

IV : American and Syrian policy in Lebanon since the 70's

A : Historical Background :

1- European-American crossover in the Middle East :

The US were not much present in the near east before 1956, after the Suez attack of the French-British-Israeli coalition, and the sovietic-american agreement on the issue, the De Gaulle's France, after 1958 will abandon its traditional aid to the Israelis, and be replaced by the US, in the cold war context. In Lebanon France has always been present on the side of the Maroni-Christians, since Louis XIV, but, at this time, De Gaulle initiates a new alliance with the Arab-Nationalists and did not invest in the counter-revolution in Bayreuth.

At this time the phalangists of the nationalist party led by Jemayel opposed themselves to the Sunni Prime Minister Rashid Karamé who sought to enter the new Arab United Republic of Gamal Abelnasser who was angry against the Maroni president Camille Shamoun who didn't break off diplomatic relations with the western powers of the Suez attack. The phalangists destitute the prime minister, with the help of the US, arguing that the Arab-Nationalists were aligned on the USSR.

Like in Israel, the US replaced in Lebanon the traditional British and French support to the Christians, and invests himself on this side in the Civil War.

The US under the democrat administration of Jimmy Carter refuse a complete support to the Maroni and the president Frangieh, after one year of fighting, on the verge of defeat of the phalangists called for Syrian intervention, in June 1976... against the Palestinians... which permits a horrible massacre in the Palestinian camps on east Bayreuth. However, the US did surely support the mandate given in Riyadh by the Arab League on North-East Lebanon.

Since 1977, the anti-government pact of leftists, Shi'a, Sunna, Palestinians and Druze would stick together for some time more, but their divergent interests tore at opposition unity. Sensing the opportunity, Hafez al-Assad immediately began splitting up both the Christian and Muslim coalitions in a game of divide and conquer!

PLO attacks from Lebanon into Israel in 1977 and 1978 escalated tensions between the countries, in March, Tsahal invaded the south Lebanon but Carter's America opposed to this and agree with the Security Council's Resolution 425 calling for immediate withdrawal.

The peace pact between Israel and the Egyptian Saddat made Syria change its mind, and turned towards the Palestinians, Al-Assad decided to expel the phalangist from the government and to support Frangieh against Gemayel.

2- Conservatives against Syria in Lebanon

In 1979, the blue neo-cons set Damascus on the list of "State supporting terrorism". In 1981, the US became conservatives, and Reagan changed its mind too...

That explain highly the new Israeli operation 'Peace in Galilee', which began on June 1982 and led to the conquest of all the half Lebanon, The United States called for PLO withdrawal from Lebanon, and Sharon began to order bombing raids of West Beirut, targeting some 16,000 PLO *fedayeen* who had retreated into fortified positions. On June, when the UN Security Council proposed "*the immediate withdrawal of the Israeli forces engaged round Beirut[...] as a first step towards the complete withdrawal [...]and the simultaneous withdrawal of the Palestinian armed forces from Beirut, which shall retire to the existing camps[...]*"; the US vetoed the resolution because it was "*a transparent attempt to preserve the PLO as a viable political force*", an indication of Reagan's support for destroying the PLO before it could negotiate a withdrawal agreement...

In August, a "multinational" force composed of US Marines (with French and Italian units) arrived in Bayreuth officially to ensure the departure of the PLO and protect civilians.

In the camps of Sabra and Shatila, the phalangists of the Israeli-Zone massacred number of civilians under the eyes of the US marines, after that, in May 1983, Amine Gemayel, the leader of the phalangists, Israel, and the US signed an agreement text on Israeli withdrawal only if Syrian troops departed too... Syria strongly opposed the agreement and declined to discuss the withdrawal of its troops, estimating the Gemayel presidency as collaboration under occupation with Israel.

A period of chaos occurs after this, when the Druses began to conquer territory over the Christians. After the suicide attack at the US Embassy in West Beirut, Reagan ordered naval bombardments of the Druses' positions which resulted in numerous civilian deaths; on October, another suicide bombing in Beirut targeted the headquarters of the US and French forces, killing 241 Americans.

After 5 years, the situation began to solve but, under Bush Senior's administration, the Christian general Michel Aun entered a "war of liberation" against the Syrian army.

William Harris refused any Syrian operation until Damascus joins the international coalition against Saddam Hussein. Aun claimed in 1990 that they "has sold Lebanon to Syria", we can add that Bush' US had buy in exchange an alliance between Shia's militias, Syria, and Iran.

After *Desert Storm* middle east became increasingly difficult for Syria, no more Iraqi powerful "enemy brother", no more Saudi-neutrality, no more USSR counter power... the Irani alliance was highly necessary for the regime. On the other hand, we can observe that Albright's diplomacy under Clinton's administration changed radically in the near east, producing the *Oslo's* agreements I and II, and after that *Camp David*.

B : During the war on terror :

On the last 90's, the Khamenei's Iranian revolution began to normalize its relation with the west, and abandon the state of war of the 80's finally, Khatami's presidency marks a renewal of the Iranian soft power in the region, and an evident pacification with the US. Syria during the last years of Hafiz and his son Bashar's advent enter conciliation with the rest of the world. Finally in 2000, Tsahal retreated from the south-Lebanon and let the land to the Hezbollah...

The Bush junior's area, and the post-9/11 situation completely turned over this evolution.

1- 2003-2005 : Rising Hostilities :

Hezbollah obviously is an anti-colonialist party, whose program quotes one of its goals: "expel the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon". But they do not oppose to the Syrian occupation. They are Lebanese Nationalist, but progressively accepted the confessional structure of Lebanon. This anti-colonialism is a major goal for the justification of the war against the Zionist, seen mainly as imperialist agents in the arab-muslim world... In 1999, Hezbollah was placed on the US State Department terrorism list, after its condemnation of the 9/11 attacks, it was removed from the list, but it was later returned to the list on December 2004.

This last condemnation appears after the *Syria Accountability Act* of December 2003 which levied additional sanctions: freezing Syrian assets in US banks, banning commercial flights between Syria and the US, and banishing US exports to Syria, except food and medicine.

On June 2004, Damascus entered on the ignominious list of "State protecting terrorism", after three years of respite, due to the Syrian condemnation of the 9/11.

On September, the resolution 1559, after the 1553 of July, accented the US pressure on Syria, and used the will of independence of a majority of (Sunni, Christian and Druze) Lebanese, in urging Syria to a total withdrawal from Lebanon, the abandon of the constitutional reforms to maintain the pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud, and the disarmament of all militias (mostly the Hezbollah...).

Five months after, Rafic Hariri died in a suicide bombing, this event provoked an intense international pressure on a suspected responsibility of the Syrian *Mukhabarat*. This accusation was led by the US, but also by its ally like Saudi Arabia (nearly linked with the Hariri enterprises), and the pro-occidental Lebanese themselves, manipulated, convinced, or simply finding accusing Damascus easier than clean up the intern relations of the parties.

Consequently, the huge emotion and demonstration led to the effective withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon. Since the bombing, some 12 political leaders, both *pro* and *anti* Syrian were assassinated the same way. An international commission, led by the UN, then by the TPI, which conduct an investigation for a Special Court for Lebanon, the first individual criminal case of this kind.

Bashar el-Assad became and remained on year and half on the NATO's pillory, and improved its alliance with the Irani conservative leader, M. Ahmadinejad, a declared enemy of the White House.

Since December 2003, Damascus was also outpointed for its supposed permissive policy on the Iraqi border, progressively; this charge became simply a complicity with al-Qaeda-Iraqi Baas' "terrorism".

In June 2005, Condoleezza Rice, defending the US 'democratic' strategy in Iraq, and the popular revolt of Lebanon against Syria, declared that America would no longer support repressive regimes in the name of political expediency and that it was "supporting the democratic aspirations of all people".

But Syria is not alone in its suppression of internal dissent, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are using the "war on terror" as a cover to silence any opposition, their political systems are weak, corrupt and calcified... Indeed, the US stood by silently while Mubarak crushed public protests the next year and Bush's pretext on Syria's human rights breach actually does not figure into the sanctions' reasons, nor is there any restriction on US companies' oil and gas invests ! (Conoco in 1998, 4 other firms after 2003)

2- 2006-2007 : US-Syria first re-evaluation :

On September 2006, a few weeks after the Israeli bombing on Lebanon against the Hezbollah; the Syrian security forces repelled a suicide attack on the US embassy in Damascus, several members of the US' administration offered their praise. Syria appeared henceforth as critically important to US prospects for Middle East stability and progress toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The conservative policy began to come back to a reaganian traditional approach of the 'carrot-and-stick', the US continued to impose sanctions, until Assad do cooperate (suppress its aid to the Hezbollah, close the border, cancel its ballistic program...) in what he can hope benefits (US expertise to reform the economy, US help to the Syrian claims on the regime).

But the neo-conservatives, among them Young, were radically against any offer which could appear to their allies (Syrian opposites, sunni-christian coalition in Lebanon, Israel, Saudi-Arabia, the Rafic Hariri death's UN investigation...) to undermine the US credibility.

For them, and this option remained opened all the second mandate of Bush Junior, the US have to change the régime, by three ways: encourage a rebellion against Assad, send a US expeditionary corp, or push Tsahal to do the job...

But for the effective officials, what was happening in Iraq demonstrate the danger of any destabilization in the Middle East to not "qaedize" Syria

Whenever, for the conservatives, since Israel's July 2006 invasion of Lebanon, Assad signed a mutual defense pact with Teheran. Syria was one of the strongest opponents of the Iraq war and openly rooted for the United States to fail there, Syria sent weapons to Saddam regime and allowed foreign fighters to gather in Damascus en route to fight US troops in Iraq...

However, Sunni extremists attacked the UN headquarters in Damascus in April 2004, killing four, in what experts say was seen as both an assault on the West and an attempt to destabilize Assad's regime, more bombing had been committed in Damascus since 2007 by Salafists activists, so, did the Baas support Al-Qaeda ?

3- Last Bush area issues :

On September 6, 2007, Israel, while negotiating indirectly with Bashar by the through Turkey for a resolution of the 60 years conflict with Syria, launched an air strike against a building near al-Hasakeh: the *Operation Orchard*.

Shortly before, an explosion not explained (?) had already hit a hypothetical Scud missiles' settlement in the suburbs of Aleppo, one month earlier.

According to the report of the advocacy group Jane's, Iranese would be killed in the explosion, which was 'accidentally' recording on the news Syrian agency Sana.

In the case of Al-Hasakeh while the Israelis were silent, CNN said five days later that the raid was aimed at a relay center of Hezbollah in Syria, the Washington Post, two days later, quoted theories on an eventual nuclear reactor supplied by another member of the "axis of evil", North Korea.

On October 2008, after a constant rise of this type of accusation by the American authority in Iraq, U.S. Special Forces conducted a raid in Syrian territory. Four helicopters attacked a building under construction in Sukkariye few miles from Abu Kamal.

The question of legitimacy (given the illegality of the operation) was asked, one week before the presidential elections. Shortly before, official figures stated on a drop of 80 pc of "infiltrators" since spring 2007, which were approved by Condry Rice in September 2008, without attributing it to Syrian efforts on the issue.

J. Kelly, however, beginning in October 2008 continued to emphasize on the "porous" borders, documents seized in Sinjar (northern Iraq) in 2007 revealed that 90 pc of the infiltration was coming from Syria. At the same time, the Iraqi Intelligence was "feeling that Al Qaeda's agents can work and live pretty openly on the Syrian side."

This first foray outside of Iraq since the invasion in March 2003 may derive of an export of tactical strikes targeted from Pakistan on the Euphratesian Theater.

C : Obama's renewal:

1- Is peace possible between Syria and Israel?

In January 2000, Bill Clinton led marathon talks between Hafez el-Assad and Ehud Barak which collapsed over the Sea of Galilee's sliver ! In 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative conduct by Saudi Arabia had no more results.

After his election in April 2009, B. Netanyahu offered to negotiate Assad who rebuffed nothing more than a photo-op and suggested a continuation of indirect talk through Turkey. However Obama's administration didn't discourage and continue to support Syrian-Israeli negotiations; interrupted by Damascus after the Israeli invasion of Gaza on late 2008.

Peace would mean the end of Syrian aid to Israel's most dangerous enemy: Hezbollah, as the treaty of Camp David in 1978 was a good bargain for Israel – and for the US, which now counts Egypt among its most important strategic allies in the Arab world.

If there are serious negotiations, the US could demand the regime stop interfering in Iraq carry out liberty reforms (but will they demand that if Damascus become aligned?), and reject any support to the Hamas. Washington does have much to gain strategically from renewed Syrian-Israeli dialogue: Damascus could play a more constructive role in the region, against jihadists or in disarming internal policy's relationship in Lebanon.

Frederic Hof, deputy to George Mitchell, laid out the idea of creating a nature reserve on the Golan Heights returned to Syria.

Such an agreement requires a deep involvement of Obama's administration.

2- Neo-cons opposition to Obama's normalization :

In recent months, Syria has launched a diplomatic charm offensive, holding seven high-level meetings (three visits by G. Mitchell) with the Obama administration and working to mend its relations with fellow Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In September 2009, the State Department invited Syria's deputy foreign minister, F. Mekdad, for talks in Washington; he was the highest-ranking Syrian official to visit the US in five years.

In February 2010, the administration nominated the diplomat R. Ford, as the first US ambassador to Syria since 2005 (assassinate of Rafic) and W. Burns, Under Secretary of State visited Syria. High-ranking Central Command officers have also been sent to Damascus to discuss cooperation against terrorism

Elliott Abrams, a neo-cons reference remarks that the US removed the American block to Syria's attempt to join the World Trade Organization; and eased some export licenses in the aircraft. But they denounce Syrian support for terrorism (Hamas, DFLP and PFLP which continue to be housed and protected in Damascus). He adds that Damascus remains into the Teheran-Hezbollah Axis of Evil in serving as the route for Iran's rearmament of the militia and in hosting a secret meeting between H. Nasrallah and M. Ahmadinejad. For all those think tanks, the Syrian strategy of Syria's pacification could be doomed and Assad will surely and shortly ridicule the US.

3- Confusing positions, US allies contradict themselves

a) Iraqi's tensions :

Last August, Iraq withdrew its ambassador from Damascus, protesting over Syrian involvement in deadly explosions in Baghdad. In September 2009, following a crescendo of accusations, the press learned the deployment of *"thousands of reinforcements along the border with Syria to prevent insurgents from crossing the border."* »

The Maliki government guaranteed the possession of evidences linking Damascus with leaders of anti-government attacks in the summer by logic of the Ba'ath-Qaeda's connection. The US general commander in Iraq, R. Odierno, stated in November that Syria does continue to *"facilitate the movement of jihadists and explosives into Iraq"*.

Do the US army and the Iraqi government agree with the conciliation process between Assad and Obama? Do they seek to bring back Mitchell to a neoconservative's approach? Did the Hillary-Mitchell diplomacy use the conservative tactic of 'carrot and stick' pressures by passing through the army and the Iraqis?

b) Israeli's tensions :

In mid-April, Shimon Peres publicly accused Damascus of delivering Scud missiles to Hezbollah. These statements have prompted the convening of Syria's top diplomat in Washington for an explanation.

A Democratic senator, D. Feinstein described the event as "highly probable sign of the persistence of neo-conservative views within the Democratic camp. Conversely, John Kerry, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, remained cautious, while the Spanish ambassador to Lebanon (the country holds the EU presidency and the Spanish general command of UNIFIL in south Lebanon),

complained of a total lack of evidence. Israel could now be willing to discredit Syria with neo-conservatives arguments, the US remaining passive...

Again, one cannot ensure that the US was prepared, or if they did agree those allegations, or if some neoconservative's forces conspire against the moderates in the Secretariat of State...

c) Anti-Syrian Lebanese rescuing Syria... and the US' normalization process

On 21 April, the Sunni leader Saad Hariri, himself, compared those allegations to "*what had been told of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein in Iraq.*" Saad Hariri came to power following the Syrian withdrawal and the popular excitement caused by his father's death... blamed by his family to Damascus.

His staff leader added recently that that kind of missile could not penetrate the Lebanese border like small weapons, asking tacitly if Tel Aviv accuses Lebanon for complicity, and if it does prepare another war.

Inside the Hariri family, one admits discretely that the turnaround was the result of "*the West (the US) who rehabilitates the Syrian regime because he needs him in the fight against Islamic militants, to stabilize the Iraq hopes the move away from Iran.* »

Indeed, S. Hariri met Bashar el-Asad in November 2009, a few weeks after the Saudi King himself, both pillars of the American policy in the Arab world, both, during the past five years, terribly angry against Damascus!