

French President Sarkozy visits Syria to seek new alliances

Pierre Mabut
15 September 2008

French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a two-day visit to the Syrian capital Damascus on September 3-4 to continue Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations brokered by France, Qatar and Turkey. The immediate purpose of the negotiations is to get Syria and Israel to negotiate directly and sign a peace deal that would end the state of war existing between the two countries since the Israeli state was established in 1948.

More broadly, Sarkozy, who is also the current six-month president of the European Council, is trying to integrate the Syrian regime of Bashir Al-Assad into Europe's economic sphere of influence and isolate it from its ally, Iran.

Assad, currently president of the Arab League, is seeking to normalise relations with Western imperialism, and to obtain the return of the Golan Heights region seized by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War. Western Syria is militarily indefensible without the Golan Heights, making its return a pre-condition of any serious peace agreement between Israel and Syria.

The Syrian ambassador to the US, Imad Mustafa, underlined Syria's desire to be brought into the Western fold in a comment in Washington last month: "We desire peace to recognise each other and end the state of war. Let us make peace."

One obstacle for Assad in any deal is that the US and Israel have put Syria on the list of states supporting terrorism, along with the Palestinian Hamas regime in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran. The volatility of US and Israeli relations with Syria was underscored by Israel's unprovoked bomb attack of September 5, 2007 on installations in Syria at Deir az-Zor. The Israelis have refused any comment on the incident.

The Syrian regime hopes that if it agrees to a peace deal with Israel negotiated under French auspices, Sarkozy might go on to broker a Syria-US agreement.

Sarkozy welcomed Syria into the 43-nation Union for the Mediterranean, a group France is promoting to extend its economic influence south of the European Union, while also deepening cooperation on "combating terrorism" and immigration control. This represents a turn in French foreign policy from when then-President Jacques Chirac broke relations and held Damascus responsible for the assassination of ex-Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

Assad commented that France, Turkey and Qatar—"which have normal relations" with Israel—"would encourage the US to participate due to its power status and relations with Israel."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made clear that the price for such a peace involves Syria closing off the lifeline of Iranian financial and military support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since Hezbollah is the only political force in Lebanon able to effectively withstand Israeli military attack, this would give Israel a free hand on its northern border and increase its latitude for military aggression against Iran. The *Sunday Times* wrote August 3, "He [Olmert] wants the closure of the Damascus office of Hamas and other militant organisations and a promise that Syria will not implement its defence pact with Iran if Israel or the US should go ahead with an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities."

The *Times* quotes an Israeli defence source saying, "Israel's main purpose is to create a barrier between Syria and Iran and if this is achieved, the return of the Golan Heights to Syria would be a worthwhile price."

Since assuming office in May last year, Sarkozy has realigned France's foreign policy with that of the US in the so-called fight against "terrorism" and Islamic fundamentalism. France has fully reintegrated NATO's command structure, serving as a junior partner in US

imperialism's occupation in the Middle East. Under strong US pressure, the French government last year appealed to French companies to stop investing in Iran. It voted for the continued occupation of Iraq by the US at the UN, and deployed its troops in Lebanon and Afghanistan for "peace keeping" and "democracy."

During the last day of talks in Damascus, Sarkozy confirmed this imperialist stance by once again defending Israeli aggression, attempting in an "unofficial" comment to browbeat Syria into distancing itself from Iran. According to *Libération* (5 September 2008): "Due to a technical error, journalists were able to hear a part of Sarkozy's intervention in the presence of the other heads of state (Syria, Qatar, and Turkey), during closed-door discussions. 'Iran is taking a major risk in continuing the process of obtaining a military nuclear [capability], which is our certainty. Because one day, whatever the Israeli government, we will find ourselves one morning with Israel having attacked. It does not matter whether it is legitimate or if it is wise or not. What will we do at that moment? It will be a catastrophe.'"

The ground for Sarkozy's visit was prepared the week before by the arrival of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who set forward more conditions aimed at intimidating the Syrians. *Le Monde* quoted Kouchner's comments in Beirut, before arriving in Damascus, saying France "wants to believe in the word and will of Syria, but remains extremely vigilant and prudent." *Le Monde* added, "In this respect he qualified as hardly reassuring the recent speech by President Assad, drawing a parallel between the attitude of Moscow towards Georgia and that of Syria to Lebanon."

However, Assad has resorted to balancing between the interests of US imperialism and Russian nationalism to defend his own interests. In August, in Moscow, he signed military agreements saying "we are ready to cooperate with Russia in any project that can strengthen its security."

In August, in the wake of the Georgian attack on South Ossetia and the Russian response, the Syrian leader went to Moscow to secure military agreements and announced he would be discussing the possible deployment of Russian missiles on his territory. Assad commented: "I think Russia has to think of the response it will make when it finds itself closed in a

circle." In allying himself with Russia against Western imperialist encirclement, Assad has ruffled the feathers of the former French colonial power, which ruled Syria in the 1920s and 1930s, and whose interests lie in maintaining the Middle East in its orbit, with the US and others.

While Sarkozy was outwardly concerned with bringing Syria into line with the US and NATO's demands that it break from Iran, the French president was also advancing the interests of French imperialism.

French oil company Total, which has been present in Syria for 10 years, and CMA-CGM (the world's third largest shipping company), accompanied Sarkozy on his Damascus visit. The president of Total, Christophe de Margerie, renewed the licence to exploit the reserves at Deir az-Zor and obtained the right to extract the gas there until 2021. Total, in a co-partnership with the Syrian Petroleum Company, extracted 29,000 barrels of oil in 2007. The new agreements stipulate "a strategic partnership with the Syrian national [gas and oil] companies." De Margerie expressed his satisfaction with the agreements, which "opened the way to a renewed cooperation between Total and Syria and the activities of the group in partnership with the national oil companies of the country."

Up to now the Emir of Qatar has played a key role in warming relations between France and Syria. He is on good terms with the US, Israel, Syria and Iran. The Emir was the first Arab leader to be invited to France by Sarkozy on assuming the French presidency last year. Qatar, the world's top exporter of liquefied natural gas, signed an electricity and nuclear power deal with France during a Sarkozy trip in January. Sarkozy also signed nuclear power deals with the United Arab Emirates.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact