Syria’s Postwar Position and Policy toward the United States

Hostile Relations

Washington’s postwar policy and increasing inclination toward Israel provoked an increasingly hostile policy from Syria. Between 1967 and 1970, the Syrians saw no signs of progress for the recovery of the occupied Golan Heights or Palestinian territories or parity in the balance of power in the region. As a result, the Syrians harbored the following grievances against the United States for (as they saw it) failing to consider Arab aspirations and interests:

i. Disproportionate US support for Israel in the 1967 war
ii. A US-enforced embargo on arms trade with the Arab states
iii. US policy shift stipulating withdrawal from occupied land as being conditional on peace (*contra* international law)
iv. US failure to condemn continued Israeli settlements in occupied territories
v. Perceived US exploitation of cleavages amid the Arab ranks
vi. Suspected US espionage for Israel

The first grievance was of course the United States’ strengthened alliance with Israel. In contrast, the Arabs enacted a boycott against Israel straight after the war, led by Syria, whom Washington labeled ignominiously as “the most rabid of the Arab countries on this subject.”

The United States noted from the Ba‘th’s early foreign policy that it was not only the “most belligerent of all the Arab states toward Israel,” but its preoccupation with Israel had “dominated Syria’s foreign policy” and, as a result, it tended to “shape its policy toward a given nation in terms of
that nation’s policy toward Israel.”2 Even prior to the June 1967 war, Syria had viewed anything American with “profound suspicion.” As the United States correctly asserted, the “basic issue is the Palestinian problem and the total identification, in Syrian eyes, of the United States with Israel.”3 After the war, Syria’s animosity and association of the United States with Israel only increased. The Syrian government severed relations with the United States with immediate effect, giving American official personnel only 48 hours to leave, whose lives, according to US reports, had been in grave danger while they remained in Syria. Although other Arab states, such as Iraq, Algeria, and Egypt, had also broken official relations with the United States in protest after the war, they still maintained diplomatic links by retaining personnel in their respective interests sections in Washington. Syria’s severance, however, was “total.” The furthest the Syrian government went was to assign a clerk to the Syrian interests section of the Pakistan embassy in Washington, DC, Syria’s protecting power in the United States, while Italian officials had to represent the United States in Damascus.

Moreover, the United States continuously came under severe attacks in the Syrian press, and visas were refused to American tourists. Things did not improve in 1968 when the United States noted that “the prospects for resuming relations with Syria are even bleaker than those of Iraq,” with whom the United States also had frosty relations since its own Ba’thist revolution.4 According to the State Department, the United States had, up until 1972, very few direct contacts with Syrian officials from 1967 onward.5 An internal report on foreign trade in the Middle East further elaborated on the extent of poor relations between the United States and Syria:

To date, the Syrians have continued to be extremely hostile to the US and their public information media have castigated the US to a degree which even exceeds the hostile Peking propaganda. Furthermore the Syrian Government has boycotted American goods and has favoured the goods of other countries. The SARG has attempted to undermine the pro-Western governments in Jordan and Lebanon by means of sending fedayeen through Lebanese and Jordanian territory. This has invited Israeli retaliation which has contributed to the internal instability of these countries. Thus we do not want to do anything that would enhance the military capabilities of either the fedayeen or the Syrian Army.6

The second main grievance, apart from Washington’s general support for Israel, was Syria’s frustration at the US-imposed embargo on the sale of weapons to Arab states. Damascus saw this as a deliberate attempt to prevent the Arabs from developing not just their militaries but also their general domestic security infrastructure; even the import of police radios