long as Syria remains a supporter of the resistance.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, when American forces had killed a number of Syrian civilians and border patrolmen, in the Syrian-Iraqi frontier caravan town of al-Qaim. It looked for a while as though fighting would escalate into a follow-on invasion of Syria. Then, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell “softened” the American criticism of Syria but under pressure from American supporters of Israel, Congress passed and President Bush signed the “Syria Accountability Act” in December 2003. That bill called for the imposition of economic sanctions against Syria. Ironically, while moves were being taken to weaken or replace the Syrian regime, American intelligence agencies were working closely with their Syrian counterparts to thwart international terrorism. Syria turned over hundreds of files on terrorist activities which American authorities found “invaluable.” Now fighting has resumed. In April 2004, scores of Iraqi or Syrian civilians (the population there is mixed) were killed in battles with American troops.

Some observers are now asking, “Is Syria next?” There are many precedents. The most elaborate came to light a year ago. President Dwight Eisenhower and Prime Minister Macmillan in 1957 approved a joint CIA-MI6 plan to encourage “incidents” within Syria, then stage a fake frontier incident as an excuse for invasion after which the leaders of the Syrian government would be “eliminated.”¹ Will history repeat itself? President Bush’s Neoconservative advisers hope so and have urged the Israelis to carry out air strikes on Syria.

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A former Member of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Council, responsible for the Middle East, Dr. Polk was Professor of History at the University of Chicago and Founding-Director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies. His latest book, *Understanding Iraq*, will be published in January 2005. He is now Senior Director of the W.P. Carey Foundation.

¹ The coup was planned by CIA Assistant Director for the Middle East Kermit Roosevelt, but was not carried out because the governments asked to participate, Jordan and Iraq, refused. Documents on the plan were published by *The Guardian* on September 27, 2003.