Blair seeks to bring Syria's Assad behind war vs. Iraq

Jean Shaoul
24 December 2002

The British government's courting of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad during a four-day official visit to London last week was aimed at bringing Syria fully behind the planned US led war against Iraq. It is part of a wider offensive orchestrated by Washington designed to assemble Arab support for war.

In the first ever visit to Britain by a Syrian president, Assad was given the red carpet treatment. There was a meeting in 10 Downing Street complete with a press conference, tea at Buckingham Palace with the Queen, a photo-op for his wife, Asma, with the prime minister's wife, Cherie Blair. The press joined in, with a full-page feature in the pro-Labour *Observer* newspaper on Assad's British born and educated wife, who worked at an investment bank in London until her marriage two years ago, describing her as someone who cared deeply about the impoverished Syrian people.

But behind all the fanfare, Prime Minister Tony Blair told Assad in no uncertain terms what it was that the US and Britain demanded of him if he did not want Syria to be the next in the firing line after Iraq. Assad had to stop the various proxy groups, which he used to give his regime a radical veneer, from stoking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Blair demanded that Assad close down the Syrian bases and offices of the Palestinian groups such as Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords and use terrorist methods in pursuit of their nationalist agenda. He was also told to stop supporting Hezbollah, the armed wing of the Shiite fundamentalist party that operates in Lebanon and also enjoys Iranian backing. Last month, it launched an attack that wounded two Israeli soldiers.

Blair was speaking on behalf of Washington as much as London. The Bush administration could not be seen talking openly to the ruler of a state that it claimed sponsored terrorism, but Blair could be trusted to deliver its message.

Just to make sure that Assad and everyone else knew what the terms were, Blair had an op-ed piece published in the *Financial Times* entitled "Engaging with Syria to undermine Iraq".

He spelt out his opposition to Syria's support for terrorist groups based in Syria, its trade links with Iraq and its poor record on human rights and political freedom. "But," he said, "I strongly believe that candid dialogue is more productive than no dialogue at all.... There will be hard talking today on both sides."

Foreign Office officials said that the two countries do not pretend to agree on every issue, but Syria was important because it has a strong influence on Arab public opinion, is the only Arab state to have a seat on the UN Security Council and borders on Iraq.

Blair also announced that Britain will host a conference next month to try to establish some mini-Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, although Yasser Arafat, chairman of the now defunct Palestinian Authority, would not be invited. Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon immediately declared that he would have nothing to do with it.

As the Arab state that has held out the longest against a formal rapprochement with Israel and stayed out of the orbit of US imperialism, the Arab Ba'ath regime in Syria has also clung on the longest to its radical pretensions. But Assad, the 37-year-old son of the late Hafez al-Assad who ruled Syria with an iron fist for 30 years, was on his best behaviour. He insisted that there were no terrorist bases or offices in Syria, simply press offices. "Of course we don't have in Syria what are called organisations supporting terrorism," he said.

Now that the war was nearer home, he refrained from making the type of bellicose remarks that so infuriated Blair when he visited Damascus in 2001 to seek support for the war against Afghanistan.

But Assad could not be seen to openly side with US war aims. Speaking at the Royal Institute for International Studies, he warned the US and Britain that Iraq was not a threat to its neighbours and that a war against Iraq would only serve to intensify terrorist attacks. While the US would easily win a war against any country, he said, it would "suffer a lot" in the longer term. "The gap will widen between the Arab region and the West.... Terrorism will be more active. You can't separate the issues [the Israeli suppression of the Palestinians] from each other," he said.

Such rhetoric could not disguise the fact that Assad came to London to see what he had to do to avoid Iraq's fate. He has no option but to toe the US line. Bereft of support from Moscow and the Gulf states, Syria's economy is in dire straits and has come to rely on trade with Iraq, which last year reached $1

© World Socialist Web Site

billion. A US-controlled regime in Iraq would mean that not only would that lifeline go, but Syria would be surrounded by US allies. It would face an increasingly bellicose Israel, under conditions where its support for the violent Palestinian groups that rejected a settlement with Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon has placed it on Washington's list of states sponsoring terrorism.

The pro-Israel lobby in the US has already sponsored legislation—the Syria Accountability Act—that seeks to apply stringent sanctions against Damascus unless it stops supporting Palestinian rejectionist groups and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria must pull its forces out of Lebanon—effectively a satellite of Damascus—end the development of chemical weapons and stop importing oil from Iraq. While the bill does not yet have the support of the Bush administration, it is being used as a bargaining chip with Syria.

It is these fears that lie behind Syria's support for the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 in November that sanctioned the return of the UN weapons inspectors to Iraq. Syria, which waged its own brutal war against Muslim fundamentalists in the early 1980s, killing tens of thousands, has also passed on information to the US in its "war on terrorism". It acted to restrain Hezbollah when Sharon tried to provoke Lebanon and Syria into a war over the plans to divert the Wazzani waters, a tributary of the Jordan that provides much of Israel's water. Syria is believed to hold an alleged Al Qaeda suspect, Mohammed Haydar Zammar, who was arrested in Morocco. A second man, Maher Arar, was deported to Syria after being arrested while passing through New York.

The pan-Arab Saudi newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* summed up Assad's motivation for his trip to London. It wrote in its editorial that he was expecting London to broker the removal of Syria's name from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism and help secure economic aid to Syria.

For 20 years during the Cold War, Syria was able to rely on support from Moscow, for whom Syria was a key client state in the Middle East. But this support was always qualified and miserly compared with the lavish support the US gave Israel.

Notwithstanding Syria's radical pan-Arab rhetoric, its relations with the other Ba'ath regime in Iraq were always strained. Party schisms, their rival geopolitical interests in the region, the struggle for control over the Euphrates waters and oil pipelines as well as other economic issues divided the two countries. When the Iranian Islamic regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini declared war on Iraq in 1980, Syria supported Iran.

Assad's father was happy to use other guerrilla movements to pressure Israel. Syria was linked with the attacks carried out with terrorist groups such as the Abu Nidal organisation, which operated at that time out of Damascus and whose targets included Israelis, Jews, Syrian dissidents, Jordanian diplomats and pro-Arafat Palestinians. While Yasser Arafat was unwelcome in Syria, most of the Stalinist Palestinian factions maintained a base there. As a result of Assad's support for Iran and opposition to Iraq, whom the West supported in the 1980s, the imperialist powers branded Syria a sponsor of terrorism and gave it a pariah status.

All this took its toll on the Syrian economy. The Gulf states cut off their aid because of its support for Iran. The West cut off trade. The final straw came in 1989 when Moscow, in the face its own economic collapse, cut off its arms supply. Syria threw in its lot with the US and sent troops to join the Western coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War in 1990-91, despite the fact that it robbed the first Assad of any residual ability to challenge Israel and promote the cause of the Palestinians, who supported Iraq. It signified the complete collapse of pan-Arabism. According to reports cited in the *New York Times*, when the Saudi King Fahd sent a representative to elicit Assad senior's support, Assad abandoned the verbosity for which he was renowned and asked just three questions. "Are the Americans serious about stopping the Iraqis? Will they finish the job by going all the way? And do you trust them?"

As the *New York Times* noted, while only a few thousand troops were deployed in Syria against Iraq, the presence of soldiers from such a staunch Arab nationalist country carried heavy symbolic weight. The reward for such treachery was the lure of gold from the Gulf states.

Syria's support for the genocidal bombing of Iraq was followed up with the supply of crucial information about hostages and planned terrorist attacks on Western targets. The regime evicted some of the most wanted terrorists from Damascus, such as Carlos "the Jackal" and a representative of the Japanese Red Army faction. More recently, Syria gave way to US pressure and refused sanctuary to Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the nationalist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in its civil war against Turkey, thereby paving the wave for Ocalan's trial as a terrorist.

Syria also supported Middle East "peace process" leading up to the signing of the Oslo Accords. However, while Arafat and later Jordan were to reach an agreement with Israel, Syria was never able to do so because of the economic and social tensions it would create threatened to blow the fragile state apart. An agreement would have to encompass the return of the Golan Heights and access to the Sea of Galilee that together provide much of Israel's water, security arrangements for the early warning stations on Mount Hermon, diplomatic and trade normalisation and the opening of frontiers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site