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Syria is integral to peace in Middle East

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I HAVE done a bit of travelling, perhaps not enough, or never enough. I have never been treated anywhere with more ahlan washahlan (you are welcome) than I was in Damascus and Aleppo by ordinary Syrians.

For me, as for countless others across time, Syria has been a conversion of sorts, an exposure to light in an area of darkness. The standard was set in the first century of the last millennium by a Jew named Saul, probably a Pharisee, who was commissioned to help suppress Christianity in Damascus. On the way over, he was blinded by a vision of Jesus and then baptised into a preacher, later to be known as St Paul, apostle of the Gentiles.

The path to Syria is among history's most well-beaten. Part of the Fertile Crescent watered by the Tigris-Euphrates and the Mediterranean, it has a richly storied antiquity of multiple civilisations. Six centuries after St Paul, Damascus, the crown in the opening burst of Muslim conquest out of the deserts of Arabia, became the capital of the first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyad Caliphate. Even after the succeeding Abbasids moved the centre of Islam to Baghdad, it remained the jewel of the Levant.

Syria has staunchly retained its eyeopening allure. It has held on to an ancient, exotic and exuberant Arab and Islamic culture against the tide of regional radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

There has been no destructive iconoclasm of the Taliban-type.

Fiercely nationalist and secular, General Hafez Al-Assad, president for 30 years until his death in June 2000, gave no quarter to the Islamic radicals, and his country has been the better for it. His son and successor, President Bashar Al-Assad, has relaxed some of his father's more restrictive controls. The arts have been allowed to flourish (within limits) and Dr Bashar has even permitted the publication of the satirical Al-Domari, the first independent newspaper in 40 years.

I urge you to come here, if only to see a side of the Arab and Islamic Middle East in resplendent contrast to the banner headlines of tyranny, jihad and state-sponsored terror propagated by the West. With some 3,000 sites of archaeological interest representing 33 civilisations, Syria has more of interest to the traveller than many more popular tourist destinations. Besides, it has all the other things that the tourist normally looks for.

Yet, with roughly two million arrivals in a year, according to Syrian Information Minister Adnan Omran, it lags woefully behind the most visited Muslim countries, Egypt (five million), Turkey (12 million) and Malaysia (13 million).

Why? The short answer is Israel, and the West's determined support of the Jewish state. Syria has been at war with Israel, declared or undeclared, hot or cold, almost since its independence from the French mandate (proclaimed in 1941 but foreign troops were only withdrawn five years later).

It has fought in all four Arab-Israeli wars since 1948. Conflict and defeat, combined with the wave of popular pan-Arab nationalism rallying to the Palestinian cause, left Syria at the mercy of factional division and military coups until the senior Assad came to power in November 1970.

After Egypt and Jordan separately made peace, with Lebanon in uneasy detente, Syria was left alone as the only Arab country bordering Israel that has held out. Its fixedly pro-Palestinian foreign policy focus was

not just the "diversionary obsession of an unelected despotism", as many Western observers would have us believe. Solidarity with the Palestinians remains a burning issue in the hearts of ordinary Syrians and their intelligentsia to this day.

I felt it and I cannot see how a lasting peace can be attained in the Middle East without their participation. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - treated like an icon during his just-concluded official visit for being a most successful modern Muslim leader - also stated it and heard it repeatedly.

The Syrian position isn't all about the politics of enmity, although there is more than enough of it after decades of waging war. The Syrian people have unimpeachable grounds for wanting the captured Golan Heights back.

After occupation by Israel in 1967, the strategic Heights were supposed to turn into a buffer zone manned by United Nations peacekeepers. When Syrian and Israeli troops clashed in the latter's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin annexed it, taking the Golan out of international mediation. It forced Syria to confront Israel with territory as hostage.

The tactic - intended to isolate a hardline Syria from the surrounding Arab pack - applies today, now actively backed by the United States. Damascus has largely been left out of the loop in the Middle East "road map".

Washington has included Syria in the "axis of evil" for its purported support of terrorism, principally of Lebanon's Hizbollah, whose militants sporadically lob missiles into northern Israel.

With Iraq conquered and swarming with US soldiers, Israel blithely threatened escalation upon Syria following a guerilla attack over the border on Aug 10, which killed an Israeli teenager. Another flashpoint has erupted in the Shebaa Farms area between Syria and Lebanon, which Israel also moved into in 1967.

Condemning Syria for its support of terrorism, vehemently denied by Damascus, is a partisan fudge by Washington on behalf of Tel Aviv. Hizbollah is an organised political party with seats in the Lebanese Parliament. Syria maintains that its activities constitute legitimate resistance to Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian lands.

Nevertheless, Dr Bashar knows that he must deal with the US in the so-called "new dynamic" operating in the Middle East after the fall of Iraq. Indeed, his country has co-operated extensively in the international war on terror.

But Dr Bashar, other Arab and indeed non-Arab Muslim leaders such as Dr Mahathir are waiting to see if the Bush administration's demands upon them will translate into quid pro quo pressure on Israel.

So far, Israel has yielded little. It wants security on its own terms. Even the current hudna or ceasefire among Palestinian militants is turning into a one-sided drain on the meagre political capital of Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas.

His Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, has not been equally compelled to rein in his military incursions upon the Palestinians.

The more I relish the sights, sounds and history of Damascus and Aleppo, the more I am persuaded that Washington is making a big mistake. Syria - 75 per cent Sunni with harmonious minorities of Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Shias, Alawites and Druze among others - can make a better go of modernisation and liberalisation than most of its fellow Arabs. I am quite positive about this. Its two neighbouring mainstays of Arab liberalism, Jordan and Lebanon, are too awash in the troubles of Palestine

to be able to take anything for granted.

Israel must be made to return the Arab territories it has seized. Without the restoration of land, whether it is to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria or Palestine, there can be no peace - a fact verified by common sense and affirmed by UN resolutions.

Until all of Israel's neighbours are put back together, they can hardly do enough to secure themselves, let alone an uncompromising Zionist entity.

Israel is so strong that I just cannot understand why it feels so unsafe along-side of a democratic Palestinian statehood envisaged by the road map.