

CHAPTER 8

Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Clinging To His Roots?

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Introduction

“When there is a storm the need is greater to cling to the roots, to principles and to the constants which are our roots. No matter how long the storm might last it is going to stop and when you try to stand up after the storm you will not be able to unless you have roots.”

-Bashar al-Asad¹

Upon the death of Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000, *The Economist* quipped that Syria had seemingly “lost a dictator and gained an ophthalmologist.”² The transfer of power from a long-time military strongman to his medically trained and politically inexperienced son was bound to raise expectations of change in a society whose stability under 30 years of Hafiz al-Asad’s rule bordered on paralysis. The challenges Bashar and Syria face are formidable. As Glenn Robinson notes, Syria is in many ways an anachronism, it is a minority dominated authoritarian state in the age of democracy and a statist economy in the age of the market.³ Internationally the challenges are just as stiff. The ongoing conflict with Israel over the Golan Heights, continuing regional challenges from Iraq and Turkey, a Lebanon increasingly restive under Syrian rule, and a United States paying more attention to Syria’s support for international terrorism, all pose challenges that Bashar will have to grapple with.

The initial transfer of power from father to son went far smoother than many had expected, a significant accomplishment in a country where as David Sorenson notes, coups are the traditional means for succession.⁴

Within days of his father's death, Bashar quickly assumed leadership positions in the three most important formal governing institutions in Syria; the armed forces, the Ba'th Party and the central government. Colonel Bashar quickly became Lt. General Bashar, the head of the Syrian armed forces, and he was also selected to replace his father as Secretary General of the Ba'th Party. At the same time the Syrian Parliament amended the constitution to lower the minimum age for the presidency from 40 to 34, which in a stunning stroke of good fortune for Bashar just happened to be his age at the time.⁵ The Regional Command of the Ba'th Party then nominated Bashar for the presidency, a nomination that was quickly seconded by the Syrian Parliament. One month after the death of Hafiz, the Syrian people played its role in a presidential referendum in which Bashar's elevation was approved by a vote of 8.6 million ayes to 22,000 nays. While some may see 97.29 percent of the vote as a landslide, it represents a precipitous fall from Hafiz's 99.98 percent in his previous anointing as president.

What previously had been seen as a rather unlikely succession scenario had come to pass.⁶ Beyond some quickly silenced grumbling from Hafiz's brother Rif'at from exile in Europe, Syria's transformation into a hereditary republic went virtually unchallenged. With these initial leadership hurdles cleared, Bashar now has to face Syria's problems. The purpose of this chapter is to offer an early assessment of Syria's direction under Bashar, focusing especially on Syria's foreign policy dilemmas and its relationship to the United States. The following section explores Bashar's personal history and worldview. Since many of Bashar's most important initial actions focused on economic and political reforms at home, the third section explores the status of the reform process and how the political power structure within Syria affects Bashar's decisions. The implications of this analysis for Syrian-U.S. relations under Bashar is the subject of the fourth section, with Syria's position in the current war on terrorism discussed in the fifth section. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of U.S. policy options regarding its relations with Syria.

In trying to forecast the future course of Syrian foreign policy, an understanding of Syria's international position and Bashar's domestic position will be just as, if not more, critical than understanding the personality and worldview of the Syrian President himself. Since internationally and domestically Bashar finds himself in much the same

position his father did, the United States and the world can expect more continuity than change from Syria as the challenges Bashar faces will lead him to cling to the legacy and policies of his father. When Patrick Seale ended his monumental biography of Hafiz al-Asad, he asked his subject how he would like the biography to end. Hafiz's response was "Say simply that the struggle continues."⁷ Bashar has now inherited that struggle.

Four Faces of Bashar al-Asad

In trying to sort out what Bashar al-Asad is like as a leader, four competing images are prevalent. Some see Bashar as a westernizing reformer, others as a virtual clone of his father, others as a political novice ill-prepared for the task of holding power in Syria, and still others see him as youthful statesman whose inexperience could lead to crises and a worsening of regional tensions. Since each of these views offers some insight into Bashar al-Asad, the purpose of this section is to explore each of the four.

Bashar was never supposed to become president; his older brother Basil was the one everyone expected to step into his father's shoes. It was Basil that was given the grooming, positions, and exposure thought necessary to prepare for an important role in Syrian politics. Basil's unexpected death in a car accident in January 1994 changed Hafiz's plans and Bashar's life, as the young ophthalmologist was called home just months short of the end of his residency at a hospital in England. At this point Bashar's medical training ended and his apprenticeship in Syrian politics began. Upon returning to Syria, Bashar was a captain, within a year he was promoted to major, the next year to Lt. Colonel, in 2000 to Colonel, and after the death of his father, to three-star general and commander in chief of the armed forces.⁸ The new heir apparent was also placed in charge of Syrian relations with Lebanon and headed a high profile anti-corruption campaign.

Those who see Bashar as a nascent reformer stress his experiences prior to assuming his brother's mantle. Looking at his medical training, his years spent living in England, his enthusiasm for the internet and other forms of modern technology, highlighted by his leadership of the Syrian

Computers Users Association, some see Bashar as a westernized modernizer. This impression is particularly prevalent in western media accounts of the new Syrian leader. Capturing this image well is a *Salon* article that asks whether Syria's president is a "geek," noting his image as a "gentle, Westernized man with an interest in computers."⁹ Hafiz's quasi-official biographer Patrick Seale sees the new president as "a computer nerd,"¹⁰ arguing that it is "abundantly clear" that Bashar is looking to lead a "profound transformation" as the "protector—even the patron—of the new liberal movement."¹¹ After meeting Bashar at Hafiz's funeral, U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright praised him, hoping he would fulfill his potential to be a "modernizing reformer."¹²

A competing view of Bashar portrays him as his father's son, rather than as a son of modern technology and the West. His brief two-year stint in England, in this view, should not overshadow the fact that, as Bashar himself put it, he was brought up "in the home of Hafez Al-Assad."¹³ It is debatable, however, how much interaction he had with his father while growing up and how much he can be considered, as one Syrian writer put it, "a branch of that blessed tree."¹⁴ Upon assuming positions of high responsibility, Hafiz saw little of his family and spent most of his time working.¹⁵ Bashar was not born until September 1965, well into his father's ascent to the upper realms of the Syrian power structure. An indication of Bashar's somewhat distant relationship with his father may be seen in his curious habit of regularly referring to Hafiz not as his father, but as "President Hafiz al-Asad."¹⁶ Indeed, Hafiz's legacy as President will probably weigh far heavier on Bashar than Hafiz's legacy as a father.

A third view, similar to the reformist view discussed above, also sees Bashar as quite different than his father. The emphasis here, however, is on his political inexperience, rather than any alleged reformist tendencies. Referred to, at times clearly dismissively, as "Dr. Bashar" the stress here is on how Bashar's medical training has ill-prepared him for the competitive and often bloody world of Syrian politics. "The Doctor Will Lead You Now" is how one magazine chose to encapsulate this disjuncture between Bashar's professional training and his current responsibilities.¹⁷ Bashar "has not taken to the rough and tumble of Syrian politics" is how Glen Robinson sees it.¹⁸

A final view, which also stresses Bashar's inexperience, focuses on the dangers this holds for Syria's foreign relations, rather than on Bashar's hold on power domestically. Here Bashar is seen as novice statesman prone to ill-considered rhetoric, hasty moves, and risky behavior that the cautious Hafiz would have abjured. In this vein, some have pointed to a number of inflammatory statements offered by Bashar in the early days of his presidency. At the November 2000 meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Bashar accused Israel of practicing a "new Nazism" and in falsifying history in its claims on Jerusalem.¹⁹ In January 2001, Bashar painted Israel as "a state based on loathsome racist values and hatred toward Arabs and Islam."²⁰ In a speech to the 2002 Arab Summit in Amman, Bashar was seen as condoning attacks on Israeli civilians with his argument that the problem was not any particular leader in Israel, the armed forces, or the government, but inhered in Israel's racist society.²¹ Upon welcoming the Pope to Syria, Bashar made international headlines by accusing the Israelis of trying "to kill all the principles of divine faiths with the same mentality of betraying Jesus Christ and torturing him."²² Unlike Hafiz, who came to power considerably chastened by defeat in the 1967 war,²³ Bashar has no direct experience with war, which some worry could lead him to accept risks his father avoided. The major international event that coincided with Bashar's rise to power was not defeat in war, but the Israeli pullout from Lebanon. Possibly learning from this event that Israel can be defeated, Bashar, some fear, may be willing to rush in where his father feared to tread.²⁴

Each of these perspectives on Bashar captures some portion of the truth. Bashar has had exposure to the West and to modern technology, he did serve his political apprenticeship under his father, and notwithstanding that, he is relatively inexperienced both internationally and domestically. Which side of Bashar emerges in any particular instance will depend greatly upon the specific situation he is in. Understanding Syria under Bashar will require grappling with the interaction of his temperament with his and Syria's situation.²⁵ The following section demonstrates how this interaction of personality and situation can help explicate the ups and downs of domestic reforms in Syria under Bashar.

Bashar at Home: The Structural Limits of Reform

Bashar's inauguration speech, which stressed the need for new ideas and active political participation by all segments of Syrian society, gave some measure of hope to reformers within Syria that significant economic and political changes were in the offing.²⁶ The main impetus for these reforms was the troubled state of the Syrian economy. The debate regarding Syria's economy is not whether it is in need of reforms or not, but is instead a debate over how serious the current problems are.²⁷ In the early 1990's, with the influx of aid money from the Gulf States following Syria's stand in the Gulf War, an increase in remittances from Syrian workers in the Gulf States, and the discovery of significant pockets of oil within Syria, the Syrian economy experienced a modest boom. Today, these sources of revenue are decreasing rapidly. Syria's oil fields are drying up, as is the aid money and remittances from the Gulf States.²⁸

This economic downturn is coming at an especially difficult time given the youth of Syria's population. Close to 45% of Syria is under age 15, which means that large numbers of young adults will be continuing to enter the job market for years to come.²⁹ By one estimate, the labor force is currently growing well over twice as fast as job opportunities, this in a country with an already high unemployment rate.³⁰ Moreover, a significant portion of Syrian jobs remains in the inefficient public sector, which is currently losing the equivalent of 10% of Syria's GDP every year.³¹ Given this large demand for jobs, it is not surprising that Bashar has prioritized job creation over privatization.³²

Slow economic reforms had begun under Hafiz, such as the creation of new laws to encourage foreign investment and the Bashar-led charge to bring the internet and cell phones to Syria. Economic reforms have continued under Bashar with the creation of a unified exchange rate and new laws to allow private banks, even some with partial foreign ownership, the right to operate in Syria.³³ While there have been no significant reversals in the economic reform process, the slow pace of change has disappointed many Syrians.

Syria's model in the reform process seems to be China. Wanting to avoid the political collapse that hit the Soviet Union and its East European allies following attempts to reform, Syria prefers a slower paced set of

reforms that operate within the existing political system. Another potential model closer to home is Egypt, where economic reforms, some political debate, and elections all take place within the framework of what remains an authoritarian system.³⁴ This has meant, however, that the political reform process has gone even slower than the already sluggish economic reforms, and that this process has suffered some significant reverses in recent months. The half-hearted nature of the reform process can be found in its most visible slogan, which offers the clunky and far from stirring call for “change within stability and continuity.”³⁵

Early in Bashar’s reign there were some signs that significant political reforms were at hand. For example, Bashar ended the monopoly the Ba’th Party had on Syrian newspapers and has allowed political parties affiliated with the Ba’th in the National Progressive Front to begin publishing their own newspapers and Bashar has also approved the publication of a satirical newsmagazine.³⁶ Bashar has also discouraged the public display of pictures of himself and his father that are virtually omnipresent in Syria,³⁷ he has announced that when his seven year term is up he would like to hold a presidential election rather than a simple referendum,³⁸ and he has released large numbers of political prisoners.³⁹ When in September 2000 and January 2001 groups of Syrian citizens promulgated calls for increasing political reforms (the Manifesto of the 99 and the Manifesto of the 1,000 respectively), the regime initially did nothing to target the authors or halt the circulation of the petitions.⁴⁰ Some of the figures behind these two manifestos were also active in organizing and taking part in private gatherings of political discussion groups throughout Syria. Again, initially, the government tolerated these civil society forums.

The signs of this “Damascus Spring” soon came to an end, however. In February of 2001, the government banned the independent civic forums, requiring all such meetings to receive governmental permission. In September, Bashar issued a decree expanding the number of constraints and regulations on the press, and in August and September some of the leaders of the emerging civil society groups were arrested, including two independent members of Parliament. These two parliamentarians have since been found guilty of “aiming to change the Constitution by illegal means” and sentenced to 5 years in prison.⁴¹

Much of the explanation for the limits of these reforms, both economically and politically, can be found in the structure of the Asad

regime that Bashar inherited. The starting point for most analyses of the Asad regime is its minority nature.⁴² Although Alawis, like Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad represent only about 12 percent of the Syrian population, the upper levels of government have been heavily Alawi since even before Hafiz came to power at the head of his “corrective movement” in 1970. While Alawis claim to be and are recognized by many as a legitimate sect of Shi’i Islam, the persistent doubts some hold about this conclusion is perhaps best seen in the continuing ardent efforts of Alawis to have their Shi’i identity recognized by others. For example, in the later years of his rule, Hafiz al-Asad departed from the strictly secular nature of his Ba’thist ideology and began to emphasize his own and his regime’s Islamic nature.⁴³ In some ways, the minority Asad regime is not as surprising as it might seem at first. As Nikolaos van Dam notes, Sunni Muslims represent only 57.4 percent of the population, with the rest being composed of religious or linguistic minorities.⁴⁴ The Ba’th revolution that helped pave Hafiz’s road to power was built on overturning the dominance of the traditional Sunni/Arab elite, and the minority nature of Bashar’s regime could somewhat paradoxically be a source of strength as many Syrians continue to view an Alawi regime as less of a threat than a potential return of Sunni/Arab dominance.

The political coalition that Hafiz passed to Bashar is in actuality much broader than simply an Alawi-dominated military regime, or even a regime dominated by different minority groups. For example, although the revolution that brought the Ba’th Party to power was hostile to the traditional Sunni elite of Syria’s major cities, Sunni leadership from rural areas played a key role in stabilizing the Asad regime. This portion of the Asad coalition is still represented by such powerful figures as long-time Defense Minister Mustafa Talas, long serving Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shar’ and current Prime Minister Mustafa Miru.⁴⁵ Moreover, Hafiz al-Asad, from the very start of his reign, attempted to woo the traditionally dominant urban Sunni business class into his coalition, successfully creating what some have called a “military-merchant complex,” combining an Alawi-dominated military establishment with the Sunni urban business elite.⁴⁶ The continuing expansion of the state structure under Hafiz also created a significant base of support for the regime in the civil service.⁴⁷

Another pillar of the Asad regime is the network of formal institutions that Hafiz encouraged. As Hafiz himself put it, “I have always been a man

of institutions.”⁴⁸ In addition to the military and the intelligence services, there are also the formal governing structures of a Parliament, a Prime Minister, his cabinet, and a series of executive agencies. On top of the government structure is the apparatus of the Ba’th Party, which has been transformed from its early days as an ideological party to a mechanism for the distribution of patronage.⁴⁹ In order to prevent any single institution or its leadership from becoming too powerful and threatening the control of Hafiz and now Bashar, these institutions, especially the military and intelligence services, are often divided, given vague and overlapping mandates, and are put in competition with one another.⁵⁰

Although the Asad regime is broader than an Alawi dictatorship, there is no doubt that as one moves through these organizations, from the formal government, to the party, and to the military and intelligence agencies, and as one moves up each organization, the Alawi presence becomes more and more predominant.⁵¹ As Eyal Zisser notes, while Alawis are only 12 percent of the population, close to 90 percent of the heads of the military and security services are Alawis. This Alawi dominance is especially pronounced in the so-called Praetorian Guards, the military units stationed in and around Damascus.⁵² Moreover, Sunni military commanders are usually paired with Alawi deputies and vice versa.⁵³ These institutions help explain, in part, the ease of the transition to Bashar because institutions are far easier to bequeath to a successor than are personal allegiances.⁵⁴

Since Bashar has assumed power, three broad trends are evident in his dealings with the circle of leadership that surrounds the presidency. First, in a continuation of the last few years of Hafiz’s rule, there has been a steady purging of those suspected of opposing Bashar’s elevation.⁵⁵ Recently, the continued consolidation of Bashar’s position has focused on purges from the armed forces especially in the military intelligence branches.⁵⁶ The second trend has been moves toward bringing new faces to head the cabinet departments responsible for economic policy, with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade going to men believed to be in support of reform.⁵⁷ The third trend has been continuity in the top jobs under the President, including the Prime Minister, and the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs. For example, Mustafa Talas, long time political ally to Hafiz al-Asad, who had been rumored to be on his way out, has been asked to stay on for at least two more years, even though he is past the legal age for retirement.⁵⁸

Potentially, one of Bashar's most far-reaching personnel moves may have been his choice for First Lady, Asma al-Akhras, a member of a prominent Sunni family from Homs who was born and raised in England. The new First Lady, who holds a degree from King's College in computer science and has worked as an economist for Deutsche Bank and JP Morgan, symbolizes in a very concrete way Bashar's openness to working with the traditional Sunni business elite in pursuing the economic reform process.⁵⁹

Playing down any potential tensions between reformers and traditionalists in Bashar's cabinet, Defense Minister Talas argued that "Syria does not have an old guard and a new guard, but one guard."⁶⁰ Despite such assurances, it is clear that any potential economic and political reforms will face an uphill battle given the nature of the Syrian political system. Bashar faces the eternal dilemma that confronts any reformer in office, which is that substantial reforms are likely to jeopardize the political base that put him into power in the first place.⁶¹ Bashar faces the same equation his father did, namely that "key constituencies are likely to be threatened by liberalization, while liberalization's agents and beneficiaries are historic regime rivals."⁶² Paring down the bloated and inefficient government sector may make economic sense, but public employees are a key pillar of the current regime's support base. Deregulation of certain industries may make economic sense, but it will also hurt regime supporters whose profits depend on government protection. Decreasing corruption may make economic sense, but access to corrupt profits is one of the most important rewards the regime bestows on its loyal supporters in addition to providing a useful tool that Bashar can and has used to get rid of potential rivals by selectively prosecuting them for corruption.⁶³ Even though Bashar has continued his father's efforts to bring the Sunni business elite into his coalition, the interests of this group is likely to increasingly diverge from the regime with regard to the pace and direction of reform.⁶⁴

The slow pace of domestic reforms so far under Bashar is indicative of the political constraints he is operating under, regardless of what his personal preferences may be. These and similar constraints must also be kept in mind when thinking about the future course of Syria's foreign policy under Bashar, including the relationship between Damascus and Washington.

U.S.-Syrian Relations: A Persistent, but Moderate Rivalry

Although Syria was not included in George W. Bush's axis of evil, it does possess axis of evil credentials, especially with regard to its support of international terrorism and its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs. Washington is also critical of Syrian policies toward the Middle East Peace Process and somewhat more quietly, of the continued Syrian military presence in Lebanon.⁶⁵ The purpose of this section is to explore the possibilities for a change in U.S.-Syrian relations with the accession of Bashar. Looking specifically at the Syrian position on relations with Israel, WMD development, its domination of Lebanon, and its policies toward with Iraq, the overall argument of this section is that given Syria's interests and the interests of the Bashar regime in staying in power, the U.S.-Syrian relationship is likely to remain one of low-key rivalry.

Starting with the Syrian relationship with Israel, there seems to be little prospect of Bashar adopting a policy any different than the one pursued by his father. As Bashar has stressed in his public utterances since his earliest days in office, the return of the entire Golan Heights, defined as an Israeli withdrawal to the lines prior to the outbreak of the 1967 war, is a matter of honor and national dignity, not a matter for negotiation.⁶⁶ Given that not bowing to the wishes of Israel is seen as one of the greatest accomplishments of Hafiz's reign, it is unlikely that the newly installed Bashar could reverse over thirty years of Syrian policy on such a central issue.⁶⁷ In addition to making Bashar look like he can not measure up to his father, any compromise settlement with Israel would reduce Syrian claims on aid from the Gulf States based on Syria's position as a frontline state against Israel.⁶⁸ In addition, peace with Israel would also take away a large part of the justification for the retention of authoritarianism at home.⁶⁹ Given the collapse of the peace process, which has reinforced Syria's long contention that the Oslo process was flawed from the start,⁷⁰ and given recent criticisms within Israel that Ehud Barak's pull-out from Lebanon helped lead to the intifada by making Israel look defeated, both Israel and Syria seem unlikely to make the concessions necessary to meet the demands of the other.

This does not mean that conflict between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights is likely. Indeed, since 1967, this border has probably

been Israel's quietest. While Syria demands the eventual return of the entire Golan, it is also prepared to wait for it, as it has for over 35 years now. The most dangerous aspect of the Israeli-Syrian relationship centers on Syrian support for Lebanon's Hizballah, which will be discussed below in the section on Syrian support for terrorism.

Syria also possesses an extensive chemical weapons arsenal, a biological weapons program, and missile and aircraft programs designed to allow for the delivery of weapons of mass destruction.⁷¹ When asked about this arsenal, Syrian officials sometimes deny they possess such weapons, sometimes maintain they need these weapons to provide a deterrent to Israel, or for those untroubled by logical inconsistencies, sometimes offer both answers simultaneously. Given Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, the continuing hostile relations between the two, and Syria's conventional inferiority in that relationship, Syria's desire to possess a WMD capability is understandable from a national interest standpoint. Even leaving Israel out of the equation, Syria would also have an interest in keeping these weapons as a deterrent against Iraq and Turkey.

While Syria's possession of WMD is likely to remain a source of tension between the United States and Syria, there is little reason to expect this tension to be particularly acute. Syria has viewed these weapons purely as deterrents and as weapons of last resort and Damascus has shown little interest in exporting these weapons to other states or terrorist organizations. Thus, while the Syrian WMD program is unlikely to go away any time soon, it is also unlikely to pose a serious threat to the United States.

The same can basically be said for Syria's domination of Lebanon, where since 1976, Damascus has retained somewhere in the neighborhood of 25,000 troops. In the interest of stability and in the interest of keeping Syria a part of the Gulf War coalition, the U.S. has tended to tacitly accept Syria's military presence in Lebanon.⁷² Israel's exit from Lebanon in May 2000 did little to change Syria's calculations.⁷³ Lebanon remains economically vital to the Asad regime. Its relatively freer economic climate offers an outlet for the Syrian business class, it provides an important source of income for the military commanders stationed in Lebanon, and thousands of Syrians travel to Lebanon to find work.⁷⁴ While the death of Hafiz al-Asad may have

encouraged certain groups within Lebanon to escalate their calls for a Syrian exit,⁷⁵ and despite some recent troop redeployments within Lebanon, Syria is in no hurry to leave.

The situation with regard to Syria's eastern neighbor, Iraq, is more fluid. Although the Ba'thist regimes in Damascus and Baghdad have historically had an uneasy relationship, upon coming to power, Bashar initiated a brief rapprochement with Hussein's Iraq. The Syrian-Iraqi border became increasingly open to trade, official visits between the two capitals became more common, and the pipeline connecting the Kirkuk oil fields in Iraq to the Syrian Mediterranean port of Banyas was the largest single hole in U.N. sanctions against Iraq.⁷⁶ The primary driver behind this improved relationship was Syria's economic interests. Damascus was moving to position itself to take advantage of the eventual lifting of U.N. sanctions and while those sanctions were still in effect, cheap oil from Iraq offered an economic windfall during a time when Syrian supplies were dwindling. Further, Damascus' opening toward Baghdad gave concrete form to common complaints heard in the region regarding U.N. and U.S. double standards. As Bashar expressed it, "Iraq is destroyed for the sake of U.N. resolutions and U.N. resolutions are destroyed for the sake of Israel."⁷⁷

At first, the United States took a low-key approach regarding Syria's improving relations with Iraq, choosing even to ignore Bashar's renegeing on a pledge made to Secretary of State Colin Powell to shut down the Iraqi oil pipeline. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, put a spotlight on the ties between Damascus and Baghdad and further strained U.S.-Syrian relations. Syria was outspoken in its criticism of the U.S.-led invasion and it was accused of providing direct support for Hussein by shipping arms and by allowing irregular forces to cross into Iraq from Syria. Worries in Washington that Damascus intended to play a disruptive role in post-war Iraq increased following reports that high-level members of the deposed Hussein regime had taken sanctuary in Syria. The result was a brief war of words between Washington and Damascus that subsided almost as quickly as it arose. A brief visit by Secretary Powell as well as Syria's decision to evict a small number of Iraqis and better seal the border, quickly returned U.S.-Syrian relations to their steady, albeit uneasy state.⁷⁸

Syria's Support for International Terror

Given the current war on terrorism, Syria's support for international terrorist groups stands out as the most important item on the agenda of U.S.-Syrian relations. Syria has been on the American list of state sponsors of terrorism since that list was initiated in 1979 and the most recent version of the list, although acknowledging that Syria has not been directly implicated in an act of terrorism since 1986, maintains that Syria continues "to provide safe haven and logistical support to a number of terrorist groups."⁷⁹ These groups include the Lebanese group Hizballah as well as the Palestinian Hamas, The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, and the Palestine Islamic Jihad. Syria allows these groups to retain offices in Damascus, enjoy refuge and basing privileges in Syrian-controlled Lebanon, and allows for the transit of weapons through Syrian territory. Syria's position on this list prevents it from receiving U.S. aid, requires the U.S. to oppose loans to Damascus from international financial institutions, imposes a ban on all U.S. arms sales, and restricts trade in certain dual-use items. Otherwise, U.S. trade with Syria is allowed.⁸⁰

Bashar and the Syrian government were quick to condemn the terrorist attacks of September 11 and to call for worldwide cooperation against terror.⁸¹ At the same time, Syria has resisted cleanly fitting into President Bush's Manichean declaration that in the war on terrorism, "you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Having fought a long and costly domestic campaign against an Islamic-based opposition that employed terrorism, culminating in the government's bloody destruction of the city of Hama in 1982, the Asad regime shed no tears for al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Bashar even suggested to a visiting U.S. congressional delegation that America could learn a lesson or two from the Syrians about how to quash terrorist threats.⁸² This does not mean, however, that Syria is ready to cut its ties with all the groups designated by the U.S. as terrorist. As the State Department notes, Syria is trying "to have it both ways" in cooperating in the crackdown against al-Qaeda, but continuing to support groups like Hizballah and Hamas.⁸³

To explain this distinction, Bashar argues that "there is a difference between terrorism and resistance . . . the difference between one who has

a right and the other who usurps this right.”⁸⁴ Seeing the Lebanese and Palestinian attacks on Israel as legitimate resistance to occupation, groups like Hizballah and Hamas do not qualify as terrorist groups in Syrian eyes. Beyond this, Bashar’s government also insists that the U.N. and not the U.S. should head any war on terror and that instead of just condemning terror, the international community should solve the underlying grievances that spur terrorism.⁸⁵

While Syria’s definition of terrorism is certainly subject to debate, what is less debatable are the clear and concrete advantages Syria accrues by adopting this definition and continuing to support certain terrorists groups. From a strategic standpoint, Syria’s central international dilemma is that it is a state with broad regional ambitions, but a lack of resources with which to pursue those objectives. Syria aspires to play an influential regional role, but is decisively outclassed in terms of power resources by three of its immediate neighbors, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. Support for terrorist groups is a relatively cheap and low-risk way to increase its influence in regional discussions. Syria wants to regain the Golan but does not have the military or economic capability to make Israel’s holding of the territory particularly costly to Jerusalem. The best weapon the Syrians have in making Israel uncomfortable and giving it an incentive to negotiate is the support Syria offers to groups like Hizballah and various Palestinian groups. Similarly, what means of influence does Syria possess to persuade Turkey to come to a mutually acceptable water sharing agreement? For years, Syria’s strongest card was the support it provided to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Even in Lebanon where Syria has military superiority, support for terrorist groups has also proven an effective way of solidifying Syria’s dominance.

Beyond these benefits, Syrian support for terrorist groups has helped it improve its relations with Iran, justify Syria’s claim to be the leading Arab state in the struggle against Israel, and serve as a source of revenue for the regime and its supporters. Moreover, support for these groups is also domestically popular, an especially important consideration for a politically inexperienced eye-doctor trying to prove that he is indeed tough enough to lead Syria.⁸⁶

So far, the White House has been reluctant to seriously pressure Syria to cease its support for these groups. While President Bush has stated that

it is time for “Syria to decide which side of the war against terror it is on,” National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, although rejecting any distinction between good and bad terrorism, noted that “the means we use with different countries to get them to stop harboring terrorists may be very broad.”⁸⁷ The administration’s methods with Syria at this point seem to be limited to verbal encouragement. Reasons for this include the value the U.S. puts on Syrian intelligence cooperation against al-Qaeda, a desire not to close off a potential Syrian role in the peace process, and the hope that Syria can be persuaded not to attempt to undermine U.S. efforts to build a new regime in Iraq.

Another important factor limiting the extent of pressure the U.S. is willing to exert on Syria over its support for terrorist organizations is that Syrian support for terrorism has been deliberately crafted to limit the direct threat it poses to U.S. interests. In addition to the use of proxy terrorist groups that distances Syria itself from these actions and restrictions on launching attacks directly from Syrian soil, Damascus has also made a clear choice to discourage attacks on American or Western targets more generally. Even with regard to attacks on Israeli targets, where Syria has shown far less restraint, these attacks are also designed to minimize the dangers of escalation. Syria puts great stress on the implicit “rules of the game” regarding Hizballah attacks and has at times put definite restraints upon Hizballah. Evidence of Syria’s desire to continue the terror attacks as a way to pressure Israel while minimizing the chances for escalation can be seen in Syria’s lack of response to two Israeli attacks on Syrian positions in Lebanon, which killed Syrian soldiers, in April and June 2001. Rather than respond militarily to these strikes, which had been precipitated by Hizballah attacks on Israeli targets, Syria opted instead simply to continue its support for Hizballah—neither escalating nor lowering the conflict. While the possibility of miscalculation and unintended escalation remains a danger, Syria realizes that a major conflict with Israel or the United States is not in its interests.⁸⁸ Although Senator Bob Graham has argued that the threat stemming from terrorist training camps in Syria and Lebanon are “more urgent” than any threats emanating from Iraq, this remains a distinctly minority position in Washington.⁸⁹

Conclusion: Dealing With Syria Under Bashar

Given this analysis, what should U.S. policy be toward Syria under Bashar al-Asad? Here the news includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. The bad news is that there is little the United States can do to stop Bashar from pursuing what the U.S. sees as hostile policies on the most important items on the American-Syrian agenda, like terrorism, WMD, and the peace process. The good news is that this hostility and the extent of rivalry between the United States and Syria is likely to remain limited as neither side has any desire to challenge the core national interests of the other. The ugly news is that this uncomfortable situation of moderate rivalry is likely to last a long time.

Starting with bad news, when you consider the domestic, international and economic benefits Bashar and Syria accrue from their policies toward Israel, WMD development, and support for terrorism, U.S. resources to encourage a change in these policies come up short.⁹⁰ What could the United States offer to Syria to sign a peace agreement with Israel or cut its ties to terrorist organizations that would compensate for the domestic popularity, regional influence, aid from the Gulf States, and the sense of pride Syria feels in its long term refusal to knuckle-under to the pressure of the Israelis and the Americans? Similarly, what could the U.S. offer Syria to make Damascus willing to expose itself to potential nuclear blackmail from Israel and give up its most credible deterrent to a broad conventional attack from Israel, Iraq or Turkey?

Theoretically, the United States may possess the carrots and sticks to change Syria's calculations, but in reality it is difficult to envision a situation where the United States would see it as in its interests to expend the resources that would be needed. U.S. trade with Syria is fairly minimal, aid is non-existent, and there seems little reason to suspect that there would be political support in Washington for massive aid for Syria. On the stick side, the costs of any military intervention would greatly outweigh the gain, and measures short of that, such as further unilateral sanctions, are likely to be ineffective. The last 35 years of Syrian policy has demonstrated the accuracy of Bashar's contention that Syria is "poor and can tolerate more than expected."⁹¹

One state that has succeeded in getting Syria to drop its support for international terrorist groups is Turkey. In 1998, Ankara did extract from Damascus a promise to withdraw its support from the PKK, an agreement that Syria has largely abided by. Is the “Turkish model” a potential roadmap that the U.S. could follow?⁹² Probably not. In order to get that agreement, Turkey had to risk, threaten, and mobilize for a large-scale conventional war. Turkey was also willing to pair that threat with concessions on a water sharing agreement. While this certainly shows that Damascus is susceptible to military pressure, the United States may be hard pressed to make a similarly credible military threat. Although the toppling of Hussein in Iraq, as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan, certainly demonstrated the capability of the United States to unseat hostile regimes if sufficiently provoked, Damascus has been and will likely continue to keep its provocations well below any threshold that could spark a similar U.S. move into Syria. In addition, the costs and difficulties of reconstruction and state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the possibility of increased instability in Iran, also increase the incentive on the American side to keep any confrontation with Syria limited.

Moreover, Syria’s benefits from support of groups like Hizballah and Hamas are far greater than anything Damascus gained from its support of the PKK. While Israel certainly presents a credible military threat to Syria, it has not been able to induce Syria to sign a peace agreement or cut its ties to these terrorist groups, and any increased Israeli military pressure on Syria will likely do more to complicate than ease America’s policy problems in the Middle East. Any hope of using the Turkish model to get Syria to cut its ties to Lebanese and Palestinian terrorism is likely to be as misguided as any hopes that Hizballah’s success in chasing the Israelis out of southern Lebanon can serve as an effective guide for driving the Israelis from the Golan Heights or the West Bank. Just as the Golan and the West Bank mean far more to Israel than southern Lebanon, Syria gains far more from Hizballah and Hamas than they did from the PKK.

The good news with regard to U.S.-Syrian relations is that to a large extent American deterrence has worked and Syria, although a rival, is a moderate one. Syria has been deterred from directing the terrorist groups it supports against U.S. targets, it has treated its weapons of mass destruction as weapons of last resort, and Syria has shown no interest in precipitating a war with Israel over the Golan Heights, a war it would almost certainly lose.

While Syrian policies on the peace process, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq are far from desirable from the U.S. standpoint, they are also far from a dire threat to important U.S. interests.

The ugly conclusion of this analysis is that the United States and Syria are likely to remain in a state of limited rivalry for the foreseeable future. There is no black and white answer for what U.S. policy should be toward Syria. Limited sanctions are an appropriate response to the limited threat Syria poses and limited incentives are an appropriate response for the limited cooperation Syria is willing to engage in. The precise mix of carrots and sticks is going to vary over time and issue area.

An adviser to Bashar argued that “he does not derive his legitimacy from the fact that he is the son of the late president, but from his adherence to his father’s political legacy.”⁹³ As long as that legacy is one of authoritarian induced domestic stability, a lumbering state-centric economy, distant relations with the West, and lack of compromise with Israel, Syria is going to remain a rival to the United States in the Middle East. A more promising legacy upon which to base solid U.S.-Syrian relations could be found in the development of democratic legitimacy in Syria along with economic growth based on integration in the world market. While U.S. investment and encouragement can play a role in pointing Syria in that direction,⁹⁴ that role is likely to be marginal and the results not visible for some time. In some ways, the less the United States government does to openly encourage reforms in Syrian domestic and foreign policy the better. Nothing is as likely to doom the reform process than for it to be viewed as an American imposition. The greater the storm, the more Bashar will cling to his roots. Such an outcome would be harmful to both the United States and Syria, for like his father, Bashar may find that the only way to hold Syria together is to hold it in place.

Notes

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2. 355, 8175 (June 17, 2000), 24.
3. “Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria,” *Middle East Policy* 5, 4 (January 1998), 159.

4. "National Security and Political Succession in Syria," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 9,1 (Winter 1998), 74. For an overall account of the turbulent post-independence years of Syrian politics see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
5. Article 83 of the Syrian Constitution contains the age requirement.
6. Robinson, "Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria," 176-177.
7. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle For The Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 495.
8. Rachel Bronson, "Syria: Hanging Together or Hanging Separately," *The Washington Quarterly* 23, 4 (Autumn 2000), 96.
9. Flore de Préneuf, "Is Syria's next president a geek?" *Salon.com*, June 13, 2000.
10. Matt Rees, "Does Bashar Have What It Takes to Rule: Assad's son and the real succession question," *Newsweek* 135, 25 (19 June 2000), 22.
11. Patrick Seale, "Dramatic Initiatives," *The World Today* 57, 3 (March 2001), 7 and 9.
12. Fouad Ajami, "A Master of the Realm: Hafez Assad bequeaths that most elusive prize, power, to his son," *U.S. News and World Report* 128, 25 (26 June 2000), 32.
13. "An Interview with Bashar Al-Assad" *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, Special Dispatch Series #244 (July 20,2001). This and all subsequent *MEMRI* documents were acquired from <http://www.memri.org>.
14. Cited in Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 161.
15. Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 179 and 344.
16. For examples see, "Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's Interview with *Le Figaro*" *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*, (24 June 2001).
17. Christine Gorman, "The Doctor Will Lead You Now," *Time* 155,25 (June 19, 2000), 44.
18. "Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria," 176.
19. Bashar al-Asad "Speech to the 9th Summit of the Organization of the Islamic

Conference,” (November 12, 2000) *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*. This and all subsequent *SANA* documents were acquired from <http://www.sana.org>.

20. “Anti-Israeli Statements by the President of Syria,” *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series, #177 (January 12, 2001).

21. “Syria’s Bashar Assad’s Speech at the Arab Summit,” *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series, #202 (April 4, 2001).

22. “Speech Welcoming Pope John Paul II to Damascus,” (May 5, 2001), *SANA*.

23. Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 143-144.

24. Eyal Zisser, “The Lebanon-Syria-Israel Triangle: One Year After Israeli Withdrawal,” *PeaceWatch*, #326, (May 22, 2001), The Washington Institute For Near East Policy. This and all subsequent cites to the Institute’s *PeaceWatch* and *PolicyWatch* series were acquired at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch>.

25. For an argument that the imperatives of his situation will overwhelm any temperamental factors, see Charles Foster, “Assad is Dead: Will Assad Live Long,” *Contemporary Review* 277, 1617 (October 2000), 221-224.

26. Bashar al-Asad Inauguration Speech, (July 17, 2000), *SANA*.

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28. See Ali A. Bolbol, “Syrian Economic Development,” *Middle East Insight* 17, 1 (January-February 2002), 53-58 and Peter Kiernan, “Syria’s Economic Dilemma,” *The Middle East*, #288 (March 1999), 35-37.

29. Perthes, “The Political Economy of Syrian Succession,” 144.

30. Nimrod Raphaeli, “Special Focus: Syrian Economy,” *MEMRI*, Middle East Economic News Report #17 (December 31, 2001).

31. Josh Martin, “Syria: Let The Reforms Begin,” *Middle East* #310 (March 2001), 29-30.

32. “An Interview with Bashar Al-Assad,” *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series, #103 (June 19, 2000).

33. See Martin, "Syria: Let the Reforms Begin," and Sami Moubayed, "Syria's New President Bashar al-Assad: A Modern Day Attaturk," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 19, 9 (December 2000), 31-32.

34. See Perthes, "The Political Economy of Syrian Succession," 150-151; Robinson, "Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria," 162; and Alan Makovsky, "Syria Under Bashar Al-Asad: The Domestic Scene and the 'Chinese Model' of Reform," *PolicyWatch* #512 (January 17, 2001).

35. Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 213 and Najib Ghadbian "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria," *Middle East Journal* 55, 4 (Autumn 2001), 641.

36. See Eli Carmelli and Yotam Feldner, "The Battle for Reforms and Civil Society in Syria-Part I," *MEMRI, Inquiry and Analysis Series* #47 (February 9, 2001); and Sami Moubayed "Tug Of War In Syria," *Washington Report of Middle East Affairs* 20, 3 (April 2001), 31.

37. Moubayed, "Syria's New President," 31.

38. Carmelli and Feldner, "The Battle for Reforms and Civil Society in Syria-Part I."

39. Ghadbian, "The New Asad," 637.

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43. Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: The Politics of Peace and Regime Survival," *Middle East Policy* 3, 4 (April 1995), 82-83.
44. *The Struggle For Power in Syria*, 1.
45. Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 7, 20.
46. The coiner of this term is Syrian analyst Sadiq al-'Azm, see Robinson, "Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria," 161 and Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 318-319 and 456. See also, Hanna Batutu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999), 208-216; Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*, 88-89 and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, 3 (August 1995), 306.
47. Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*, 91.
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49. Sorenson, "National Security and Political Succession in Syria," 73-74.
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51. van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syria*, 75-88 and Batutu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 217-225.
52. *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, "Syria's Praetorian Guards."
53. Hinnebusch, "Syria: The Politics of Peace and Regime Survival," 79.
54. Ariel A. Ahram, "Iraq and Syria: The Dilemma of Dynasty," *Middle East Quarterly* 9, 2 (Spring 2002), 40.
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61. Ghabbian, "The New Asad," 625.
62. Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," 307.
63. Ghabbian, "The New Asad," 635.
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73. See “Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese PM, Emile Lahoud on an Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon,” *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series, #75, (March 13, 2000); and *MEMRI*, “An Interview with Bashar Al-Assad,” (June 19, 2000).

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75. Eyal Zisser, “Leaving Lebanon?” *Tel Aviv Notes*, #20, found at <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss>. See also Robert J. Rabil, “The Maronites and Syrian Withdrawal: From ‘Isolationists’ to ‘Traitors’?” *Middle East Policy* 8,3 (March 2001), 11-25.

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