



SYRIA AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

By Eyal Zisser*

Many in the West believed that Bashar al-Asad's ascension to power in Syria presaged a turn away from Pan-Arab nationalism and toward a more pro-Western position. However, three years into his rule, Bashar al-Asad has not brought about any such change. On the contrary, Bashar has adopted a policy sometimes even more radical than that of his father, Hafiz al-Asad. Syria's conduct during the war with Iraq in 2003 illustrates Bashar's policy of brinkmanship.

The rise of Bashar al-Asad to rule in Syria in June 2000 aroused great expectations among many, both inside and outside Syria. The hope was that the young ruler, conversant with Western ways of thinking and living, would revolutionize Syria in everything having to do with his regime's policies, both on the domestic scene and, perhaps first and foremost, concerning Syria's foreign policy.(1)

However, the years that have passed since Bashar rose to power have shown that it was not the sort of revolution he had in mind. Conversely, while he may have understood the need for the introduction of change and reform in Syria, he was not able to withstand the regime's ruling Old Guard's wish to retain the status quo that had existed in the country for decades. It also became clear that there was nothing behind the image of a young, dynamic leader, open to and favoring the West. Indeed, the soft and moderate tone that had characterized Bashar before he took office was quickly replaced by an entirely different tenor emerging from the Presidential Palace in Damascus. Bashar adopted, or perhaps was forced to adopt, militant and radical pan-Arab positions. This was particularly prominent in view of the Palestinian intifada and the question of Israeli-Arab conflict, and to a greater extent later on in connection with the war in Iraq.

In the opinions of many, his conduct bore witness to several conclusions: that he was firmly ensconced in the Arab nationalist and anti-Western framework, that he aspired to take his father's place as the leader of the radical camp in the Arab world, and that he lacked experience, self-confidence, and possibly an orderly decision-making apparatus or even experienced advisors close to him. All of this, many concluded, led the young leader in Damascus into places his father had refrained from going.(2)

The war in Iraq was one of the most important tests for Bashar in his short time in office so far. While it is still too soon to assess the implications of that war for Syria, especially the implications of Bashar's behavior during that war, several points can be made.

First, Syria chose to place itself at the head of the Arab camp opposing the war and was prominent in its sharp, even belligerent, criticism of Washington's decision to go to war. Moreover, Syria not only supported Iraq rhetorically, but also when the war actually broke out, Syria continued to turn a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons into Iraq via Syria and allowed Arab (mainly Syrian) volunteers to cross the Syrian border into Iraq.

Second, Syria's behavior during the war led Washington to adopt a threatening tone, unprecedented in its severity, towards Damascus. The accusations leveled against Syria by the United States bear witness to the potential for disaster inherent in the path along which relations between the two countries have been moving in recent years. Damascus,

apparently surprised at the tone that Washington had adopted towards it, began to take steps to placate the Americans, thus preventing a Syrian-American confrontation. It would also appear that Washington, for its part, has not closed the door on Syria and still hopes that the two will be able to work cooperatively in the future.

Bashar's behavior during the war gained him immediate political rewards in Syrian and inter-Arab public opinion, which may have been his aim, but at the same time it created bitter resentment towards Syria among most of the Arab regimes, including the Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan. Thus, a great deal now depends on the United States and the degree of its determination to settle scores with Syria because of the latter's policies in recent years. While Bashar, like his father, did demonstrate his awareness of the constraints facing Syria, he was less cautious and thus crossed red lines, which ultimately brought him into confrontation with Washington.

The Americans left the door open for him to change his policies, but the new realities in the region--the presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops on Iraqi soil, the euphoria in Washington in the wake of America's dramatic victory in Iraq--could bring that moment of truth sooner than expected.

SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE BASHAR ERA--INITIAL MOVES

Against the background of Syria's poor relations with most of the countries of the world and the sense of socio-economic stagnation and suffocation at home, Bashar al-Asad's rise to power was received as a welcome breeze. There were many inside and outside Syria who hoped that Bashar would bring with him the opening of a new era in Syria's relations with the world. This hope was focused both on style--a new, open one replacing the feeling of isolation, suspicion and suffocation characterizing the rule and policies of Hafiz al-Asad--as well as a change in content, a foreign policy recognizing the new regional and international realities, opening itself up to substantial changes and the adoption of an unequivocal pro-Western orientation.

It is important to mention the positive impression that Bashar made on quite a number of Western leaders as well as journalists who met him before he rose to power. They described him as a young, open-minded, very intelligent man well versed in details and quite in control of facts. He appeared not to need his aides or previously prepared notes in order to lead a fluent matter-of-fact discussion on any subject with those he met. Bashar's deep familiarity with Western ideas and the openness which he displayed (even declaring that he was a jazz fan), and, of course, his penchant for surfing the Internet, only strengthened that impression.(3)

There appeared to be good reason why many chose to view him as a representative of the younger generation of Arab leaders destined to take the helm in the Arab world. Among those mentioned together with Bashar were King Abdallah II of Jordan, King Muhammad VI of Morocco, and the crown princes of a number of the Gulf monarchies. These young leaders frequently met with Bashar even before he rose to power and these meetings provided Bashar with some experience in the sphere of foreign policy as well as granting a measure of legitimacy to his rise to the presidency, since his counterparts appeared willing, even enthusiastic, to make him one of their own.(4)

Nevertheless, there still remained some doubt as to whether Bashar actually belonged to the group of young monarchs who had, until they rose to power, spent most of their lives, and certainly their formative years, in Western educational institutions and environment. King Abdallah II frequently and staunchly claimed that Bashar, like him, belonged to the Internet generation.(5) However, the passage of time, especially after he rose to power, revealed that Bashar did not really belong to that group and that the differences between him and the other young monarchs were greater than the similarities. It even seems that Bashar felt himself closer to Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizballah, also one of the

younger faces in the Arab world, than to Kings Abdallah II and Muhammad VI. Indeed, contacts between Bashar and the young monarchs, which had apparently focused on mutual personal interests, ended as soon as the members of this young group rose to power and faced the stormy domestic, regional and inter-Arab realities.

Bashar's policies, at least in the early stages of his rule, reflected the continuation of those of his father, i.e. he continued cautious maneuvering between East and West while attempting to straddle the fence. On the one hand, attempts were made to promote a political dialogue with the countries of Western Europe, the moderate Arab countries and even with the United States. On the other hand, there was the desire to preserve close ties with Iran and promote relations with Iraq. In addition, there were clear attempts on Bashar's part to exploit the change in rule in Damascus in order to turn over a new leaf in his country's relations with the world at large while shaking off the residue of the past, especially personal residues that had frequently clouded Syria's relations with its neighbors. A particularly prominent aspect of these attempts was that they were designed to improve relations with Jordan, Turkey, and to a certain degree, with Iraq, with which Syria had been in serious conflict for several decades.

However, it quickly became clear that regional realities were stronger than Bashar and that smiles and good will alone could not erase the substantive differences of opinion on key issues or the residues of the past which had for so long overshadowed Syria's relations with its neighbors. Moreover, when he was faced with his first crisis, on more than one occasion, Bashar's balanced, placating statements and his smile hid the folly of youth and immature positions and policies. Since Bashar lacked practical experience in the sphere of foreign policy and also, apparently, a comprehensive view of Syria's place and role in the regional and international arenas, it is not surprising that he was motivated to adopt radical policies, and not only in the Israeli-Arab context, which considerably damaged Syria's foreign relations without promoting any Syrian interests.

It should be mentioned that Bashar's managing of domestic affairs was quite similar to his foreign policy mismanagement. At the end of the year 2000, Bashar tried to introduce reforms in the socio-economic sphere in Syria. However, from quite early on, he apparently lost all control of that process. There was an atmosphere of "a Syrian spring" in Damascus that expressed itself in the flourishing of political forums and the publication of petitions signed by intellectuals demanding the establishment of a democracy in the country. This prompted the members of the Old Guard surrounding Bashar to pull him up sharply and force him to mount an attack on the reformist movement, which he had so enthusiastically supported until then, in effect ending the "Damascus Spring."⁽⁶⁾

Within the first year of Bashar's rule in Syria, two crises broke out that were to make a great impact on his regime from then onwards. The first was the outbreak of the intifada in September 2000, followed by the renewed activities of Hizballah against Israel's northern border. The Palestinian intifada, as well as the renewed Hizballah activity against Israel, threatened to create a regional conflagration or at least an Israeli-Syrian confrontation. The second was the war on terrorism declared by the United States in the wake of the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. As part of this war, the United States first brought down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and then took over Iraq. At the same time, Washington became increasingly more critical of Syria not only for not severing its ties with the "Axis of Evil" but, in effect, promoting its relations with the elements comprising it: Iran, Iraq, Hizballah at the time and North Korea.

BASHAR AND THE INTIFADA

The outbreak of the intifada caught Damascus completely by surprise, and it may be assumed that the Syrians did not initiate the renewed Hizballah activities against Israel that occurred in early October 2000. At most they had been informed of no more than the

organization's general intentions, an expression of the new balance of power created between Damascus and the organization following the death of Hafiz al-Asad.(7) Nevertheless, from the moment the intifada broke out, Bashar tried to exploit the new realities emerging in the region to promote his personal status as well as Syria's standing as a regional power. These new regional realities provided a golden opportunity for him to establish his personal and political status as the head of the Arab rejectionist camp, or at least as the head of a camp whose opposition to Israel was staunch and uncompromising. The mood of the public on the streets of Damascus as well as in the other Arab capitals substantially contributed to Bashar's increasingly tough policy. He wanted to create the image of being close to the heart of the Arab man-on-the-street and willing to do his bidding.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the basis for his policy vis-a-vis the crisis into which the region had deteriorated was not only calculated reasoning arising from Bashar's desire to exploit the opportunity afforded him by the Palestinian intifada to prove his abilities as a leader at home and abroad. In his reaction to the renewed flare-up in Israeli-Palestinian relations, the young leader was revealed, according to many in Israel and in the West, as emotional and hasty to say nothing of immature and inexperienced. His immaturity led him far afield to places where he most probably did not want to go.

At the same time, one could sense that behind these moves, especially his reactions to what was happening in the region, there lurked a hostile and uncompromising worldview regarding Israel, arising out of the residue left by the years of growing up in the house of his father, Hafiz al-Asad. This worldview gathered dust during the years of the peace negotiations between Syria and Israel and was pushed aside because of the expectations and even hopes of both these countries. However, it took very little to shake the dust off this concept and rejuvenate it as a central component in Bashar's strategic thinking.(8)

BASHAR, THE UNITED STATES AND THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM

The terrorist attacks by Usama bin-Ladin's al-Qa'ida organization on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 introduced a new era in Syrian-American relations. The attacks brought about a sharp change in global and Middle Eastern realities, leading to the formulation of a new global and regional agenda. There were even those who compared the attacks to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in its wake. These events, of about a decade before, had had similar fateful implications for the entire world and for the Middle East and Syria in particular. It is therefore no wonder that the United States, having emerged from the terrorist attacks even more determined than ever to strike at its enemies, was quick to demand that Syria change its course and join efforts with the international community to fight terrorism.

Syria's reaction was apparently identical with that which Damascus had presented to the first President George Bush in the early 1990s. It adopted an evasive policy, desiring both to eat its cake and keep its penny. On the one hand, it took steps to prevent a frontal and direct confrontation with Washington. To that end, it was prepared to cooperate with the United States in its struggle against the al-Qa'ida organization. On the other hand, Damascus continued to adhere to its worldview and to courses of action that stood in total contradiction to Washington's policies. These courses of action had the potential to obstruct America's regional interests: the promotion of the Arab-Israeli, and certainly the Israeli-Palestinian, peace process; the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq; the isolation of Iran and possibly the overthrow of the regime of the Ayatollahs there; and the elimination of the military dimension of Hizballah's activity in Lebanon.

Bashar recognized the need to minimize the potential damage to Syria from the bin Laden attacks on New York and Washington. He denounced them and even offered to assist the United States in its efforts to apprehend those behind the attacks. FBI agents did

arrive in Syria in early 2002 to investigate some al-Qa'ida activists who had been in Syria or who had maintained ties with Syrian citizens.(9) The Americans were grateful to the Syrians for their assistance, and President Bush even called Bashar al-Asad to thank him for it. Senior American officials were quoted as saying that the information provided by Syria had helped prevent attacks on American targets in the Gulf, and thereby saving many American lives.(10) Yet Syria's aid ultimately revealed little and concealed much. While providing this aid, Syrians turned a blind eye towards the presence in Syria and in Lebanon of bin Ladin activists and possibly of other Islamic activists involved in terrorism.(11)

In addition, Syria continued to devote efforts to promoting its relations with other members of the "Axis of Evil," as George W. Bush defined North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Hizballah. Indeed, one of the prominent names on the FBI's list of 22 most wanted terrorists is that of 'Imad Mughniyya, Hizballah's head of operations, who had been involved in the attacks on American targets in Lebanon and the bombing of the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. The names of two more of the organization's activists appear on the same FBI list as well. As is known, these people operate openly in Lebanon under the Syrians' watchful eye.(12) It is no wonder that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said that he did not discount the possibility of the use of force against Syria because of its support for terrorism. Armitage subsequently defined Hizballah as the "A-team of terrorists," and as "an element against which the United States has an open account that it hopes to settle sooner or later."(13)

In addition to the Americans' focusing on the continuing assistance that Syria is providing to the terrorist organizations, senior officials in the United States have begun attacking Syria because it is arming itself with advanced and non-conventional, mainly biological and chemical, weapons.(14) On the eve of the war with Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell did indeed declare that the United States was keeping an eye on Syria's interest in weapons of mass destruction and the support it granted to Hizballah.(15)

RELATIONS BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ: THEY WALKED TOGETHER UNAWARES?

Alongside these foci of disagreement, the increasingly close relations between Damascus and Baghdad were a major issue for Washington. Indeed, since Bashar rose to power, there were perceptible efforts to turn over a new leaf in his relations with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. However, it should be mentioned that the trend toward improved relations between Syria and Iraq had begun in 1997, under Hafiz al-Asad. These relations had been on a downward course since the beginning of the 1980s because of Syria's support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, as well as the personal, political and ideological differences that arose between the fellow Ba'th regimes, Syrian and Iraqi.(16)

However, in 1997, Asad sensed that Saddam Hussein no longer posed a real threat to Syria and he apparently wanted to use closer relations between the two states as a bargaining chip against the United States and Israel. The Syrians were horrified by the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel and by the possibility of the exacerbation of Syrian-Turkish relations to the point of armed conflict. In any event, while Hafiz al-Asad did renew relations between Syria and Iraq, he acted cautiously, refraining from introducing anything of substance to these relations, certainly not turning them into any kind of a strategic or intimate alliance.(17)

So far, in anything that has had to do with his relations with Iraq, Bashar has been revealed in all his inexperienced youth. He has demonstrated extreme daring, certainly in comparison with his father's cautious policies. His government did not hesitate to express explicit and unequivocal support of Iraq, even to the point of attempting to establish a unified pan-Arab front against the American intention of attacking that country. Damascus also became the focal point of pilgrimages by senior Iraqi officials, led by Deputy Prime

Minister Tariq 'Aziz, and Vice Presidents 'Izat Ibrahim al-Duri and Tariq Yasin Ramadan, who were cordially welcomed in the Syrian capital.(18)

In addition, Syria's relations with the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein cooled, and the Syrians put limits on their activities. For example, a radio station run by the Iraqi opposition operating in Syria was shut down in early 2001 and the publication of anti-Iraq newspapers in Damascus was outlawed.(19) However, the Syrians continued their contacts with Kurdish movements, a move designed to ensure a certain amount of Syrian influence in Iraq in the event of an American attack and even more so in the event of the Iraqi state's political breakdown. The Syrians feared the possibility of the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which could have implications for the Kurdish population in Northeastern Syria.

Moreover, in the autumn of 2000, the Iraqis began exporting oil via Syria. The Iraqi oil flowed through Syria via the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline in amounts between 150,000 to 200,000 barrels per day (bpd). This oil was transferred to Syria for local use, allowing Syria to increase exports of its own oil. Washington was quick to protest to the Syrians for their crass violation of the boycott of Iraq. However, in response to that protest, Bashar explained to Secretary of State Powell and later to President Bush that the flow of oil had been part of a technical examination of the pipeline, which had been idle for almost two decades, and that with the completion of the examination, the flow of oil would be stopped.(20)

At the end of 2000, it was reported that shortly after the Palestinian intifada broke out, Saddam Hussein moved Iraqi forces to the Syrian border perhaps as a warning signal to Israel but clearly in order to exploit the situation to improve his regional standing.(21) In the summer of 2002, reports were published that Syria had turned a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons from Eastern Europe to Iraq via Syria involving Firas Talas, son of Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Talas and a well-known businessman in Damascus. This time, the Syrians were quick to deny these reports.(22) Finally, in late 2002, it was reported that the Syrians had allowed Iraq to hide some of its weapons of mass destruction in their territory and even assisted in the transfer of Iraqi weapons to Hizballah. These reports were also denied by the Syrians.(23)

After Bashar rose to power, Syria continued to refrain from any kind of strategic alliance with Iraq or even from renewing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Apparently, it was the Old Guard surrounding Bashar that prevented the development of closer relations between Syria and Iraq. Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq 'Aziz proposed, during a visit to Damascus, that Syria should ratify the "National Action Treaty" that the two countries had signed in the late 1970s when relations between the two countries were good, but that Saddam Hussein canceled when he rose to power in 1979. Syrian Defense Minister Talas reacted with derision, stating that "Hafiz al-Asad died without ever learning why Saddam cancelled the Treaty, or why he was so quick to accuse Syria of plotting a coup against him."(24) It is possible that the Syrians' fear of Iranian and the Gulf States' reactions prevented Asad from getting too close to Iraq. After all, it was Bashar al-Asad who called Saddam Hussein "a beast of a man" during a visit to Kuwait even before he succeeded his father.(25)

Ties between Syria and Iraq, both during Hafiz al-Asad's rule and that of his son Bashar, were first and foremost of economic significance. Iraq became a milk cow for Syria because of the dramatic increase in trade between the two countries, which reached at least \$3 billion by the end of 2002.(26) The increase in trade between the two countries—both direct and for goods transported through Syria to bypass UN sanctions--was accompanied by a series of economic agreements, including the establishment of a Syria-Iraq free trade zone and one on joint investments in the two countries. An airline route between Baghdad and Damascus was inaugurated in blatant violation of the sanctions

and, in July 2001, a railroad line was opened between Mosul and Aleppo. The resumption of the flow of oil between Kirkuk and Baniyas amounted to about one-third of Syria's own production. The Iraqi oil was sold to Syria at a reduced price and Syria used it for the domestic market, letting it increase its own oil exports and realize a nice profit.(27)

ON THE EVE OF THE AMERICAN ATTACK ON IRAQ

American preparations to strike at Saddam Hussein created new tension in Syrian-U.S. relations, with Syria quickly taking Iraq's side, conspicuously hosting Iraqis in the Presidential Palace in Damascus. Syria also joined the attempts to thwart Washington's efforts to recruit broad international support. On November 8, 2002, when Security Council Resolution 1441, which included a strong demand that Iraq agree to renew the international inspections or suffer the consequences, came up for approval, Syria gave the resolution its blessing.

The Syrians did try, however, to present its vote as a "Syrian diplomatic victory," or, alternatively, as in response to the Arab consensus that Syria was called on to represent in the Security Council. They even bragged that their vote had succeeded in foiling or at least postponing the American attack on Iraq. The Iraqi press, however, did say Syria's vote on the issue was a "betrayal of the Arab cause." Nevertheless, official Baghdad refrained from coming out strongly against the Syrians because it understood the pressure and constraints on Damascus.(28)

Together with its attempts to foil Washington's efforts in the international arena, Syria adopted a staunch anti-American stance accusing Washington of having a "hidden agenda" whose objective was the establishment of a new American order in the Middle East for itself and on behalf of Israel. For example, Syrian Vice President `Abd-al Halim Khaddam warned that:

...the American attack on Iraq is designed to bring about the partition of that country, which is a strategic objective of Israel's. In fact it is part of the long-standing Zionist aim of breaking up the national fabric of the countries of the region... We are defending Iraq, which is an Arab country, and the fate of all the Arabs is bound up with its fate. We are not Finland and therefore we cannot relate to Iraq's fate with equanimity. Iraq is a strategic hinterland for Syria in its conflict with Israel. We supported Kuwait when Iraq invaded its territory, but today Iraq is under attack and therefore we are standing at its side.(29)

The hostile attitude among the Syrian public toward the United States had already begun in early 2002, following the Israeli Operation Defensive Shield. Actively encouraged by the regime, this hostility took the form of street demonstrations near the American Embassy in Damascus and later in organized boycotts of American goods and cultural symbols. A popular committee was established in Damascus to encourage the boycott of American products. Signs appeared in the windows of restaurants reading: "No entry to Americans"(30) and the American consul in Damascus was escorted out of the "Ocsigen" Restaurant in Bab Tuma, the Christian Quarter of Damascus. The owners of the restaurant became heroes after that incident.(31)

Yet the street demonstrations in Damascus near the American Embassy were more subdued than similar events in the past. In December 1998, demonstrators protesting the American "Desert Fox" attack on Iraq broke into the ambassador's residence and caused damage. One of the demonstrators even took the American flag down from the roof of the building. This created a diplomatic incident between the United States and Syria, especially after Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Talas called the behavior of that demonstrator "an act of heroism." The Syrians were forced to apologize, disassociate

themselves from Talas's statement, and pay compensation to the United States for damage caused to the Ambassador's residence and to the American Cultural Center during the demonstrations.(32) This time, the Syrians refrained from taking any unnecessary chances and prevented the demonstrators from getting anywhere near the American Embassy.(33)

On the eve of the outbreak of the war, Syria adopted an even harsher tone in its protest against the United States. Bashar declared that the United States "is interested only in gaining control over Iraqi oil and redrawing the map of the region in keeping with its worldview." He added, "In the past we did not sense the danger closing in on us in the face of fateful developments including the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration, the establishment of the State of Israel, but the danger to the Arabs inherent in the war in Iraq is no less than any of those."(34) He warned the Arabs about the friendship of the United States, which, he said, is "more fatal than its hostility."(35) Bashar also compared the United States to "a car speeding towards a concrete wall, but even if the power of an American car will allow it to penetrate a concrete wall, it is liable to discover that on the other side of the wall there would be no bed of roses either, but it would lead to an abyss... since Bush does not understand that for the Arabs honor is more important than anything else, even food."(36)

From the moment the war broke out, Syria was mobilized, even if mainly verbally, against the United States. This mobilization reached one of its pinnacles when Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara declared before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the People's Assembly, "We want Iraq's victory,"(37) Subsequently, al-Shara even compared the United States to the Third Reich and President Bush to Adolf Hitler.(38) In an interview to the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir*, Bashar warned that Syria might become the next U.S. target, adding that in view of Washington's moves, "Syria does not intend sitting idly by."(39) The Syrian authorities also allowed, and even encouraged, thousands of demonstrators to go out onto the streets of Damascus and other cities all over Syria to protest against the American attack on Iraq.

Simultaneously, the Syrian media mounted their own campaign against the United States.(40) Radio Damascus said, for example, that the American-British attack violated the most basic human values, human rights, and was also in gross violation of international law. "Our experience proves that the interests of Israel are controlling American policy and not the interests of the United States. After all, it was the supporters of the Likud among the Zionists in the corridors of the American Administration who led to the attack on Iraq." Radio Damascus also declared, "The forces of evil in the world have conspired to gain control over the wealth and resources of the Arab Nation. The super power in the world is acting today in a biased way in order to achieve its aims and its Satanic arms bring harm to peaceful peace-loving peoples."(41)

The United States, especially Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, quickly responded by accusing Syria of granting assistance to Iraq by smuggling night-vision goggles and other equipment into Iraq, and accused Syria of allowing Arab volunteers to reach Iraq via Syria. A short while later, senior American officials also accused Syria of allowing Iraqi leaders to escape from Iraq via its territory.(42) Secretary of State Colin Powell threatened to impose sanctions on Syria,(43) and President Bush, in a strong message to the Syrians, accused them of developing chemical weapons, which was troubling for the United States and could force it to take action against Syria.(44) At first, the Syrians dismissed these accusations out of hand, but they were undoubtedly disturbed by the strong language employed. In fact, in a matter of days, they were quick to close their border with Iraq, and to start sending conciliatory messages to Washington, saying they wished to resume a dialogue with the American administration.(45)

SYRIA AND THE INTER-ARAB ARENA

Against the backdrop of American accusations, there were visible attempts by Damascus to press the Arab states to defend it against Washington. However, Syria's relations with the Arab states had also suffered because of Damascus's positions on Iraq. Indeed, Damascus did not hide its dissatisfaction with the pro-American stand that Arab states, including Egypt, had adopted or, more correctly, with the position of passive bystander that many had adopted. At the March 2003 Arab Summit in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt, Bashar's strong speech was notable for the accusing finger he pointed at those Arab states that were not lending Iraq their support but preferred to remain as uninvolved onlookers.(46)

A short while before, the Syrians had foiled an initiative by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to convene the summit at an earlier date, claiming that in view of the fact that the Arab states intended to do nothing regarding the expected American attack on Iraq, there was no point in doing so. Subsequently, Syria foiled an Egyptian initiative to send a delegation of Arab foreign ministers to Iraq to pressure Saddam into complying with the demands of the UN and even to resign as Iraqi president. Egyptian newspapers were quick to accuse Syria, because of its positions on the matter, of having defeated a Cairo-led inter-Arab effort to prevent the war.(47)

Bashar, for his part, explained Syria's position in an address to the Syrian People's Assembly on March 10, 2003. He declared:

We proposed the minimum which is not granting assistance [to the United States] in its attack on Iraq. After all, if the Arabs want to grant assistance [to the United States] what point is there in convening a summit Conference? There is no logic in convening a summit Conference unless someone wants to 'cover himself' for the assistance he is granting [to the Americans].... Whoever wants to assist the Americans should announce that, but he should not expect us to agree to that or to accept it [by our very presence at the summit].... We did not propose that the Arab states remove the [U.S.] military bases existing in their territories and we did not demand the implementation of the joint Arab defense agreement [and come to the aid of Iraq]. Neither did we demand the adoption of steps against Arab states that would assist [the Americans], and neither did we call for an end to the occupation [of Iraq by the United States]. Nevertheless, we were accused of being radicals. The truth is we did not fulfill our obligation, since you can compare our position as Arabs to the positions of peoples and countries all over the world, and even positions expressed in newspapers in the world, the British press, for example [against the war]."(48)

Syria's difficulties were clearly seen in its relations with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf states. Particularly prominent in its criticism of Syria, albeit not outright, was Kuwait, which had been the main victim of the rehabilitation of Saddam Hussein's status in the region from the end of the 1990s until his overthrow. The American offensive in Iraq had resulted in a further worsening of relations between Syria and the Gulf states because of accusations by Damascus that, while maintaining a low profile and exercising utmost caution, these states were collaborating with the United States in the war against Iraq.

As in the past, the main target of these accusations was Qatar, where the American Headquarters in the Gulf had been established. The Syrian newspaper *Aswad-Abyad* even accused Qatar of having become the "Zionist project No. 2 in the Middle East and even an American colony and a base for the subjugation of the Gulf and the control of our treasures."(49) In previous years as well, there had been sharp differences of opinion between the two countries because of Qatar's readiness to accept an Israeli representative in Doha, which it did not close down even after the outbreak of the intifada.(50)

Kuwait did not escape Syria's criticism either. Even before the outbreak of war, the Syrians had lectured the Kuwaitis. Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara said, at a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers, "There is no contradiction between Damascus' support of Kuwait and its efforts to ease the sanctions against Iraq, which cause suffering to the Iraqi People, who are paying the price."(51) Kuwait, incidentally, did not hesitate to threaten Syria, albeit obliquely, in its rebuttal. Members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly suggested a discussion of a proposal to stop Kuwaiti investments in Syria(52) and the editor of the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyasa* even dared to compare the rule of Saddam Hussein in Iraq to the rule of Bashar al-Asad, warning that if Damascus adhered to its position, it might bring [on itself] an end like the one of Saddam Hussein. It is no wonder, then, that Bashar finally realized that Syria's relations with the Gulf States formed an important element in Syria's foreign policy and that they had to be preserved; especially in view of Washington's accusations against Syria and the fear that the former would take practical measures against Damascus.(53)

CONCLUSION

The occupation of Baghdad by the United States shocked Damascus. Syrian television refrained from broadcasting the masses on the city's streets, cheering and tearing down the statue of Saddam Hussein with the assistance of American troops. Yet, despite Syria's denial of what had happened and quick announcement that it would not cooperate with any pro-Western regime established in Baghdad, it also had to take into account the changed situation for its own interests.(54)

What motivated Bashar's harsh anti-American stance? First, there can be no doubt that he was operating out of a real fear that Syria might be a future U.S. target following the war in Iraq. Moreover, Bashar was influenced by his instinctive anti-American feelings and refrained from balancing these instincts against Syria's strategic interests that might have dictated more cautious behavior vis-a-vis the United States.

Second, Bashar was interested in strengthening his own position with the Syrian public and the Arab public in general, by adopting a more populist stand. Given the regime's own failure and his personal unwillingness to deliver reforms, shifting the blame for Syrian and Arab problems to the United States seemed a good way of deflecting criticism and opposition.

Third, he probably did not expect such a quick, decisive and dramatic American victory in Iraq. In any event, Bashar's policies were authentic and anchored in his worldview, but they were not an indication of maturity, self-confidence and mainly experience on the part of the young leader in Damascus.

Washington and Damascus are ostensibly on a collision course. However, it is also true that the United States is not eager for a confrontation with Syria, especially if Damascus shows some flexibility of perhaps even the most minimal kind. Threats are more a way of exercising pressure to change Syrian policy, on hosting terrorist groups or turning over Iraqi officials, for example, than reflecting a preferred outcome. In this context, Powell offered Damascus another chance to choose whether it wanted friendship or conflict with the United States. He also included Syria in his first tour of the Middle East following the war, and Bush praised Syria for having understood the American message and their desire to cooperate with the United States.(55)

Washington's soft approach to Damascus stems from the fact that in the past Syrian was careful not to cross red lines, and each time that it appeared to do so, it was quick to back away. It can well assume that a warning will bring better behavior which is what Hafiz al-Asad, known for his extreme caution, would have done. In addition, the Americans were happy to placate the regime in the past in order to encourage it to join the Arab-Israeli peace process.(56)

However, Bashar, unlike his late father, may not fulfill these expectations. In that case, Bashar might well pay a heavy price for his behavior .

Bashar al-Asad's policies have been characterized by his adherence to the status quo and the heritage of his father, however, much less cautiously. The breath of fresh air felt following the change in regime in Damascus quickly blew away and it became clear to all that until Bashar formulated his own vision, objectives, worldview and agenda, and acquired sufficient experience, no substantial change was to be expected in his behavior and in Syrian policies.

Thus, Syrian policy continues to vacillate between fear of the United States and the desire to integrate into the world order which the United States leads on the one hand, and, on the other, the nostalgia for the old order of the 1970s and 1980s in which Syria drew closer to Iran and at one point even to Saddam's Iraq, while continuing to extend its aegis over Hizballah. Only the future will tell whether, in the final analysis, Bashar has come to understand where the fine line exists between instinct and the formulation and implementation of a realistic pragmatic policy based on Syria's political constraints and regional realities which include the American conquest of Iraq and the presence of so many American soldiers still in Iraq.

**Eyal Zisser is a senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and a senior lecturer in the department of Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University. He is author of Asad's Syria at a Crossroads (Hebrew, 1999); Lebanon: The Challenge Of Independence (London, 2000); Asad's Legacy - Syria In Transition (New York, 2000). He is also the author of "The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and the External Fronts" in MERIA Journal Vol. 5 No.1. (March 2001).*

NOTES

1. For more see Eyal Zisser, "Will Bashar al-Asad Last," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2000), pp. 3-13.
2. Eyal Zisser, "Who Really Rules Syria," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 15-24.
3. Interviews by the author with German and British Diplomats, Tel Aviv, November 12, 2001, and March 15, 2002. See also *al-Hayat* (London), October 13, 1997; *Washington Post*, April 27, 2000.
4. *Yediot Ahronot*, May 27, 1999; *Washington Post*, April 27, 2000; *al-Hayat*, June 13, 2000.
5. *Yediot Ahronot*, May 27, 1999.
6. Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (ed.) Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. 24 (2000) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2002), pp. 536-541; see also Eyal Zisser, "Who Really Rules Syria," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 15-24.
7. Eyal Zisser, "The Return of Hizballah," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 3-12; see also *Yediot Ahronot*, May 27, 1999.
8. Bashar al-Asad's speeches to the Arab summits in Cairo (October 2000), Amman (March 2001) and Beirut (March 2002), *Syrian TV*, October 22, 2002; *Syrian TV*, March 27, 2001, translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS); *Tishrin* (Damascus), March 28, 2002.
9. *Al-Hayat*, November 25, 2001; *Washington Post*, July 25, 2002.
10. *Washington Post*, July 25, 2002; *al-Watan*, (Kuwait), February 24, 2002.
11. *Ha'aretz*, September 2, December 25, 2002; *Yediot Ahronot*, September 15, 2002.
12. *Reuters*, October 11, 2001; *al-Hayat*, January 31, 2002; *al-Jazira TV*, May 13, 2002.
13. *Reuters*, September 10-11, 2002.

14. *Al-Hayat*, July 31, 2001; see also Dani Shoham, "Poisoned Missiles: Syria Doomsday Deterrent," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 13-22.
15. *Reuters*, September 10-11, 2002; April 14-15, 2003.
16. See Eberhard Kienle, Ba`th V Ba`th, The Conflict between Syria and Iraq, 1968-1989 (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990).
17. Eyal Zisser, Asad's Legacy – Syria in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 86-87; Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (ed.) Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. 24 (2000) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2002), pp. 549-550.
18. *Al-Hayat*, November 26, and December 13, 2001; *INA (Iraqi News Agency, Baghdad)*, January 29, 2002.
19. *Al-Watan*, May 12, 2002.
20. *Al-Quds al-`Arabi* (London), October 10, 2000; see also Bashar's interview with the *Times*, December 16, 2002. See *Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)*, Country Report (CR) - Syria - 2002, No. 1, pp. 2-5; See also *Reuters*, October 29, 2002.
21. *Ha'aretz*, January 24, 2001.
22. *Ha'aretz*, July 15, 2002, December 25, 2002.
23. *Ha'aretz*, December 25, 2002. For the Syrian response, see *Radio Damascus*, December 25, 2002, translated by FBIS. See also *Fox News*, April 5, 14, 2003.
24. *Al-Ra'y al-`Amm* (Kuwait), December 24, 2001.
25. *Al-Hayat*, March 13, 2000.
26. *Al-Hayat*, October 26, 2001, December 13, 2002.
27. *Al-Safir* (Beirut), November 23, 2000; *Reuters*, March 31, 2001, January 4, 2002; *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 30, 2001.
28. *Tishrin*, November 9, 2001; *Babil* (Baghdad), November 9, 2002; *al-Hayat*, November 11, 2001.
29. *Sana (Syrian Arab News Agency)*, September 6, 2002; *al-Hayat*, November 14, 2002.
30. *Akhbar al-Sharq* (London), April 18, 2002; *al-Hayat*, April 21, 2002, *Reuters*, September 11, 2002.
31. *Akhbar al-Sharq*, April 18, 2002; *al-Hayat*, April 21, 2002, April 1, 2003.
32. Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (ed.) Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. 23 (1999) (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 560-561. See also *Tishrin*, February 9, 15, 1999.
33. *Sana*, March 22, 2003; *al-Nahar* (Beirut), March 23, 2003; *al-`Arabiyya TV*, March 25, 2003.
34. *Al-Safir*, March 27, 2003; see also Bashar speech in the Arab summit in Sharm el-Shaykh on March 1, 2003, *Syrian TV*, translated by FBIS.
35. *R. Damascus*, March 10, 2003, translated by FBIS; see also *al-Hayat*, March 10, 2003.
36. *R. Damascus*, March 9, 2003, translated by FBIS; see also *al-Safir*, March 10, 2003.
37. For al-Shara's statement, see *Sana*, March 30, 2003.
38. The comparison was made during a press conference with the French Foreign Minister, Dominique de Villepin. *Al-Ra'y al-`Amm*, April 13, 2003; see also *Reuters*, April 12, 2003.
39. For Bashar's interview see *al-Safir*, March 27, 2003.
40. *AP*, March 28, and April 13, 2003; *Reuters*, April 9, 2003; *Fox News*, April 14, 2003.
41. *R. Damascus*, March 27, 29, 2003, translated by FBIS.
42. *CNN*, April 14, 2003; R. Monte Carlo, April 17, 2003; *Reuters*, April 21, 2003.
43. *Al-Hayat*, April 5, 2003; see also *Reuters*, April 13, 2003; *Fox News*, April 15, 2003.
44. *CNN*, April 13, 2003.
45. *Tishrin*, April 6, 9, 13, 2003; See also *CNN*, April 13, 2003.

46. See also Bashar speech to the Arab summit in Sharm al-Shaykh on March 1, 2003, *Syrian TV*, translated by FBIS.
47. *Al-Hayat*, February 27, March 1, 2003; *al-Akhbar* (Cairo), March 12, 16, 2003.
48. For Bashar's speech, see *R. Damascus*, March 10, 2003, translated by FBIS.
49. *Akhbar al-Sharq*, January 19, 2003.
50. Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (ed.) Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. 23 (1999) (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), p. 548.
51. *Al-Watan*, August 30, September 17, 2002.
52. *Al-Hayat*, April 9, 13, 2003.
53. *Al-Siyasa*, April 15, 2003; see also *al-Hayat*, April 15, 2003.
54. *Tishrin*, 10 April 2003; *R. Damascus*, April 12, 15, 2003, translated by FBIS.
55. *CNN*, April 13, 2003. See *al-Hayat*, April 21, 2003; see also *Reuters*, April 21, 2003.
56. *Reuters*, May 24, 2002; *Ha'aretz*, May 25, 2003.