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“Syria Calling”: What is the response?*

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Though not in the forefront of the mass media coverage of the Middle East and often overshadowed by more spectacular but not necessarily more important players, Syria remains the key to many issues in the Middle East. The Syrian regime has survived American neo-conservative regime-change assault on the region and at the same time it plays a pivotal role in four interdependent fields of regional antagonism: Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the regional Arab order and, last but not least, the issue of Iranian hegemony.

During the past few years, Syria has re-affirmed its role as the guarantor of Lebanon's stability and has secured that independent Lebanon is by no means hostile to Syria and Assad's regime, as many analysts and policy-makers speculated five years ago. As the Israeli analyst Daniel Sobelman admits, the Lebanese political consensus “states that Israel, not Syria, is the enemy and the principal threat to Lebanon, and Lebanon remains part of the Arab-Israeli conflict.” Moreover, a tripartite meeting between Iran, Syria and Hizbullah not only re-affirmed their united front against any challenge but also advanced the role of Hizbullah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to the position of a regional leader and player. To a certain extent, Hizbullah's powerful position in the country is indispensable for Syria's direct grip on Lebanese politics and society.

Syria's position vis-à-vis Hizbullah is different from that of Iran's. For the current Iranian strategic thinking, the Shiite organization is part of an Islamic revolutionary ideology, an indispensable partner for the projection of Iranian power in the Mediterranean shore and most importantly at the Israeli borders. Lebanon, on the other hand, is for Iran just a bastion, undoubtedly critical, for its deterrent strategy against Israel, the U.S.A. and any regional power that might wish to join them. Mahmud Ahmadinejad's recent visit made this policy clear, especially his trip to South Lebanon. For the Syrians, Lebanon is perceived as an integral part of Syria's identity, national security and survival. Hizbullah is just a valuable ally for Syria's plans in Lebanon and in the region but neither the only one, nor a permanent one. Recent history has showed that Syria swifts alliances and allies in order to maintain both its control over Lebanon and its preponderant role in Arab regional affairs.

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Syria has been approaching Saudi Arabia in a two-fold plan: first, to rebuild a sort of Ta'ef II consensus over Lebanon, which would reinstate Syrian supremacy over the country and secure Arab regional approval for it and also play a central role in a new Arab regional order. Saudi Arabia is at the heart of an effort for a new Arab realignment, which would settle Lebanese and Iraqi instability and the Arab-Israeli conflict, and most pressingly, would address the menacing Iranian hegemony. According to Al-Watan daily "...other Arab countries as well as Turkey had engaged along the line of these contacts, and [that] the recent visit of Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassem to Beirut reflected the wish to see the Saudi-Syrian efforts reaching results, in parallel to Qatar's offer to provide an assisting role." The recent gigantic purchase of state-of-the-art airplanes and helicopters by the Saudi air force is also a sign of Saudi's bold presence in the region.

However, Syrian efforts to cut a deal with the Saudis on Lebanon and most importantly on a "settlement" of the Hariri assassination case, has been put on hold, after Saudi King Abdallah Bin-Abd-al-Aziz travelled to New York to receive medical treatment. According to Arab analysts "the ailment suffered by the Saudi monarch, 86, in addition to the sickness of the crown prince, who is also in his 80's, has raised the issue of succession in the Kingdom and the distribution of the important higher posts that control the huge wealth of the country and its social policy, the influential clerics, and the armed forces and the impact of all this on the relations of the Kingdom that has the greater political influence in the region on the events and developments in the Middle East". The outcome of the inner antagonism between the first and the second generation in the Saudi royal family might seriously affect the process of Syrian-Saudi rapprochement.

At the same time, Syria plays a very delicate role in the reconciliation effort between Fatah and Hamas and hosted two of their meetings in Damascus. However, such initiatives can hardly produce any fruits. After all those years of catastrophic national and social fragmentation between Gaza and the West Bank, all borders between what is partisan and factional and what is national have collapsed. Syria, has no incentive to put any pressure on Hamas, as there is no sign that either Israel or the U.S. are ready for serious talks with Bashar al-Assad.

Initially the Obama Administration seemed to understand, as Martin Indyk pointed out, that "if the White House engages with Syria, it immediately puts pressure on Iran, Hamas and Hizbullah". However, there are confusing signals towards Damascus. For instance, US officials are said to place serious obstacles to a Saudi-Syrian deal on Lebanon and the Hariri case. Insisting on Damascus to abandon its ties with Hizbullah, Hamas and most importantly Iran, before any deal on the Golan Heights and Assad's regional role is reached, seems not only counterproductive but also rather absurd.

Syria, on its part, tries to multiply its alliance options as revealed by the recent announcement of the Russian defence minister Anatoly Serdyokof that Russia would supply Syria with P-800 Yakhont cruise missiles. Furthermore, last September, the foreign ministers of Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Jordan held a meeting in New York, in the framework of continued efforts to establish a quartet cooperation council. The first preparatory meeting for this quartet meeting was held in Istanbul in June 2010. Despite Arab concerns about the emergence of "neo-ottomanism", it seems that this understanding is evolving relatively well, while its most challenging project will be Iraq's integration in it.

Concluding, "Syria [is] Calling", as Seymour Hersh wrote in the New Yorker, in April 2009, but, after one and a half year, no one in the West has given it a meaningful response. It is not an easy task. Syria is a complicated case but cornering it would be the worst option. It seems that the U.S. have to think out of the box towards a containment strategy vis-à-vis Iran, as James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh recently argued in Foreign Affairs. Following such a strategy makes Syria by all means indispensable.