

Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience

I. OVERVIEW

How is one to engage Damascus? As the incoming U.S. administration examines the future of its relationship with Syria, seemingly persuaded that an improvement in bilateral ties and an Israeli-Syrian agreement could fundamentally modify the regional landscape, France's recent experience offers useful lessons. Determined to engage in dialogue – but also ready to break off if the other side was uncooperative – and creative in approach, while fixing it within a clearly defined framework of objectives, President Sarkozy also knew how to seize on unexpected opportunities when they presented themselves.

The restoration of ties between Paris and Damascus, coming after a bitter break and heightened tensions that developed in consequence of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, came haltingly and with difficulty. It began with the election in 2007 of an unusual French president, hyperactive, believing in dialogue, eager to set himself apart from his predecessor and more pragmatic than ideological. From the outset, his approach reflected improvisation, risk-taking, flexibility and constant readjustments rather than a pre-established plan. But it never deviated from its primary goal, a consensual Lebanese president as was achieved with Michel Suleiman's May 2008 election.

Periods of intensive contact, including directly with his counterpart, President Bashar Assad, were followed by periods of estrangement. The experiment is ongoing, its full outcome still uncertain, as France looks for further advances with regard to Gaza, the Israeli-Arab conflict, Lebanese sovereignty, counter-terrorism and the Iranian nuclear issue. It will become convincing, and therefore relevant in American eyes, only if it clearly demonstrates Syria's capacity to act as a credible partner to promote regional stability.

Much depends on the coming weeks and months. Paris and Damascus have the opportunity to highlight the benefits of an engagement policy by working on at least three issues. In Lebanon, the goal should be to minimise

the threat of renewed confrontation by meaningfully addressing the current governing majority's most legitimate demands: demarcating Syrian-Lebanese borders; amending bilateral agreements signed when Syria thoroughly dominated its neighbour; and accepting credible international mediation on the issue of Lebanese citizens who disappeared in Syrian jails.

In Iraq, France could take advantage of Syria's network of relations to reach out to a larger segment of the Sunni Arab community. In so doing, it might set the stage for a U.S. effort to engage more broadly with members of that community who remain outside the political process and are not part of the "awakening" councils. French mediation in this area potentially could produce genuine cooperation between the U.S. and Syria, going beyond Washington's illusory quest for Damascus to hermetically seal its border with Iraq.

Finally, Paris might test Damascus's willingness to play a constructive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The ongoing Gaza conflict offers an opportunity in which France could ask Syria to influence Hamas and ensure that, once there is a workable ceasefire, it either accepts an equitable deal with Fatah or endorses the Arab Peace Initiative if that would remove the last obstacle to establishing a Palestinian unity government. To those ends, of course, France will need to take the lead in forging a European approach that is complementary rather than subordinate to the U.S. and that pragmatically assesses when and how to conduct a dialogue with the Islamist movement.

However, President-elect Obama's team can already garner important lessons from France's always energetic, often impulsive and at times contradictory approach:

- To begin, in the wake of a long hiatus in bilateral relations – a feature of President Chirac's and President Bush's tenures – both sides likely will require a significant period of mutual observation and trust-building. Quick results, in other words, ought not to be anticipated. Next, any successful relationship must be based on clear and steady objectives rather than an endless list of demands.

- Patience during negotiations is as important as swiftness when opportunity strikes. Haste, when Sarkozy displayed overenthusiasm, at best was futile, at worst encouraged Damascus to harden its position and play for time. But by immediately welcoming and rewarding Syria's first positive gestures, France bolstered its credibility while nudging Damascus to move. There should be no hesitation to halt dialogue if events warrant, while maintaining informal communication to allow quick reaction at the appropriate moment. For Washington's new team, this entails immediately acknowledging and reciprocating positive steps and penalising negative ones.
- Finally, there are lessons for those in the U.S. who bank on a Syrian-Iranian split. This will not occur, at least under current circumstances. However, the willingness to normalise relations with France suggests the regime wishes to diversify its strategic alliances. Washington should promote such a trend, which inevitably would dilute Iran's importance in Syria's eyes and facilitate a gradual reconfiguration of its regional alliances.

Even with the best of intentions, U.S.-Syria relations will be difficult. Beyond looming crises – whether over the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigation into Syria's nuclear program or the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination – the two governments must come to terms with the legacy of an unhealthy relationship, full of distrust and misunderstanding, that deteriorated in the Bush years but did not originate then. The new president's advisers could do far worse than reflect on the trials and errors of the current Franco-Syrian rapprochement.

II. WHAT PARIS CAN ACHIEVE

The Obama administration has set itself some rather ambitious goals in the Middle East as it comes to power: withdrawal from Iraq, dialogue with Tehran and suspension of its uranium enrichment program, pursuit and acceleration of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, participation in the negotiations between Israel and Syria, protection of Lebanese sovereignty and revival of its credibility in the region. Many American observers, including those in the new president's entourage, believe that Syria can play a central role on these issues, if only because of its capacity to do damage.

Although the parallel should not be pushed too far, France offers an interesting example to those who are trying to initiate talks with Syria. As a former mandatory power, Paris thinks of Syria as much in terms of historic ties as of contemporary interests, a view linked

to a particular vision of Lebanon, the fight against terrorism, the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Iranian nuclear issue. From the start, this relationship appears quite different from the one which exists between Washington and Damascus.¹

In Washington, these relations arouse strong negative feelings. Syria, as a faraway land with few ties to the U.S., is perceived as deeply inimical to national interests and responsible for the death of many American citizens in Lebanon and, more recently, Iraq. At the same time, ever since George W. Bush's election, its maverick regime has been considered a minor protagonist whose destructive potential should be neutralised.² Building a relationship with Syria is not actually a goal per se, but a way to gain an advantage in other areas, especially by weakening its allies, such as Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas. Iraq, an issue at the top of the American agenda, provides a good illustration. The U.S. wants to stop Damascus from interfering with its neighbours but harbours doubts that it can actually play a constructive role in the region and is not even especially interested in trying for that. Finally, the U.S. has become determined to counter any Syrian hegemonic ambition towards Lebanon.

In contrast, Syria is the object of a more ambiguous emotional involvement in France. Many observers and politicians³ share a feeling of deep mistrust towards the Syrian regime, but the reverse is equally true. Since Paris and Damascus have shown signs of getting closer, a kind of pro-Syrian lobby has even resurfaced, among both elected officials and the private sector.⁴ From a

¹ Crisis Group plans to publish a subsequent report on Syrian-U.S. relations.

² "The U.S. has traditionally relied on regional powers, such as Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to act as intermediaries for its policy. Syria has never featured in this list, but appears rather as a small yet troublesome country". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2008.

³ In the current government, doubts were voiced as recently as July 2008, when the Syrian president came to France to take part in the Mediterranean Union summit. "I admit I was against inviting Bashar for the 14 July ceremony, and there was a general outcry in parliament, including among the governing majority. However, the beginning of the Israeli-Syrian talks had already played a great part in convincing me of the necessity of talking with Syria". Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, November 2008.

⁴ A French official had foreseen that relations would rapidly grow as soon as a solution for Lebanon was found. "There are many people in France who remained in the background, because they believed in the importance of Syria and who now really want to make a comeback". Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, November 2007. As soon as the talks were initiated with Damascus, the Franco-Syrian friendship associations in the Senate and the National As-

strategic point of view, President Nicolas Sarkozy considers Syria a regional power and a potentially important partner in the strengthening of waning French influence in that part of the world. Absent from the Iraq conflict and powerless in Lebanon, a passive onlooker throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and (for the Syrians) a poor substitute for the Americans in Damascus, France has progressively been losing its uniqueness and relevance to the Middle East. As the first Western country to decisively put an end to Damascus's isolation, however, Paris has acquired a considerable asset: privileged access to one of the region's least recognised players.

In short, France accepts more readily than the U.S. the idea Syria has of itself; that is, neither a rogue state to be tamed, nor part of an "axis" to be broken, but a country with an important place in the region – for the better and not only for the worse.

That said, the U.S. can draw lessons from the French experience. The goal Obama's team has declared – for Damascus to cut ties with Iran and the Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups – seems an impossible one. Although the return of the Golan Heights would strengthen the regime's legitimacy, the small developing country fears being cut down to size if it loses the support of allies who attract so much attention to it. A leading figure asked: "They talk to us when it is a question of cutting ties with Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. But if we do, will they carry on speaking to us?"⁵ Syria thus seeks implicitly not to give up its alliances but to balance them with others in its own search for regional stability.⁶ What exactly it means by that and how far it will be ready to go remains to be seen. It also has to prove it can handle a tricky, changing situation that could perhaps upset its allies before the advantages of a new policy become apparent, namely normalisation with the U.S., Western economic support and the return of the Golan Heights. The key may lie in the renewal of its relationship with France.

Ultimately, the Franco-Syrian rapprochement will likely become untenable if the U.S. is not drawn in. If Washington, after sterile negotiations, were to return to a policy

of pressure on Damascus and isolation, it would become harder for the resolutely pro-U.S. government in Paris to go it alone. The French experience will only be wholly worthwhile if it can clearly demonstrate how Syria can become a factor of stability in the region, and not simply by breaking with its allies. But for now, there is a wide discrepancy between what France has obtained from Syria and what President Obama's team will probably expect.

The agreed exchange of embassies between Damascus and Beirut constitutes major progress towards more equitable Lebanese-Syrian relations, but even when it is implemented, it will have only a short-lived impact.⁷ Indeed, the real test for the U.S. in Lebanon is Syria's attitude towards Hizbollah (especially on the subject of its armament) and its support for militant Palestinian groups. Paris was gratified by Damascus's invitation to take part in the negotiation process with Israel, but Washington would prefer to sponsor those negotiations alone, or at a pinch, with the help of Turkey. The Elysée has also appealed for President Assad's assistance on the Iranian nuclear issue, something that would only mildly interest the new American administration, which is intent on opening its own lines of communication with Tehran. Finally, even though bilateral cooperation is being revived against terrorism, U.S. demands are focused on Iraq, a country that France obstinately ignores.

Consequently, if France and Syria wish to strengthen the fragile advantages of their renewed relations by involving the U.S., three projects could come to the fore. First of all, any chance of a return to earlier confrontation in Lebanon must be minimised by concretely meeting the current governing majority's most legitimate requirements. Demarcating the boundaries between the two countries usually comes down to the thorny issue of the Shebaa Farms occupied by Israel. Their recovery would undermine Hizbollah's resistance rhetoric. But then why not start by physically marking the borders in the north, a move which should normally be accepted by Syria?⁸

sembly swiftly resumed their activities. In December 2008, a delegation of more than 40 businessmen, among them representatives of the largest French groups, went to Damascus to collect its dividends. The French president himself is said to have taken a special interest in Syria ever since going there on a sightseeing tour. See Nicolas Sarkozy, *Libre* (Paris, 2001).

⁵Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2008.

⁶This will be discussed further in a forthcoming Crisis Group report on Syrian-U.S. relations.

⁷Certain figures in the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance have interpreted this act (long one of their core demands) as purely symbolic, if not threatening, in so far as the Syrian embassy could be used as a foothold for intelligence activity. Crisis Group interviews, prominent anti-Syrian figures, Beirut, October 2008. The process seems to have been put on hold as a result of the Israeli offensive in Gaza. Syria now has proper diplomatic representation in Beirut but has yet to appoint an ambassador.

⁸Crisis Group interview, Syrian diplomat, October 2008.

Revision of the bilateral agreement signed by Syria and Lebanon in the days when the former exerted its heaviest influence on its neighbour has become a bone of contention for the governing majority in Beirut and a taboo subject for Damascus, although the exact content of the technical details seems as little known on one side of the border as on the other. They could be reviewed by a Lebanese parliamentary commission, or a committee created by President Suleiman, charged with soberly studying its foibles – a compromise between vehement complaints and indulgent silence. At the end of the day, the ratification of a balanced bilateral agreement between the two neighbours would be the best guarantee of a mutually profitable relationship and a durable proof that Damascus accepts Lebanon's full sovereignty.

Moreover international mediation would appear necessary on the question of the Lebanese who have disappeared in Syrian jails so as to reinforce the credibility of a process whose tendency to procrastinate reignites passions. Mechanisms of this sort could be sufficiently flexible to be acceptable to Damascus, while signalling a deep redefinition of Lebanese-Syrian relations.⁹

The second issue, Iraq, has become the black hole of French politics in the Middle East. Paris seems to look upon the crisis there, which deeply affects the entire region, as being strictly America's responsibility (which is morally true but politically false). However, France could play an important role in Iraq, serving as scout for the Obama administration in the initiation of talks with a portion of the Arab Sunni community that should be as large and representative as possible.

Until now, such a dialogue has not occurred. The Bush administration's policy of strategic engagement was largely limited to establishing contacts in order to gather information, try out divide and rule tactics or co-opt a certain section of the Sunni Arab community.

⁹Despite a few symbolic gestures on these cases since the announcement of the embassy exchange, a great many Lebanese remain sceptical, hence the relevance of more plausible mechanisms. "A Lebanese-Syrian commission was inaugurated in 2005 with a view to studying the question of the prisoners, but Syria procrastinated. In 2006, the idea of a Red Cross mediation was brought up, but it needed to be approved by the two parties, and Syria refused. We could create a comity on the border issue but the Syrians will do anything to delay". Crisis Group interview, senior March 14 figure, Beirut, October 2008.

The 70,000 Sunni members of the *sahwat* and other "sons of Iraq" groups¹⁰ represent above all two categories: tribes whose historical legitimacy and claim to monopolise the representation of all Sunni Arabs are often challenged; and former servicemen socially perceived as outsiders (alienated youth, peasants, workers), whose involvement in the *sahwat* is considered in the same way as their former role in al-Qaeda, namely as a disruption of the social order. For instance, the urban elites, religious as well as professional, of towns such as Fallujah and Mosul remain deeply hostile to the *sahwat* and have refused to support the current political process or even to join the armed forces. They could thus be at the root of a revival of the armed opposition in a later phase of the conflict.

Talks have now been made possible by:

- the finally plausible prospect of an American military withdrawal (the absence of which was an obstacle to any negotiation with what is left of the armed opposition);
- the change of the U.S. administration;
- the Iraqi elections planned for 2009, which are supposed to bring a new balance to a sectarian political system that widely excludes Sunnis, while promoting better representation in local and national institutions; and
- neutralisation of the armed opposition and its resulting pragmatism, as well as the defeat of Salafi discourse, leading to a return to nationalist arguments.

This would mean systematically reaching out to the groups still left out of the political process and the *sahwat* phenomenon – former soldiers and intelligence agents, as well as imams who represent the Iraqi trends of thought, exiled former officials, "authentic" tribal chiefs sidelined under Saddam and the like. The purpose would be to let them seize the last opportunity, offered by an American withdrawal, to take part in a political system from which they could remain excluded, and to offer the Obama administration the means to strengthen its own position. France would simply initiate the talks, by preparing an inventory of the essential interlocutors and laying the foundations for a process that, in any case, would have to be taken in hand by Washington itself.

France has assets: it now has potential access to the network of contacts set up by Syria, whose credibility on the Arab Sunni scene in Iraq is far greater than that

¹⁰Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq after the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008.

of Iraq's other neighbours. France itself enjoys solid credibility, as it opposed the embargo and the invasion, while it now provides an excellent line of communication to the new American administration. Finally, Paris has many sources of expertise on Iraq, currently dormant but easily capable of being reactivated.

A French mediation could lead to the beginning of cooperation between Damascus and Washington that would not be restricted to the illusion of "securing" the Iraqi-Syrian border. Indeed, though Syria has adopted several measures to that effect,¹¹ it is unable to ban all forms of support to the armed opposition in Iraq on its territory, owing to the feelings of its own Arab Sunni population; the strong links between towns such as Dayr al-Zor and Mosul, Bu Kamal and Rawa; the private interests that motivate certain Syrian leaders; and its desire to keep up ties with potentially important players. The fear of jihadist groups that pose a potential threat should in fact encourage the regime to keep lines open to the armed opposition. The U.S. would derive a certain advantage from coordination built around the distinction between the combatants linked to al-Qaeda, with whom dialogue would be useless, and the numerous other actors left behind by the political process.

The third and final issue stresses the fact that France also needs to find a place in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, by taking the lead of a European approach which would complement, not be subordinate to, the American approach. During the Bush administration's two terms, officials all over Europe bitterly complained in private about American policies that they unswervingly supported in practice.

In many cases, these officials expect the Obama administration to take stances they never dared to take themselves (on issues such as the Gaza blockade, inter-Palestinian reconciliation and the Israeli settlers). They have to understand that U.S. interests and freedom of manoeuvre are not the same as theirs, whoever the president.

It is up to European players such as France to live up to their responsibility by considering the right timing and the right conditions for negotiations with Hamas,¹² as

well as which course of action to follow should a new national unity government emerge. When the time comes, Paris will be in a position to test Damascus's influence over Hamas – for instance if a fair *modus vivendi* was established between Palestinian factions, and pressure was needed to settle a compromise, or in case Hamas's agreement to the Arab peace plan was needed to remove the final obstacle to the creation of a government of national unity that Europe could accept.

III. POST-CHIRAC FRANCE

As soon as President Jacques Chirac, whose relationship with Sarkozy was notoriously confrontational, left office in 2007, the Elysée showed its desire to break with a Lebanon-Syria policy deemed "too personal".¹³ Chirac, a great friend of Rafiq Hariri, cut all ties with Damascus and its allies following the assassination of the former prime minister and championed the international tribunal. Upon leaving the presidency, he moved to a flat loaned by the Hariri family.¹⁴

For the new man in the Elysée, preserving stability and sovereignty in Lebanon meant that France must become a mediator, initiating talks with all parties involved, in Lebanon and the whole region. Despite his declared desire to maintain special ties with Washington and Tel Aviv, Sarkozy rejected any suggestion of excluding Hizbollah.¹⁵ On 14-15 July 2007, a meeting was held in the Château de Celle Saint-Cloud, gathering 28 players on the Lebanese political stage¹⁶ – an inclusive approach stemming from a dispassionate interpretation of the causes for the Lebanese stalemate.¹⁷

ised his mission. Yves Aubin de La Messuzière, "Why Europe must speak to Hamas", *Le Monde*, 9 December 2008.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, French officials, Paris and New York, May 2007.

¹⁴ *Le Figaro*, 24-25 April 2007. This accommodation was supposed to be only temporary, ending when the former president and his wife had found more permanent housing. A year and a half have passed, and the couple is still living at the same address.

¹⁵ The initiation of talks making Hizbollah a legitimate interlocutor among others, nevertheless, generated an outcry in Israel and in the French Jewish community, a pressure felt by the Elysée.

¹⁶ For an official version of this event, see www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/liban_418/france-liban_1173/rencontre-inter-libanaise-14-16.07.07_51561.html.

¹⁷ In its analyses, the Elysée has a tendency to treat Lebanese actors on both sides on an equal footing. The emotional reaction of the governing coalition majority known as the March 14 alliance annoyed some. Cancelling the Celle St. Cloud

¹¹ Relatively stricter border controls have been set up, while the freedom of movement of individuals representing or supporting the armed opposition in Iraq from Syrian territory has been considerably reduced. See the report to be published by Crisis Group on Syrian-U.S. relations.

¹² See in particular the comment of former Ambassador Yves Aubin de La Messuzière, in charge of discreetly initiating talks with Hamas, before his revelations to the press jeopard-

In addition to its efforts in Lebanon, France thought it necessary to explain its action to Iran and Syria, on the principle that “the Lebanese protagonists have limited autonomy”.¹⁸ To strengthen the impact, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner’s special emissary, Jean-Claude Cousseran, was sent on 10-11 July to Tehran to prepare the meeting, before going to Damascus on the 17th to consolidate its results. The main purpose remained to “set Lebanon back on its constitutional tracks”,¹⁹ while removing any obstacles to the appointment of a consensus replacement for the incumbent president, Emile Lahoud. Otherwise, Paris feared the creation of rival governments, whose fierce competition could degenerate into “real violence”.²⁰

Sarkozy set about explaining French policy in a speech given on 27 August 2007, during the French ambassadors’ annual conference:

For centuries, Lebanon has been dear to the French people. This friendship is not directed at any particular group or clan but at all the Lebanese people without any exception. Indeed, France is fiercely committed to Lebanon’s total freedom, to its full independence, to its full sovereignty, as required by Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701. This friendship spurred Bernard Kouchner into inviting all the main political players to Celle Saint-Cloud and then meeting them again in Beirut. We must carry on the resumed negotiations in order to end the crisis, with the timely election pursuant to the principles of the constitution of a president who unites the Lebanese and will be capable of working inside the country with all Lebanon’s communities, and outside, with all its major partners. All the regional players, and Syria among others, have to act in order to promote such a solution. The requirements for a Franco-Syrian dialogue will be fulfilled if Damascus follows this path.²¹

meeting was even considered in June, on the grounds of it being “impossible to help these people against their own will”. Annoyance increased as the Franco-Syrian talks intensified. “Certain members of March 14 have totally lost their sense of proportion. For instance, they come and ask us if it is correct that the French army is collaborating with the Syrian army in anticipation of it invading Lebanon. We tell them: ‘Listen, we all have very busy schedules. If it is to discuss things like this, it’s better not to waste our time’”. Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, November 2007.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, July 2007.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, July 2007.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ www.Elysee.fr/Elysee/Elysee.fr/francais/interventions/2007/aout/allocutionaloccasiondelaconferencedesambassadeurs.79272.html.

France started by adopting a careful, calibrated and conditional approach in its rapprochement with Syria. It seemed convinced that Syria would do anything to prevent the creation of an international tribunal to try the Hariri assassination case, including at the expense of a general destabilisation of Lebanon.²² But the alternative – sacrificing the tribunal – would be scandalous. The impact that calling into question the current policy, i.e. isolating and pressuring Damascus, would have on the Lebanese crisis is another issue. How to tackle the tribunal issue in a concrete way? Who in the government can be an interlocutor? And how can the impact created by such a change be managed in France itself, where Lebanon has a tendency to stir passions,²³ as well as in Washington and Israel?²⁴ The conclusions of this brief survey lead to the three following points.

Paris’s main concern was reassuring Damascus about the tribunal,²⁵ by denying any intention of destabilising the regime, while at the same time standing firm on the need for justice.

Beyond mere statements of principle, a few low-level contacts implicitly strengthened this message; a meeting with a foreign ministry official was thus organised for Riad Daoudi, a Syrian lawyer in charge of the tribunal dossier, during his stay in Europe in mid-2008.²⁶ France’s ambivalent attitude reflected its unease. It first adopted a conciliatory stance, while clearly refusing to discuss any “deal” on the tribunal issue, but even-

²² Crisis Group interviews, French officials, Paris and New York, May 2007. These officials were then convinced that Syria was behind almost all the violence that shook Lebanon, including the emergence of the jihadist group Fatah al-Islam. One, while granting that Saad Hariri’s Future Movement could have also played a role, invoked the sophistication of Fatah al-Islam weapons, the logistical support brought to it by the Palestinian group PFLP-GC, based in Damascus, and the combatants crossing Syrian territory toward Iraq who were driven back to Lebanon.

²³ The foreign ministry was particularly worried about the “extreme fickleness” of the French press, which criticized Chirac for his very close links with Hariri before turning its back on Sarkozy because he didn’t only speak to him”. Crisis Group interview, French official, Paris, June 2007.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, French officials, Paris, May and June 2007.

²⁵ In the first discussions with French officials initiated by Crisis Group, the question of the tribunal predominated, eg, “The French initiative towards Damascus is based on two presuppositions: that Syria attaches some importance to the eventual normalisation of relations with France; and that Syria is trying to defuse the conflict which is brewing on the issue of the tribunal”. Crisis Group interviews, French officials, New York, Paris and Damascus, May, June and July 2007.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, French and Syrian officials, August 2007.

tually warmed to the idea of having some Arab states take care of the negotiations.²⁷ In short, the idea was to offer the rather vague prospect of a friendly solution, without giving up the tribunal as a major means of pressuring Syria. From then on, the official suggested, all that was needed was to strike a subtle balance:

The message sent to Damascus was of this kind: "Everything is possible if you cooperate; if not we will side with others to pressure you even further". It would be useful if the U.S. raised its voice a little; I have a feeling that the Syrians are no longer afraid of them because they know that Washington is more concerned with Iraq than it is with Lebanon. And if the Syrians don't feel worried, they will do just as they please.²⁸

Secondly, high-level meetings were suggested as a form of reward for Syria acting in a satisfactory manner. Every political assassination in Lebanon would instantly freeze the diplomatic process, while moments of detente would be compensated by resuming the talks. Thus, Cousseran's visit, planned as a prolongation of his Lebanon stay in June 2007, was cancelled because of the murder of a deputy, Walid Eido, then rescheduled as a result of Damascus's suitably positive attitude towards the Celle Saint-Cloud meeting.²⁹ Likewise, the private meeting between Kouchner and his Syrian counterpart Walid Muallim during the UN General Assembly was postponed because of an attack that cost the life of the deputy Antoine Ghanem.³⁰

²⁷ "We need to discuss the tribunal with Syria, but France must not do it. It has to maintain its stance on the tribunal for it is one of its rare assets. The Arabs must do it". Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, July 2007. An official later said, "during the four meetings we had with President Assad, the tribunal was never mentioned except once in a trivial manner, and at his own initiative". Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, November 2008.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, July 2007.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Antoine Ghanem's murder prompted only one Syrian statement. It was, according to the Elysée, "as weak as it was late" and led to serious reappraisals. Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, September 2007. This irritated Sarkozy: "I haven't accused anyone, but still! We see elected representatives being assassinated with clockwork regularity, and it's starting to become unbearable. Assassination is not a [legitimate political] method, and a majority is not turned into a minority by the murder of its members. It is totally unacceptable, and the following fact must be known: France will do everything in its capacity to ensure that, one day or another, the assassins will have to account for their crimes ... and I have noticed that people always fall on the same side. Suspensions are going to become facts if it carries on this way". Press conference, New York, 25 September 2007. In a press

Thirdly, the prospect of a straight and swift normalisation of bilateral relations beyond occasional diplomatic talks was extended on the grounds of one simple, clear criterion: the election by consensus of a Lebanese president. Meanwhile, France restricted the agenda of discussions to the presidential crisis.³¹ This approach strengthened France's initial consistency, despite growing frustration owing a Syrian attitude that was considered both passive towards France³² and incurable towards Lebanon.³³

Strikingly enough, that steadfast attitude emanated from the Elysée, which at every stage of the process dealt with every doubt and disappointment more pragmatically than the Quai d'Orsay.³⁴

statement, Kouchner clearly linked the cancellation of his meeting with Muallim to Ghanem's murder. Associated Press, 27 September 2007.

³¹ In particular, Cousseran's assignment, during his stay in Damascus in July 2007, was strictly restricted to Lahoud's succession. Crisis Group interview, senior French and Syrian officials, Paris, July 2007.

³² At first, Damascus did not answer the French overture. The ambassadorship in Paris, which had not been filled since 2006, was left vacant. The French embassy in Damascus was still treated in the same way as when Chirac was in power, although a diplomat felt that Paris had sent a powerful signal by choosing to send Cousseran, a great specialist on Syria and former head of intelligence, in spite of his socialist ties. "France did its best to open the door to talks. Sending Cousseran represented an extraordinary overture". Crisis Group interview, French official, Damascus, September 2007.

³³ For instance, at the end of June 2007, French officials were irritated that Syria kept sending "all the bad signals", whether attacks or "mob-like threats" towards Lebanon, or obstructing the solution to the presidential crisis suggested by the Arab League. Crisis Group interviews, French officials, Paris and Damascus, June and July 2007. A diplomat deemed at the time that it was "almost too late. If Syria chooses confrontation in Lebanon, there will be nothing left to discuss. In view of these intimidation tactics, the only possible policy for the French is toughening their stance, notably when it comes to the shape the tribunal will take. What do they think? That everyone is going to give in and that we'll all go home? We're not wimps. We need at least a few signs of Syria's goodwill if we are to start talking. Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, June 2007.

³⁴ For instance, at the end of June, the foreign ministry appeared on the verge of giving up all hope on Syria. The situation at the Elysée was then described as a window "which is left ajar but that is gently closing". Crisis Group interviews, French officials, Paris, June 2007.

IV. THE ELYSÉE TAKES CONTROL

After several months of stagnation, the process was considerably altered when handling of the initiative passed from the foreign ministry to the presidency. That happened in November 2007, just before the term of office of the outgoing Lebanese president was scheduled to end on 23 November. A private meeting between Kouchner and Muallim organised on 2 November during the Istanbul summit on Iraq's security³⁵ was followed by the first visit to Damascus of the secretary general of the Elysée, Claude Guéant, accompanied by Jean-David Levitte, Sarkozy's diplomatic adviser. The French president also rang up his counterpart twice. The purpose was above all to establish direct contact with President Assad, whose involvement was likely to clarify the Syrian position.³⁶ Setting up a link with the Elysée also allowed Damascus an insight into French strategy, which had been blurred by several harsh statements that apparently contradicted the avowed desire for dialogue.³⁷

Sarkozy simultaneously left for Washington, where Bush apparently gave him the room he needed to implement his own method in Lebanon – a concession probably made easier by the preparation of the Annapolis conference on Palestinian-Israeli peace, to which many Arab and European players encouraged the administration to invite Damascus.³⁸ Said a French diplomat:

The idea is to go for a double neutralisation. On the one hand we must block the Americans, who are pressing for the unilateral election of a Lebanese president by March 14 [the anti-Syrian coalition currently in power], which poses a threat to Lebanon. On the other hand, we need to diminish Syria's

ability to act as a spoiler. We believe that Syria wants to use France as a stepping-stone towards the U.S., and we have adopted a strategy by stages. The first step would be to push for Syrian participation in Annapolis and put the Golan Heights on the agenda. If everything goes well, we'll be able to take further action.³⁹

At the same time, France increased its efforts to ensure the nomination of a president by consensus. On 16 November, it overcame his initial objections to obtain from the Maronite Patriarch a list of potential presidential candidates,⁴⁰ then resumed its mediation between the Lebanese parties,⁴¹ this time on a more concrete basis. This was also a turning point in Franco-Syrian relations, as the mediation's intensification created a dynamic Syria could no longer simply ignore. Another French diplomat said:

In my opinion, Damascus did not believe in the French enterprise. The Syrians have not taken up our objectives but have been content to appreciate the method we used, seeing the talks as a means of reducing their isolation. They remained unconvinced and did not think that France could extract a list of candidates from the Maronite Patriarch. The success of that initiative took them by surprise and led them gradually to commit themselves more than they had expected.⁴²

The Elysée became carried away in three different ways. Although it had refused to do so until then,⁴³ France

³⁵ Apparently Kouchner started out by phoning Muallim – a politically less consequential gesture. He swiftly promised to send Cousseran to Damascus and to meet Muallim in Istanbul.

³⁶ “The main purpose of Guéant's and Levitte's visit was to see Bashar, supreme arbitrator between pragmatists such as Muallim and those who would have preferred to ruin everything”. Crisis Group interview, French official, Damascus, November 2007. Until then, France had explored many lines of communication with the Syrian regime, producing disorganised and hard to gauge effects.

³⁷ At the time, a Syrian official pointed out the importance of these meetings, which could give rise to more personal relations. “The talk between President Assad and Guéant left an excellent impression [on the president], as did his telephone conversation with Sarkozy. We are happy that, from now on, the dossier is in President Sarkozy's hands”. Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

³⁸ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°22, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Annapolis and After*, 20 November 2007.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Beirut, November 2007.

⁴⁰ The Patriarch was reluctant to jeopardise his credibility by suggesting a list likely to be ignored by the parties in conflict. *Le Monde*, 7 November 2007. “We had to exert great pressure by telling him that he would be morally responsible for any flare-up in Lebanon if he didn't contribute to solving the crisis. It will be a while before he forgives us if it doesn't work”. Crisis Group interview, French official, November 2007.

⁴¹ Between 12 November and 15 December, 2007, Kouchner returned three times to Lebanon.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, November 2007.

⁴³ In early November 2007, Kouchner fiercely rejected any interference whatsoever in the presidential selection process, which had to remain strictly Lebanese. “We want the Lebanese democratic electoral process to take place according to constitutional rules. Any interference must be avoided at all costs. It is the Lebanese people themselves, all the Lebanese communities, that have to choose a candidate. There will presumably be discussions between the majority and the opposition, that is to say between Mr Hariri and Mr Nabih Berri as well as the choice of one or two candidates to present to parliament. I don't know, and I don't wish to know their names. I shall not discuss them. If the basic elements of

discussed the Lebanese presidential candidates with Damascus, recognizing that Syria had a say in the subject, or even a right of veto.⁴⁴ Moreover, it called upon Syria to put pressure on its allies (especially Hizbollah);⁴⁵ that is, to intervene in Lebanon, though it had previously been asked to abstain from doing so.⁴⁶ Finally, despite the gradual approach which had been adopted in theory, in practice the Elysée rushed headlong into talks: Guéant in particular called Mualim on a daily basis.⁴⁷

Syrian reactions were mixed. They welcomed the difference of approach between France and the U.S.⁴⁸ and made a few gestures of goodwill, particularly when it facilitated the peaceful departure of the incumbent president, Emile Lahoud. Yet, Syria still kept its distance. Some people worried about the Elysée's eagerness,⁴⁹ especially as Syrian officials insisted on the limits

of their influence in Lebanon. According to a Syrian leader, "Syria has very little leverage, where Aoun is concerned. And with Hizbollah we can only exert pressure until they warn us: "This threatens our basic interests".⁵⁰

Torn between the desire to develop good relations with France and reject any solution unfavourable to its interests in Lebanon, Syria adopted a deeply ambiguous attitude. On the one hand, its leaders soothed their French interlocutors in private, guaranteeing that a solution was imminent every time the presidential election was postponed.⁵¹ On the other hand, as the situation in Lebanon became steadily more unstable, some grew increasingly distrustful.⁵²

V. BREAKING UP AND MAKING UP

the democratic process are respected, then the relations between France and Syria will progress in a positive manner. Only then will we resume normal relations. This is the message, which for the fifth time, was sent to Damascus yesterday". Press conference, Paris, 5 November 2007.

⁴⁴This precedent was a particularly bad experience for the March 14 alliance. "The French have made a serious mistake by repeating daily that Syria could facilitate the election of a president. We should simply ask Syria not to do any harm". Crisis Group interview, senior March 14 figure, Beirut, October 2008.

⁴⁵"What should we expect from Syria? That, when the moment comes, it will put pressure on Hizbollah. I understand that Damascus has little leverage on Aoun, and I also understand the complexity of its relations with Hizbollah. But if Syria can't do anything, what's the use?" Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, November 2007.

⁴⁶The irony of the situation was often pointed out in Damascus. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, November and December 2007. A Syrian official showed his satisfaction at seeing France struggling to forge an agreement between the Lebanese in preparation for the election. "We have been doing this for years. We had to intrigue one year in advance for the slightest election in the smallest village. Honestly, we are only too happy to leave it to the French!" Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

⁴⁷Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian and French officials, Damascus and Paris, November and December 2007.

⁴⁸"Sarkozy is pro-American and pro-Israeli, and we are watching him. But the important thing is he's turned away from Chirac's Syrian and Lebanese policy. While France knows Lebanon well and fears its disintegration, the U.S. doesn't know anything about it". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

⁴⁹"The Syrians became suspicious of Sarkozy when he started being overzealous: according to my sources, they particularly winced when Sarkozy basically declared that he would spend his Christmas holidays in Damascus if the crisis had

The divorce between Sarkozy and Assad was as sudden as their rapprochement. Another assassination in Lebanon,⁵³ growing pressure from the U.S.⁵⁴ and an increasingly embarrassing situation caused by the mediocre results of the mediation, in which France's credibility⁵⁵

been solved by then". Crisis Group interview, French official, March 2008.

⁵⁰Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007. "We told the French officials that we were not in contact with Aoun. He is not our ally. But he has a strong personality, has close links with Hizbollah and is very popular among the Lebanese Christians. Hizbollah cannot give up Aoun, as one could with most Christian figures. And by the way, if no one wants us to interfere, why should we embark in this joint effort with the French?" Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, November 2007.

⁵¹Crisis Group interviews, French and Syrian officials, Paris and Damascus, December 2007.

⁵²The most striking illustration of this is Vice President Faruq al-Shara's statement during the seventh periodic meeting of the National Progressive Front, insisting that Syria was stronger than ever and leaving the resolution of the Lebanese crisis to the Lebanese themselves. *Al-Ba'th*, 12 December 2007.

⁵³The general staff officer, François al-Hajj, was assassinated by a bomb on 2 December 2007.

⁵⁴In December 2007, Bush declared he had "long ago lost patience with President Assad" and sent to Beirut his assistant secretary of state, David Welch, as well as the deputy national security adviser, Elliot Abrams (a staunch supporter of strong-arm tactics regarding Syria). Agence France-Presse, 19-20 December 2007. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Adviser Steven Hadley are said to have also exerted direct pressure on the Elysée. *Le Monde*, 12 January 2008.

⁵⁵Reflecting in his own words the mounting criticism in the regional, Lebanese and French press, Kouchner admitted, "seeing a foreign minister for the seventh time obviously

was at stake drove the Elysée to deliver an ultimatum: either election of a new Lebanese president before 22 December or bilateral relations would deteriorate considerably. The Elysée reviewed a whole series of sanctions, ranging from a speedy set-up of the international tribunal, through UN economic sanctions, to leaks regarding the Israeli bombing of structures near Dayr al-Zor suspected of being part of a covert nuclear program.⁵⁶ Once the deadline had passed, Sarkozy staged the break-up with a certain dramatic flair, standing next to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak – one of Assad’s greatest Arab detractors – and brandishing the threat of a tribunal.

France has taken the responsibility of a conditional dialogue with Syria. We are now waiting for acts and not speeches from the Syrians. Lebanon must have a president, a consensus president. Was I right to get in touch with President Bashar el-Assad? I don’t regret it. I accept it because I wanted to be totally sincere when I said to Syria: there, you have the chance to show that you want to take a respectable path. There is no denying that we can’t wait any longer. Syria must stop speaking and must start proving its worth. I will – along with all my collaborators – first cut ties with Syria, if we don’t receive proof of its desire to let Lebanon choose a consensus president. Secondly, France will unblock the necessary funds in order to hasten the establishment of an International Criminal Tribunal.⁵⁷

The Elysée made sure at the same time it would be able to renew talks. Contrary to Sarkozy’s claims, ties were never entirely cut: Guéant called Muallim again, and a letter from the Elysée was even sent to Damascus.⁵⁸ At the end of January 2008, the French Institute

gives rise to criticism and irony”. Press conference, Beirut, 7 December 2007.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, December 2007.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Sarkozy, press conference, Cairo, 30 December 2007.

⁵⁸ “Sarkozy has moved on to other things, but not entirely. He hates admitting that he failed and wants to keep a chance of changing it into a success. Guéant’s phone call could have been a pretext to remind the Syrians that France is not speaking to them any more....it’s a bit like a former lover who phones his ex only to ask: ‘is it you who just called?’” Crisis Group interview, French official, February 2008. Guéant’s call, probably perceived as a discreet means of keeping the lines of communication open, was publicised by Syria. “We had to respond to Guéant’s call after Sarkozy’s statement with Mubarak. The leak to SANA [the Syrian state news agency] was obviously orchestrated. Sarkozy had threatened us, turned into a new Bush and insulted us publicly; and then his man calls up and tries to keep the lines of communication

of International Relations welcomed Samir Taqi, an intellectual who is closely linked to the regime. Only a few measures of reprisal were implemented.⁵⁹ While withdrawing from the Lebanese scene in favour of an Arab League mediation, Paris continued for weeks to re-examine its options rather than revert to Chirac’s policy.⁶⁰ The idea of inviting Assad to take part in the Mediterranean Union summit in July in Paris remained afloat.⁶¹ On 22 April, Kouchner even met his Syrian counterpart, for a “straightforward” and “clear-headed” one-on-one session during a meeting in Kuwait on the stability of Iraq.⁶² This flexibility allowed the Elysée to act quickly when Hizbollah’s show of force⁶³ led to the signature in Doha of a compromise agreement that included the election of the Lebanese president.

In the meantime in Damascus, the break decided by France caused the regime to plunge back into isolation after a period of relative respite and success.⁶⁴ In order to keep up appearances, Syria pretended for a time that nothing had changed, making an extraordinary show of a mere parliamentary delegation, whose visit in January had been planned long before and without the Elysée’s prior consultation.⁶⁵ However, officials privately claimed they were shocked by France’s attitude, reproaching Sarkozy for his cutting words more than for his opinions: “Sarkozy’s orders and ultimatums reminded me of the meeting in 2003 with

open. This was unacceptable”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2008.

⁵⁹ For instance, the idea discussed in early January of calling for UN sanctions was swiftly abandoned. “The French are thinking of going to the Security Council to call for sanctions against Syria”. Crisis Group interview, senior Arab official, Cairo, January 2008.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, March 2008.

⁶¹ *Al-Watan*, 20 February 2008.

⁶² *Le Figaro*, 22 April 2008.

⁶³ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah’s Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008.

⁶⁴ Robert Malley and Peter Harling, “France-Syria, the moment of truth”, *Le Monde*, 7 December 2007.

⁶⁵ This delegation, led by the president of the Franco-Syrian friendship group, had at first planned on meeting the president of the Syrian parliament in November 2007, but he pointed out that his timetable would prevent him from receiving them before January. Crisis Group interview, delegation member, Paris, December 2007. In January 2008 the delegation received a welcome worthy of a state visit, was greeted by Assad himself and presented to the Syrian media as proof of France’s desire to keep up the best relations with Syria. SANA, 9 January 2008. A few days after, the daily newspaper *al-Watan* quoted Axel Poniatowski, president of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly, as encouraging France to resume talks with Syria, an essential player in the region. *Al-Watan*, 22 January 2008.

Colin Powell,⁶⁶ when the president told him, ‘it is unacceptable that you speak to us in this way’. You have to understand our president’s character”.⁶⁷ Basically, the officials shifted a part of the responsibility onto Paris, which, they said, had failed in three ways: It had not understood the non-negotiable claims of the Lebanese opposition, had not been able to reason with the governing majority and had not been capable of keeping the U.S. at a distance.⁶⁸

Looking back on the events, a French official who directly handled the dossier judged that the failure in December 2007 in fact made it possible to lay healthier grounds for an effective rapprochement:

At the end of 2007, the Syrians rejected the French plan to ensure Michel Suleiman’s election. Sarkozy got annoyed. The Syrians realised that we were not dependent on them, and found themselves once again in a lonely one-on-one with Iran. It is from then onwards that a subtle mixture of comfortable and uncomfortable elements could be observed. The Mughniyeh affair⁶⁹ can be included in the second category, as it raised tensions, along with the consequences of the Israeli bombing of Dayr al-Zor, which brought up the possibility of a new escalation with the U.S., and to a certain extent the May crisis in Beirut, in which the Syrians were surprised and worried by the importance acquired by Hizbollah.

The Arab summit in May is to be included among the comfortable elements, as its success showed the limits of Saudi Arabian and Egyptian influence, as well as the initiation of talks with Israel, which, for the first time, found a way of doing Syria a real favour. This played a part in the agreement of Doha, which on the whole, didn’t offer anything new compared to the French plan. For the first time, Syria accepted to play by the rules, and this time it decided to pocket the winnings. It was Sarkozy’s outburst at the end of December 2007 and his speedy return in May that gave him his strength. The Syrians understood that he was both capable of leaving the negotiating table and of

seizing opportunities when they presented themselves concretely.⁷⁰

Because of its pragmatic and flexible quality, the French system showed it was capable of revising its positions as events unfolded. A French diplomat confided in May 2008: “These past weeks, Bashar has shown another side of himself by taking difficult decisions – such as the initiation of talks with Israel and the unpopular liberalisation of the economic system – and avoiding any serious blunders in Lebanon. This has made him a much more reliable interlocutor. We are conscious that Syria wasn’t a driving force in Doha, but at least it refrained from obstructing the process, and its intentions in Lebanon have become much clearer to us”.⁷¹

Thus, Paris launched a diplomatic offensive immediately after the Doha agreement was reached on 21 May. The next day, Alain Le Roy, the ambassador in charge of the Mediterranean Union, went to Damascus to discuss Syrian participation in the summit planned for 13 July in Paris.⁷² A French official, who said France had to “re-enter by the door, the window, or if necessary by the chimney”, then suggested resuming the high-level meetings, trying mediation on the Shebaa Farms, offering technical expertise in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, and, by using the French presidency of the European Union to full advantage, reintroducing the concept of an association agreement between Damascus and Brussels.⁷³

From then on, things started to go very quickly. On 29 May 2008, Sarkozy called Assad, thus resuming talks at the highest level. On 15 June, Guéant and Levitte returned to Damascus, carrying a letter from the Elysée. The effective implementation of the Doha agreement allowed Syrian participation in the Mediterranean Union summit, which was prepared by Muallim’s visit to Paris, followed by that of Abdallah Dardari, vice-prime minister for economic affairs. Suggested in early June, the Damascus-Beirut embassy exchange was officially announced during the summit, offering France a handsome victory (though Syria insisted that Paris had nothing to do with it).⁷⁴

⁶⁶ See Crisis Group’s forthcoming report on Syrian-U.S. relations.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, January 2008.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, January 2008.

⁶⁹ Imad Mughniyeh, quasi-mythical military leader of Hizbollah and one of the most wanted figures in the U.S. and Israel for his involvement in terrorist acts, was assassinated in the heart of Damascus on 12 February 2008.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, French official, October 2008.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, May 2008.

⁷² www.ambafrance-sy.org/spip.php?rubrique49.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, French official, May 2008.

⁷⁴ “This is not a concession to France. If we had wanted to make any concessions, we would have done so three years ago, when we were under huge pressure, not today. I started talking about opening an embassy with Emile Lahoud and [Lebanese Parliament speaker] Nabih Berri in 2005. But

On 13 August, a summit between Assad and the newly-elected Lebanese president was orchestrated in Damascus, during which contentious issues such as border demarcation, revision of bilateral agreements and clarification of the fate of the missing Lebanese in Syria were tackled, thus breaking a taboo, although tangible results remain to be seen. Syria took the opportunity to fill its vacant ambassadorial post in Paris. As a final touch, Sarkozy joined the leaders of Syria, Turkey and Qatar for a quadripartite summit in Damascus on 3-4 September.

The Syrians hailed French diplomacy's energy and pragmatism although they also understood its limits: "Sarkozy is nothing more than a tactician, but he doesn't hide it, and this is not an issue for us. All he did was fill the gap left by the Bush administration".⁷⁵ Despite the friendly signals Sarkozy supposedly sent Assad,⁷⁶ Damascus is well aware that national interests come first for France. In the same way as Damascus sees in France a way of building better relations with the U.S. and Europe,⁷⁷ Paris considers Syria a key to the Middle East. "In my view", a Syrian analyst said, "Sarkozy's rapprochement had less to do with Lebanon per se than with Syria, as the key to France's role in the region. The situation in Beirut presented serious obstacles which Damascus could help resolve. In essence Sarkozy suggested to Bashar: 'Help me get rid of the Lebanese hysteria in the French media and diplomacy, and we can move ahead on a whole range of issues'".⁷⁸

A constructive relationship, built on precise goals, is also described on the French side.

Our experience with Syria brings us satisfaction in so far as Bashar is delivering on his promises. We

pressure came [and stalled the process]. Sarkozy presents himself as the author of this move, but he has no relation with the issue. In truth, the French know that we didn't do it for them". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, October 2008.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst, Damascus, September 2008. "Sarkozy is very pragmatic. He knows how to grab opportunities and read into small details. And he knows how to find common interest". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, October 2008.

⁷⁶ "You cannot imagine how things are with Sarkozy, who used to attack us; we didn't change; he did. Bashar told me some personal anecdotes about how Sarkozy now treats him and talks to him; it is incredible". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, September 2008.

⁷⁷ "The French will basically be used as a way of fostering engagement by the U.S. and the EU. There's not so much they can offer in and of themselves". Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, June 2008.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, September 2008.

are proceeding on the grounds of an assessment grid divided into four sections. The idea is to achieve a general assessment rather than concentrate on a few points. The first being Lebanon, as the embassy exchange is indeed an important precedent. Three commissions are working on demarcating the borders, re-examination of the bilateral agreements and the missing Lebanese. There is still a lot to do, but Bashar is showing he is capable of forging ahead. The second point focuses on the indirect discussions with Israel, which have given rise to the new conviction that Syria can indeed negotiate seriously.

Thirdly, Bashar has accepted to get involved in the Iranian nuclear dossier. He cannot obtain much from the Iranians but it will at least get him interested in details, which might set him doubting.⁷⁹ The fourth point focuses on the catastrophic human rights assessment. We are not giving up our firm stance. The protection of Lebanese sovereignty and the establishment of an international tribunal are subjects on which we are not ready to make compromises. Another instance: the IAEA is currently building a dossier that is probably damning for the Syrian nuclear program, but we shall not help them in any way to face this danger. We are neither their friends nor their allies.⁸⁰

Some officials still harbour doubts about the prospects for normalisation of Lebanese-Syrian relations, even though, there again, pragmatism prevails.⁸¹ France has

⁷⁹ "It's Sarkozy who had the idea of introducing Iran into the Franco-Syrian agenda. Bashar was quite flattered. He didn't obtain anything more by speaking to the Iranians. But in spite of this, he was obliged to look into the dossier. He can no longer be satisfied with hearing the Iranians tell him it is a civilian program: he must ask concrete questions. This is a way of letting the rot set in". Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, October 2008. A Turkish official pointed out that thanks to its relationship with Tehran, Damascus was at least able to contribute a relevant analysis on the room for manoeuvre of the international community. "The meeting of the four countries was little more than a big show of support for Syria. But on substance, the Iranian file, as it came up in the discussion, was interesting. Assad stressed that stopping enrichment was politically impossible for Iran, but a deal could be built around full and effective inspections". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, October 2008. According to an Arab official with close ties to Iran, Tehran resented the suggestion of Syrian mediation. "Iran considers itself a regional power. If France wants to speak to Iran, it must be done directly, and above all not through Syria". Crisis Group interview, October 2008.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, November 2008.

⁸¹ "Idealistic scenarios for Lebanon are not enough. We could witness a return to the old methods, or else the security

also failed, at least for the time being, to convince Egypt, and especially Saudi Arabia, of the validity of its initiative.⁸² On the whole, the process remains trial-and-error:

We admit our approach may not succeed but we are trying something new. Of course, Syria remains in a good position to play around. We are trying to assuage international concern – in the U.S., among some of our European partners, but also in Egypt and Saudi Arabia – by stressing that Sarkozy is not going to give anything without getting something in return. Our approach is a pragmatic, step-by-step attempt to put Lebanese institutions back on track and achieve normalisation of relations between the two neighbours, while engaging Syria.⁸³

Being careful does not stop them from pursuing relatively ambitious goals. The two main axes of cooperation currently underway consist of French participation in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations and close coordination in the fight against terrorism. This emerges from Guéant's most recent visit to Damascus, on 29-30 November 2008:

Attention was especially focused on the Israeli-Syrian process. The French would obviously like negotiations to be chaired by the U.S., but they are busy trying to get France to play a specific part,

cooperation could become so strong Syria would control the Lebanese services from afar. This is why our official position is the following: 'exchanging embassies is all very well, but we are waiting to see about border demarcation and all the rest'. But I think that all the other issues will depend on the positive evolution of the Israeli-Syrian dossier. At this stage, our leaders must not squander their political capital by asking for unrealistic things". Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, October 2008. These preoccupations are obviously widespread among the members of March 14. "To those who want to talk with Syria, I answer: 'ok, but don't sacrifice Lebanon'. If the next American administration initiates talks, we would have to lobby to ensure that it is not done at the expense of what we have accomplished in Lebanon. We must facilitate the normalisation of Franco-Syrian relations, but without going too far. It's a tricky and difficult enterprise: we are not on equal terms; the Syrians are simply much more powerful than us, that's all". Crisis Group interview, senior March 14 figure, Beirut, October 2008.

⁸² "Encouraging the Saudis and the Egyptians to follow in our footsteps in order to rebuild an Arab axis to face Iran was one of our arguments. That argument was ill-founded". Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Damascus, October 2008.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, New York, October 2008.

including even hosting the talks.⁸⁴ Cooperation between [security] services was the other issue at stake. Syria opened its files and gave very precise information on the recent terrorist attacks on its territory as well as on the case of the jihadist group Fatah al-Islam. Lebanon is no longer their only concern.⁸⁵

A last point could focus on the extension of the Syrian role in the Iranian nuclear issue.⁸⁶ France could go further however, along the lines described above. The risk would be for Paris to be content with a political manoeuvre at a moment when it should be developing a proper policy. There definitely is a downside to the French system's good points; as a highly centralised process that avoids the channels of traditional bureaucracy, it errs on the side of a lack of follow-up, although it has proved time and again unusually creative and reactive.

We can't deny that our weakness lies in our somewhat light system [at an institutional level]. On the other hand, that's precisely what allows us to switch easily. The drawback is that there is never anybody there to manage the cases and to follow them through. Relations with Syria can only develop thanks to overtime. These are the only means at our disposal. For instance, the budget for Franco-Syrian cooperation has dropped by 10 per cent compared to last year. There is only one person in charge of the dossier at the Elysée. The Quai d'Orsay is definitely not the architect of our foreign policy and was even subordinated in the Syrian case.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ The following interpretation is also possible: "France would very much like a fifth and sixth round to be held under Turkish-French tutelage, before the U.S. joins the process. Obviously, everyone understands that the U.S. will have to have to be included eventually". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, November 2008.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, adviser to Syrian authorities, Damascus, December 2008.

⁸⁶ "Guéant's visit was very fruitful and forward-looking. The French seem concerned mainly with the Syrian-Israeli track. Lebanon wasn't so much on the agenda. They also want us to resume contacts with Iran over the nuclear issue". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2008.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, French official, October 2008.

VI. WHAT LESSONS ARE TO BE DRAWN?

The experimental work of French diplomacy has not yet reached the stage of authoritative empirical conclusions, but it can already give a few lessons to the American administration, whose own approach will be no less hesitant and experimental. The French have already noted: “I think the Syrians have placed too much hope in the next American administration. The resulting disappointment will probably supply France with more leverage. Above all, we shall be especially well placed to pass on messages”.⁸⁸ The following points are particularly noteworthy:

- ❑ The steadfastness and reaction capability of the French effort comes from having clearly defined the criteria for normalising the Franco-Syrian relationship, in spite of heavy doubts and intense pressure exerted on the officials in charge of the dossier.
- ❑ It is necessary to be patient during the negotiation stage and to act fast as soon as a solution appears. The eagerness of the French in 2007 was useless at best, and at worst encouraged Damascus to increase its demands and play for time.⁸⁹ On the other hand, France managed to establish its credibility by rewarding the first Syrian moves at once, thus pushing Damascus to commit itself further.⁹⁰
- ❑ After a lengthy pause in relations, it is essential to plan a relatively long mutual observation stage, review all options and rebuild trust. In the Syrian case, the December 2007 failure was partly due to

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior French official, Paris, November 2008.

⁸⁹ “The U.S. must recommit themselves, but not too fast. It’s true they are sometimes a bit simple-minded when what you actually need to sup with the devil is a long spoon. There is a chance they will be too naïve or too brutal. That is why we must not appear needy – otherwise Muallim and the others will raise the stakes. This was our greatest challenge: finding the right tone, the perfect balance, which would attract them without pushing them to haggle like mad”. Crisis Group interview, French official, October 2008.

⁹⁰ This attitude proved to be all the more effective, as it offered a contrast with that of the Bush administration. “This is not what the Bush administration did. They were aggressive and displayed arrogance without purpose. If the Syrians did anything good, they would dismiss it as negligible and ask for more. The U.S. definitely shouldn’t ask for something soft, that can’t be measured, or that proves reversible. They must focus on something positive, well-defined, concrete and irreversible”. Crisis Group interview, senior March 14 figure, Beirut, October 2008.

mutual misunderstanding, although the talks had been started seven months earlier.

- ❑ Establishing a direct link with the president is important but does not really solve anything. While the Elysée was tempted to substitute its own high-level emissaries for traditional diplomacy, the role of the French embassy in Damascus proved to be of crucial importance, as it constantly updated the French analysis, expressed concrete recommendations, explored unconventional lines of communication and tested the water on the Syrian side.
- ❑ There is no reason to rule out breaks in the dialogue, so long as a few lines of communication are kept open to allow for a swift reaction when the conditions for resuming the talks are met again.
- ❑ Syria must be expected to take decisions according to multiple considerations that go far beyond the reward and sanction system that structures bilateral relations. It has answered French overtures at unpredictable times, based on information that France could not have offered.⁹¹
- ❑ While France initially considered the international tribunal the touchstone of its entire Syrian policy, events have shown that Damascus is capable of adopting a more constructive posture and initiating a rapprochement with Paris without making any concrete concessions on this particular dossier. This does not altogether exclude the fact that tensions might break out again when the prosecutor announces his count of indictment.
- ❑ On the subject of Lebanon, Syria agreed to make gestures that it had previously stubbornly refused, despite international pressure. While this shows the importance of standing firm, France’s initiative also suggests that there is a link between growing Franco-Syrian relations and normalisation of Syrian-Lebanese relations. The new U.S. administration might follow this example and choose a procedure that would recognise and reward progress, while imposing some form of sanction for any backward step.

⁹¹ Long before Doha, a French official pointed out the limits of what France had to offer. “The Lebanese crisis will not be resolved until (a) Syria gets satisfaction on a far broader range of issues – that France cannot deliver – pertaining to the balance of power in Lebanon as well as regional dynamics; and (b) domestic issues are overcome in Lebanon, mainly relating to Aoun”. Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Washington DC, February 2008.

- By trying to establish closer links with France, Syria has clearly shown its intention of extending its portfolio of strategic alliances, even if it means rebalancing its stance on certain dossiers. A break in Syrian-Iranian relations would be highly unlikely, at least in current circumstances. But Syria's move towards diversification should be encouraged, particularly by the U.S., since it will weaken Iran's influence over Damascus and facilitate a progressive redefinition of their alliance on the grounds of more complex calculations.
- Presenting a general assessment of any diplomatic overture towards Syria must be carefully done, at the end of a rather long period of time (at least sev-

eral months) and by comparing several variables. For instance, the French experience has produced quite irregular, undefined and in some cases, reversible results, which, however, have some prospect of producing more tangible and lasting effects. To expect immediate Syrian reactions in response to the next American administration's wishes would be delusional. The difficulty lies in clearly expressing expectations and swiftly rewarding positive attitudes, while integrating unsatisfactory answers into a long-term perspective, that is, by imposing penalties without cutting ties once and for all.

Damascus/Brussels, 15 January 2009



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