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Robert Rabil. *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. xxvi + 289 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-99015-2.

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Robert Rabil's book examines the ups and downs in Syrian-U.S. relations. The final portion of its title, *the War on Terror in the Middle East* is, in reality, code for Syria's sponsorship of Palestinian militant organizations and its alliance with Hizbollah against Israel. Indeed, it is inevitable that the author's examination of U.S.-Syrian relations would be expanded to one of the US-Israel-Syria triangle, since the Israeli factor so powerfully shapes relations between the two countries. Rabil argues that during the second Bush administration, the United States and Syria entered a dangerous "cold war" that is the product of misperceptions and miscalculations. His study hopes to expose these in order to enable a diplomatic accommodation.

Rabil begins by tracing the rise of the Ba'th regime on the back of an Arab nationalism fuelled by anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. He skips over the first major and defining episode in U.S.-Syrian relations, the CIA's 1957 attempt to overthrow the Syrian government; here he would have profited from reference to accounts by David Lesch and Andrew Rathmell.[1] A subsequent watershed was Israel's assistance against Syria during the Syrian-Jordan crisis of 1970, a service that convinced the United States that a powerful Israel constituted a valuable strategic asset. This reassessment undermined State Department efforts to use arms supplies to get the Israelis to engage with the Rogers Plan. Rabil then charts the emerging pragmatism of post-1970 Syrian foreign policy under Hafiz al-Asad, who "kept modifying and diluting in practice his initial [Arab nationalist] ideological outlook" in light of the hard reality of the balance of power with Israel (p. 25). Real Syrian-U.S. engagement began with Henry Kissinger's 1974 disengagement negotiations. Rabil notes that Kissinger encouraged Israeli obstinacy so that the process of extracting concessions from it would display to the Arabs America's investment of political capital and minimize their expectations of U.S. pressure for a comprehensive peace (as envisioned under the Rogers Plan). Nevertheless, during the disengagement negotiations, Nixon did threaten the cut-off of arms supplies to Israel, an act that helped overcome this same obstinacy (p. 57). The Syrian-Israeli agreement signed under U.S. auspices was a watershed event, initiating on-again, off-again attempts by Washington to broker a lasting Syrian-Israeli settlement.

Rabil takes the curious position that the United States tended to be more favorable to Syria than Israel in its peace-brokering efforts although he does not substantiate such a counter-intuitive assertion. To the extent that this was the case, it can be explained by Amer-

ica's co-sponsorship of the land for peace resolutions (UN 242/338) that were the internationally accepted terms within which a settlement had to be framed. The United States was, in principle, committed to this framework and Syria accepted these terms; however, as Israel refused to surrender the occupied territories, a settlement could only be implemented through the application of U.S. pressure. Hence superficially, the U.S. official position often appeared closer to Syria's than to Israel's. And the United States did sometimes try to use arms deliveries to get what Rabil calls "unilateral concessions" from Israel–as if he believes the occupied land actually belonged to Israel. Moreover, the United States could not ignore entirely–at least until George Bush Jr.–Israel's periodic use of excessive military force during its regular invasions of Lebanon or the fact that the ever thickening Israeli settlements on the Golan and West Bank were illegal under international law. However, as Rabil's own narrative recounts, Congress regularly constrained the executive and every concession wrung from Israel had to be paid for by extravagant U.S. arms and aid that were pivotal in enabling the Israelis to avoid a comprehensive peace agreement and in pursuing the settlements in occupied territory that made one ever less likely. And even Israeli obstinacy could be rewarded: in spite of its rejection of the Reagan Plan, the United States deepened the two countries' strategic alliance in several "Memorandums of Understanding."

Rabil observes that the United States was always ambivalent toward Syria because it was seen as engaging in "terrorism" against Israel. However, not being a "rejectionist" state, Syria was understood to be using such methods as "cards" to wrangle a peace settlement out of Israel. Thus, Syria was the only country put on the terrorism list (since 1979) with which the United States not only maintained diplomatic relations but was also, at various periods, deeply engaged, either to contain Syrian-Israeli conflict in Lebanon or to advance a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. As early as 1976, the United States had brokered Israeli tolerance of a Syrian intervention against radical forces in Lebanon, albeit within Israeli-dictated "red-lines." In 1981 it also brokered a solution to the Lebanon "missile crisis." In the late Reagan years the United States came to see Syria as a force for stability in Lebanon, largely due to Syria's brokering the release of several hostages held there. At the same time, the presence of "terrorist groups" in Syria and the Beqaaa valley were seen as impediments to improved Syrian-U.S. relations. However, after the Bush/Baker team got Syria to join the anti-Iraq coalition in the 1991 Gulf War in return for a promise to revive the peace negotiations, relations quickly warmed. Rabil presents a seriously misleading account, however, of the US "tilt" toward Syria at this time. In one passage, he prefaces an extract from a September 1990 joint press conference of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara with the phrase: "In a new formulation of the definition of terrorism, Baker was close to al-Asad's interpretation" (p. 88). The extract reads: "We consider any violent act outside the occupied territories is a terrorist act. But, at the same time, we cannot consider the legitimate struggle against the occupation forces as a terrorist act ... We believe that ... Syria was put on the terrorist list without any justification ... for political objectives." Intentionally or not, the reader is given the impression that it is Baker speaking when in reality it is al-Shara. Each passage is clearly attributed in the original transcript.[2] In 1999, Ehud Barak was elected prime minister of Israel and Bill Clinton resumed U.S. brokerage of the previously stalled peace process. Syrian and Israeli negotiators met face-to-face in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, forming committees focused on normalization of relations, water, security, and borders. The Syrians made concessions on the first three sets of issues. However, as Rabil recounts, the border committee rarely met, and Barak evaded any commitment to honour the "Rabin deposit" under which Israel had offered a return to the June 1967 lines on the Golan. When Barak publicly acknowledged the Rabin deposit, however, the stage was set for Clinton to break the impasse and hold a summit with Asad. Clinton wrote in his autobiography that he had hoped Israel would be as flexible as the Syrians had been at Shepherdstown. However, the map he showed Asad incorporated Barak's insistence on retaining an Israeli territorial buffer around Lake Tiberius. Asad became agitated and the negotiations were ended; Clinton believed that Asad could not risk less than a full return of the Golan at a time when he was preparing the succession of his son, Bashar. U.S.-Syrian relations took a nosedive under George W. Bush and the neo-cons for two basic reasons. Hitherto the peace process had conditioned all other bi-lateral issues, including terrorism and WMDs, with the United States expecting these issues to be resolved within the framework of a peace settlement. However, Bush's disinterest in a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement removed this factor from U.S. consideration, thus turning the other issues into matters of sharp contention. Nevertheless, Syria was omitted from Bush's "axis of evil." It was Syrian opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq that enabled the neo-cons to paint Syria as an enemy of the United States. Syria was told it had to

stop its support for "terrorism," eschew non-conventional weapons, withdraw from Lebanon, and co-operate in the stabilization of Iraq, most notably the Syrian-Iraq border. When Syria resisted, the United States adopted a policy of constantly increasing pressure. On June 18, 2003 U.S. forces entered Syrian territory and attacked a convoy (actually smuggling gasoline) from Iraq, killing eighty (including Syrian civilians) and capturing wounded Syrian soldiers. Neo-con John Bolton accused Syria of seeking nuclear weapons in testimony to Congress. The United States slapped economic sanctions on Syria and played a major role in engineering its expulsion from Lebanon.

Rabil writes that the Syrian regime, fighting for its survival, "abandoned its traditional restraint" (p. xxii). This is not quite true, for Syria did little to oppose the United States and constantly attempted to initiate dialogue for the purpose of reaching an agreement. However, the United States had decided that Syria was a rogue state that should not be rewarded for doing what the United States expected it to do. It is true, though, that at the level of rhetoric Syria did revert to earlier depictions of the United States. In this regard Rabil quotes an article by Bouthaina Shaaban that characterized U.S. policy as driven by neo-conservative anti-Arabism, which she called a version of anti-Semitism. According to Shaaban, this anti-Arab bigotry was expressed in U.S. military attacks on and use of torture in Iraq, its support for Israeli aggression toward the Palestinians, and its calls for democracy that stirred up sectarian conflict in Iraq and Lebanon. Such Syrian rhetoric, Rabil argues, was intended to generate Pan-Arab legitimacy at home and provoke resistance to the United States in the Arab world.

Rabil judges, however, that Pan-Arabism is too weak to protect Syria from the United States. But abandoning it is not attractive, either, since Washington cannot be trusted to abandon regime change as long as the neocons are in power. The Syrian regime hopes U.S. problems in Iraq will divert it from attacking Syria but Rabil notes that they could do the opposite. The United States is locked into a conflict with Syria, one in which it employs threats and pressures but offers no incentives, and is thus unable to shift Syrian policy.

Rabil's recommendations for getting out of this mutual demonization are sensible. The United States should end "counterproductive and absurd" talk about regime change (p 159) and offer Syria carrots like re-opening the Iraq oil pipeline. He warns the United States to have no illusions that U.S. initiated regime change would be welcomed by Syrian reformers. Arab nationalism is deeply rooted in Syria and U.S. military action would undermine the reformers, rally the people to the regime, and bring Islamists and nationalists together in an anti-U.S. resistance that would surpass the one it faces in Iraq. Syria, for its part, must understand that Arab nationalist rhetoric will not protect it. It should instead concentrate on internal democratization that would strengthen it domestically and thereby offer protection from external threats.

This is a useful and largely sensible study that provides a coherent account of the various phases in U.S.-Syrian relations and, most notably, the current fraught episode. In addition to the aforementioned flaws, however, it must also be said that the book seems to neglect the previous corpus of scholarship on the issue, particularly the work of Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, as well as that of Helena Cobban.[3] The book is in fact largely derivative and based on little new research. The last chapters appear to be excerpted from other writings that are not updated and integrated into a seamless narrative. As a result, repetitions and outdated material remain in the text.

Notes

[1]. David Lesch, *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower's Cold War in the Middle East* (Westview, 1992); and Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: the Struggle for Syria* (I.B Tauris 1995).

[2]. *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents*, 1990, chapter 11, The Middle East, Section K (Syria), subsection 440, p 626; JX 1417. A43.

[3]. Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process, Council on Foreign Relations Press* (1991); Helena Cobban, *The Superpowers and the Syrian-Israeli Conflict* (Praeger 1991); and Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks* (US Institute of Peace 1999).

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