

## **THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF SYRIAN-ISRAELI TENSIONS. MOVEMENT IN THE REGION AND STAGNATION INWARD**

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Once again there is talk of war. Analysts in the local media and people in the street consider this possible. Only three and a half years after the devastating destruction in the showdown between Israel's government and Lebanon's virtual "partial government", Hezbollah, the war scenario once again awoke in the Levant. For a long time this has meant nothing in the region – war breaks out suddenly here and there, and the more that is spoken about it, the more improbable it is in reality. Yet, the fears draw a picture of the current fault lines.

The new flexibility in Damascus is interesting in that it is not connected with the taking of office of President Barack Obama in the USA. This is because the most important setting of direction took place in the course of 2008, as the person who would become the new U.S. President was by far not clear. However, from the Syrian point of view, after the simplistic good/evil rhetoric of former President George W. Bush, any change in the White House signified a glimmer of hope. – He had relegated Syria to an expanded "Axis of Evil". The solid cooperation within the area of intelligence services against militant Islamists after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and even up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, stepped into the background.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations, the exchange of ambassadors, the clarification and official acknowledgment of borders, Syria released Lebanon into complete independence for the first time in its post-colonial history. For a long time, this had been one of the principal demands on Damascus by Western players. Step by step, that, which was barely conceivable a few years ago, occurred. After a long period of taring, Syria ultimately played a constructive role, even during the tenacious formation of a government in the Land of Cedars. The Lebanese parties created the breakthrough for conciliation in the Doha Agreement in May 2008. Thus, the path to the presidential election finally became free; and, after a renewed lengthy political dispute, the government of "national unity" was able to begin its work under Saad Hariri in November 2009.

On the Syrian side, there were complaints that, based on this significant change in direction, one would have desired a greater acknowledgment of Western countries. This is because the government in Damascus thereby relinquished Greater Syria, even as an ideological premise of Syrian nationalism. In Lebanon, due to close family ties, cultural kinship, primordial fragmentation and a lively economic exchange, many Syrians still see more of a French colonial construct than an own country.

At the same time, Syria is not relinquishing its political influence on Lebanon. The game is simply continued by other means. As long as the conflict with Israel is not resolved, the small neighbouring state is and remains an indispensable strategic area for Syria. Compared to the period prior to the summer war of 2006, Hezbollah today by and large possesses more political influence over government institutions in Lebanon. On a long-term basis, from the point of view of Israel, the war was thus a disaster not only at the foreign policy level, but was also a step backwards in the internal political constellations of Lebanon.

In other words – no problem in Lebanon has really been solved. In fact, the UNIFIL troops occupied their observation posts after 2006 in Southern Lebanon, but no one ventures or even only suggests an actual disarmament of Hezbollah. The government of national unity under Saad Hariri remains a fragile brace that can barely sustain greater tension. It is all the more important that the outside participants, particularly Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, do not currently lose interest in a relative peace in Lebanon. The recent rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia and between Syria and its Lebanese opponents is a constructive step, without fundamentally defusing the opposing interests.

In the contrast to the movements in its neighbourhood, political stagnation is currently prevailing in Israel. Since the war in the Gaza Strip and the beginning of the new legislative period at the beginning of 2009, there were no noteworthy initiatives from Israel either in the direction of Arab neighbours or regarding the Palestinians. Since the Gaza War, the trust of Turkey in Israel has been deeply subverted, and neither the problems in the Gaza Strip nor in the West Bank have been resolved. No strategy is to be recognised, except for the general holding to the development of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Jewish presence in East Jerusalem. Currently, Israel is hardly under pressure. Rather, this is the time for the hardliners in the country.

Even if "only" a territorial conflict exists with Syria, a peace treaty would be a strategic gain for Israel. However, even if Netanyahu wanted it, it is by no means certain that he – or any other Israeli head of government in the extremely fragile party landscape – would domestically survive a partial or complete return of the Golan. Here, the Syrian side is being criticised for having no serious negotiating partner in Israel, but, with its readiness to negotiate, is attempting to send conciliatory signals to Washington, in order to, step by step, end the sanctions from the Bush era.

Since Assad's ground-breaking visit to Turkey in January 2004 and the numerous subsequent return visits, the relations of both countries have

changed radically. If, at the turn of the century, both sides were just about to engage in a war because of the issues of the Kurds and water, they are holding joint cabinet meetings today. Since October 2009, citizens of both countries have been able to cross the joint border without visas. Particularly for Syria, which had walled itself off for many decades, this step means a great deal. This also applies to the free movement of goods. Only Iranian travellers have the same privilege in Syria.

For Syria, good relations with Turkey has surely been the greatest success in recent years. Thus, Damascus has deftly diversified its foreign policy. The West can have nothing against relations with Turkey, in contrast to Iran. Syria also wins economically, since it is strategically located between the economically strong Turkey and the Arab markets. The breakout of Syria from isolation thus has an important regional component (Saudi Arabia included) and is to be seen not only with a view to the West.

In this new relationship, optimists see not only a strategic advantage, but also the possibility that the more relaxed handling by Turkey of its ethnic minorities could also emanate into the region. This would particularly concern the Kurds in the northeast of Syria. However, no accommodation of the Arab nationalist central power in Damascus has so far been observed here; rather, there has been an intensified approach in recent years to, for example, make it additionally more difficult for Kurds to acquire real estate.

Moreover, Syria has changed its view of Iraq. The regime in Damascus initially had an interest in, as much as possible, not allowing the unrest in the neighbouring country to die down, in order to occupy the Americans and keep them from Damascus, as a type of survival insurance. Any cooperation with the U.S. of George W. Bush promised no results. Yet, at the latest by 2008, Syrian interest in an Iraq that was not further disintegrating began to prevail – likewise out of bare self-protection.

In 2006, after a 24-year interruption, both states once again established diplomatic relations. Cooperation within the areas of economics and security policy began. However, by no means has this been without friction. In August 2009, the Iraqi government accused the Syrian government of having allowed terrorists across the border, in order to commit attacks in Baghdad. Damascus appeared indignant and accused Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki of wanting to create a distraction from his own failure in questions of security. In this case, Iraq had not been able to submit evidence.

Although Syria and Israel have engaged with Turkey as a mediator, all participants know that an agreement between the arch-enemies cannot materialize and endure without guarantees by the United States. In particular, Syria is interested in the fact that the parties walk the infamous "last mile"

with the U.S. This is because no one else can induce Israel to make concessions. However, the U.S. is currently removed from playing a driving role in the Middle East. Despite the changed tone from Washington to the Muslim world, many Arabs are disappointed with the U.S. government. Expectations were high. Obama, perhaps, gave his speech in Cairo too early, long before he could begin converting his new intentions into practical policy. The Syrian side is waiting for a commitment from Washington before it is prepared to make concessions. President Assad has already invited his counterpart Obama to Syria. However, so far, the political contacts have not risen above the level of numerous visits of delegations.

Meanwhile, the wave of arrests of traditional political representatives of human rights and the civil society movement continues in Syria. Against this backdrop, the more or less careful, strategically quite sensible inclusion of Syria can also be judged critically by Western governments. Some are asking the question of whether it is being made too easy for Syria to slip out of the role of the pariah. After suppression of the Damascus Spring, the reminders to observe human rights were recited internationally with fervour, but, in the meantime, are rather giving the impression of obligatory acts. In contrast, others maintain that, in previous years, the country was often likewise uncritically isolated and stigmatised, and this simply represents a logical reaction.

One analyst in Damascus stated, "The Europeans tend to underestimate Syria. And the Syrians tend to overrate themselves. Therefore, both sides often talk past one another". Both can lead to the fact that a thing is surely believed prematurely. This holds risks in an extremely tense region, in which once again there is talk of a pending war. One hears voices of pragmatism only from Turkey. At the end of January, on the question of whether he can today imagine a resumption of the negotiations between Syria and Israel, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoglu said, "Yes, why not?"

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 4/2010, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.126-130