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Mideast media mostly upbeat on visit; Pelosi's trip praised for its diplomacy, but journalists wonder if it will have lasting political impact

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is receiving a warm welcome from much of the regional press as she tours the Middle East -- both Arabic and English commentators are calling her visit a pleasantly diplomatic departure from the Bush administration's foreign policy.

On the San Francisco Democrat's second day in Saudi Arabia, she was still fielding questions about her controversial visit Wednesday with Syrian President Bashar Assad, which produced harsh criticism from the White House.

Many Middle East commentators saw the cross-party criticism as a debate not just about Syria but about the fundamental nature of President Bush's foreign policy for the region, and many viewed Pelosi's visit as signaling a welcome shift in approach.

"Bush thinks Pelosi's visit to Syria would make the Syrian president feel part of the international community again," wrote Masoud el-Henawi in Egypt's al-Ahram newspaper. "The question that gnaws at me now is: Is it better to isolate a country in Syria's weight or start a dialogue with it so that the reality behind its positions becomes known?"

"I think dialogue and diplomacy are the best ways to deal with it, even if the American president



AP / Amr Nabil

Nancy Pelosi is accompanied by Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid (right), head of the Saudi council and the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, on her visit.

would look with disgust at such an approach."

Jordan's Ad Dustur newspaper editorialized, "It must be stated that Pelosi's visit to Syria is a step in the right direction, given the fact that the way of the Democrats to the American presidency is wide open."

But the paper expressed some skepticism about Pelosi's visit, noting that her statement to Assad that Israel's prime minister was ready to hold peace talks provoked a prompt response from Israel that Syria must renounce terrorism first -- an example, it said, of Israel setting further conditions for peace.

Such comments were generally reflective of the Arabic television coverage of Pelosi's visit, said Jamal

Dajani, director of Middle Eastern affairs at San Francisco's Link TV, who noted that the Arabic media considered Pelosi a top story even over the past few days, when Iran's release of its British captives was breaking news.

"When I compare it, for example, to the visits of Condoleezza Rice, who is the secretary of state, this definitely created more of a buzz," he said. "People in the States think this is a Democratic propaganda campaign. ... This has been seen totally differently in the Middle East. It has been seen as a breath of fresh air being brought into the region as far as diplomacy."

Some of the reason for that buzz, Dajani said, may be a broad percep-

tion in the Middle East that America is politically homogenous, with widespread support in the public and government for the White House's approach.

"Nancy Pelosi defying the administration, it has shown a little bit of a balance of power that people have not been used to seeing from here," he said.

Writing in English for Al-Jazeera's Web site, Seifulah Rahim went so far as to describe Pelosi's visit as a "bold end-run around President Bush, to raise her profile as a kind of Democratic prime minister to Bush's Republican presidency."

In a column for the English-language Web site of the United Arab Emirates-based Gulf News, Damascus University lecturer Marwan Al Kabalan suggested that since she is "the second most pro-Israel representative in the U.S. Congress" and with little real influence on U.S. foreign policy, Pelosi's real motives had more to do with U.S. politics than Middle East peace.

"It is reasonable to argue that Pelosi's visit to Damascus was intended to weaken President George W. Bush and undermine his position inside the U.S. rather than trying to bring about a real shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and Syria in particular," Al Kabalan wrote.

Pollster John Zogby said a reading of other English-language press from the region also gave the sense that Pelosi was being seen as "the anti-Bush."

"That is extremely important, because there has been serious damage done in terms of both the elite and how they view the U.S. and in terms of general public opinion," he said. "The trip is playing, generally speaking, very well in both regions -- both within Iran and within the

Arab world."

A number of outlets, Zogby said, connected Pelosi's visit to a number of developments within the region, such as rumored efforts of talks between Syria and Israel, the newly unified Palestinian government and even some White House measures such as scheduled regional talks on Iraq that are expected to include both Iran and the United States.

"The sense here is that this kind of trip by a leading U.S. official is the start of the glue that might put all of those initiatives together," he said.

One notable exception to the overall positive perception of Pelosi's trip, Zogby said, was in Lebanon, where anti-Syrian groups saw Pelosi's visit to Syria as reducing pressure on the Assad government, which Lebanese groups blame for political assassinations in Lebanon and support of Hezbollah's aspirations in the strife-torn nation.

"A very prominent American figure and delegation coming to meet with the Syrian president, that's problematic," he said. "They don't want any legitimization of a regime that they see as being behind the assassination and having been a stumbling block in terms of Lebanese peace and progress."

Nadim Houry, a Syria researcher at Human Rights Watch, and Radwan Ziadeh, director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, emphasized that criticism in the English-language Daily Star.

"Journalists and commentators will use a lot of ink debating the merits of Pelosi's visit," they wrote. "But one thing is clear. She missed an opportunity to send a strong message to the Syrian authorities that Washington's desire to cooperate with Syria does not mean it will turn a blind eye to Syria's human rights violations."

Pelosi's own office, in a statement Thursday, downplayed any political or policy differences between the speaker and the White House, noting that the congressional delegation encouraged the Lebanese to resist outside interference, the Palestinians to reduce the influence of Hamas, the Syrians to halt the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and to cease supporting terrorism, and the Saudis to continue pushing for peace across the region.

"The purpose of the visit to the Middle East was to assess the impact of events in the region on the national security interests of the United States," Pelosi said. "There is no separation between this delegation, Congress and President Bush on the commitment of the United States to fight terrorism, end the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and pursue peace."

What Mideast newspapers are saying about speaker's trip to the region

A sampling of reactions from newspapers around the Middle East:

Ad Dustur, Jordan

"Pelosi goes to Syria carrying messages of peace and dialogue and conditions," read one front-page headline. On the inside pages, an editorial said that her visit to Syria reflects the chasm between the Bush administration and the Democratic majority in Congress regarding Iraq. And, it stated: "Pelosi's attempt to resuscitate the Middle East peace process puts Israel to yet another test. Wrapping up a visit to Israel, Pelosi went to Damascus to tell the Syrians that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was in favor of peace."

Al-Arab al-Yawm, Jordan

Mohamed Ka'aoush wrote of Pelosi's attempt to bring an opening for peace talks from Israel to Syria, "The speaker of the American Congress should not be taken too far by any illusions because Israel is unwilling to partner seriously in the peace process." Moreover, "the Bush administration is not serious about achieving peace in the Middle East. ... That is why I like to say that doing peace the American and the Israeli way will cause us more harm than good."

Al-Anwar, Lebanon

Rafiq Khouri wrote that he saw no difference between Bush's and Pelosi's objectives -- to his mind, the only difference between the Republican White House and the Democratic Congress is in the manner each wants to protect U.S. national security. The aim of her visit, as Pelosi herself said, is "protecting American national security." Pelosi said during her stop in Beirut that the delegation's visit to Syria does not mean that the U.S. position had changed. He called the dialogue with the members of Congress nothing more than breaking the ice, and wondered: What if dialogue proves a failure as did attempts to isolate Syria?

Al-Jamahir, Syria

Hassan Asaad considered the visit of the House speaker to Syria a sign of the failure of the efforts of the Bush administration to isolate Syria. Diplomats and legislators have been streaming to Damascus since the Bush administration started its campaign against Syria, he wrote, adding, "All those who came here

underlined the fact that Damascus would be the gate for reaching a settlement for the problems of the Middle East."

Al-Ahram, Egypt

Ibrahim Nafie viewed Pelosi's visit to Syria as a step toward lifting the siege the Bush administration imposed on the country. Yet the visit does not mean that Americans have decided to buy the Syrian point of view wholeheartedly, he wrote. He wrote that the visit signals that the Democratic Party seeks to form a comprehensive vision about the situation in Iraq, giving Syria a bigger role there. At the same time, he said, Syria must adopt a clear position on all the issues of the Middle East. He noted that that appears to be underway, citing the Syrian president's approval at the recent Arab summit in Riyadh of the leaders' final communique.

-- Compiled by Amr Emam

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