

Syria After the U.S. Helicopter Raid

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There is an old Arabic proverb stating that "he who gets fat, will get thin, and he who goes up in the air will come down." The simple meaning is that nothing is static in the affairs of life and each epoch has its beginning and end.

Can this perception be applied to politics and the current challenge of state sponsored terrorism to the international community? The short answer is definitely yes. Consider the case of Syria.

It seems an unthinkable contradiction to even raise the issue that Syrian President Bashar Assad might cooperate with the United States in combating terrorism following the massive demonstrations in Damascus protesting against a U.S. helicopter raid in Sukariyah village that killed top al-Qaida leader Abu Ghadiyah and members of his cell, and after Syria's closing of the U.S. cultural center and American school in the capital in protest, and Damascus's demand of a formal U.S. apology for "terrorist aggression."

Moreover, Washington's "account" with Syria relates not only to securing the border with Iraq from infiltration of foreign terrorists but also to Damascus' support of Hezbollah and Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and in the West Bank.

Thus, it is extremely unlikely the next U.S. administration will reverse its disposition vis-à-vis Syria and consider removing it from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The new president, however, must bear in mind the validity of former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston's dictum that "there are no permanent friends or enemies but only permanent interests."

That is, there are several identifying factors which indicate that Syria is possibly reconsidering using terrorism as a tool. The first is the existence of legal measures to combat terrorism.

Syria, for instance, is party to the Arab League and the Islamic Conference Organization conventions on the suppression of terrorism and on combating international terrorism.

Furthermore, Syria is a signatory to global treaties dealing with aviation security matters and "prevention and punishment of crimes against internationally protected persons."

Also, Syria's penal code complies with various international anti-terrorism efforts such as combating money laundering, confiscating and freezing of funds related to terrorism, and suppressing the recruitment of members of terrorist groups.



TURNING FROM TERRORISM? It seems unthinkable that Syria might cooperate with the U.S. in combating terrorism after U.S. commandos raided a Syrian village. However, several factors suggest that Syria may yet abandon terrorism as a tool. Photo shows Syrian riot police guarding the U.S. embassy in Damascus on Oct. 30 after it was closed by Syria. (Image by Sipa Press via Newscom)

Clearly, these steps and other judicial measures indicate a positive trend to be considered in any assessment of Syria's policies concerning terrorism.

What is of particular significance is the progress made by the recent rounds of indirect talks between Damascus and Jerusalem through Turkey's "good offices," and supported by other states such as France.

Obviously, Assad's apparent strategic intention to undertake a comprehensive peace settlement with Israel will, in accordance with long-standing Syrian policy, focus first and foremost on the return of the occupied Golan Heights captured in the 1967 War.

Other crucial issues must also be resolved, including early warning attack systems, mutual zones of disengagements, water conflicts, and the scope of normalizing relations between the antagonists.

It is clear that further progress on this diplomatic track will depend on political developments in Israel related to the forthcoming elections planned for February 2009 and the formation of a new government in Jerusalem.

In sum, despite the unfolding crisis in U.S.-Syrian relations concerning the "rat lines" in Iraq and other terrorism-related issues, it behooves all concerned parties to recognize that substantial, peacemaking efforts must be developed for long-term stability and prosperity in the Middle East and beyond.

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