



## SYRIA UNDER BASHAR; LEBANON AFTER SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL

A GLORIA Center Roundtable Discussion

*On March 31, 2005, the U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs in Washington D.C., the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, and the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center jointly held an international videoconference seminar, focusing on events in Syria and Lebanon. The seminar's central purpose was to assess the Syrian regime's direction and implications of the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon.*

*The purpose of this seminar was not to make policy recommendations or reflect any political agenda, but to present the individual views of several scholars studying the region, thinking out loud in trying to develop their own understanding of these issues.*

*Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article.*

*This seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series. The GLORIA Center wishes to thank the Bradley Foundation for its support of this series.*

**Dr. Paul Jureidini:** I think the time has come to ask the real Bashar Assad to step forward. A lot of us, myself included, initially had hoped he would be the reformer that everybody hoped for. I have begun to believe that Bashar Assad is a hardliner, who may be for some time was able to hide his hard line.

There is no question. Bashar Assad was unknown. There was opposition to him from the clique around Hafiz Assad, the people we call the Emirs. The army didn't know him. The security people didn't know him. The party didn't know him although he was a member. When he was in London he was really concentrating on ophthalmology and not on trying to understand the West. When he came back, he had six years on the job training with his father and the last

year of his pre-presidency was pretty much Bashar running Syria.

The opposition was fairly tough and Hafiz Assad began removing those who constituted a threat. He pushed into retirement his most powerful advisors and supporters leaving Bashar with a second tier which was loyal but not of the best quality. This group basically had no idea of what was going on in the world. They refused to believe after September 11 that the United States would go Afghanistan and then Iraq. And they refused to believe that they would be subjected to a lot of pressure if they didn't behave. They always insisted that fear of an Islamist takeover would insulate them from a serious international challenge. And now this miscalculation has come back to haunt them.

I am convinced that Bashar is a hardliner. He is not the captive of the hardliners. He really believes in the ideology and the balderdash that comes out of the Ba'th party, however upset he may be by the regime's corruption and other problems.

Now he is in the process of promoting his own people who are holding key positions including in the army and security agencies. These choices show that he is not changing Syria's policies or governmental practices.

**Dr. Mordecai Kedar:** What Bashar Assad really lacks is "the killer instinct", which his father had in excessive quantities. And when you lack the killer instinct in such a regime, you cannot be the head of the regime even if you hold that title. Bashar did allow "clubs" (muntadayat) to discuss the country's society and state in late 2000 and early 2001 but closed them down when they began to get out of control and threaten the regime.

**Dr. Flynt Leverett:** I don't agree with an assessment that Bashar is really a closet hardliner. I think Bashar does have genuine reformist impulses. I think Dr. Jordini is right that it is easy to overstate the impact of his relatively limited time in the West. He himself told me, in an interview about a year ago that basically in his time in London he learned the route between the flat where he lived and the hospital where he

worked. He did not come to office with a well-elaborated vision for pursuing change inside Syria, but I think he does have a genuine sense that things need to be different in Syria.

I think he wants to give primacy to economic reform; social reform would come alongside that and then political reform is kind of the last piece of how you change Syria. He is a gradualist. His approach to doing this would probably require years to bear fruit and there is an interesting question given his strategic situation, does he really have the kind of time to allow that sort of strategy to play out, but I think that is his long-term strategy. I think he is building up a network of Western-trained technocrats in second-tier positions of influence in the system, people with PhDs in economics, management, and computer science. People who've had experience in international financial institutions or in the Western private sector. And he's trying to develop this network as almost a kind of alternative regime to the old guard. He's not had much success in moving these people into top ministerial positions yet, but again, I think this is part of his long-term gradualist strategy for reform.

One thing that I take as an indicator—a confirmation of his reformist impulses—is the woman he married. Asmal Assad is the daughter of a Sunni expatriate from a notable family in Homs, a man who has made a career as a world-class interventional cardiologist in London. She was born and raised and educated

entirely in the UK; graduated from the University of London with a degree in computer science; went through the investment banker training program at JP Morgan; worked as an investment banker at Deutschebank; and, at the time that Bashar proposed to her, had been accepted to the MBA program at Harvard Business School. We can ask what turning down Harvard Business School to marry Bashar says about her judgment, but I think that the fact that Bashar proposed to someone like that, over his family's objections, says something about where his impulses lie.

I think that this is someone who has a reformist outlook, but as I said, his own personal vision is attenuated and even though he is developing this alternative network around him, I think--and he will acknowledge this in conversation--he lacks the kind of technocratic expertise around him in sufficient quantities and in kind of administrative structure, that will let him develop really systematic approaches for reform. In other words, I think that Bashar is ultimately engageable, but he is someone who is going to require a lot of help and a lot of empowerment along the way.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I really do not believe that Bashar is a reformer and am doubtful that we have seen much evidence of that. One symbolic detail is that much was made of his being the head of the Syrian Internet Society. Only a little research is needed to find out that his late brother, who had no interest in Internet, was the previous president of that group. Bashar inherited that job as he did the job of president.

Even if he were so inclined, the massive problems he faces--and the way he responds to them--would foreclose such an outcome. To pick just one example, there are the Islamist and ethnic issues. He knows that there is a Sunni Muslim majority and the more he opens up the system the more powerful he makes that sector. Economic liberalization would also give them proportionately more power to Sunnis. We also see the problem he's had with the Kurds--their riots and his repression.

There is also the difficulty of his delivering economic benefits or changing the regime's basic structure of the regime, challenging the privileges which the current governing elite gets, which doesn't want to be deprived of the privileges. On top of this are all the foreign policy problems, which his behavior--supporting Hizballah, backing the insurgents in Iraq, encouraging Palestinian terrorism against Israel, destabilizing and then retreating from Lebanon, provoking the United States and so on--has exacerbated.

Assuming that he wants to make change, even in the long run, he certainly has gone about it a strange way. And the objective conditions are also difficult, even if compared to the Jordanian and Egyptian regimes. This is true even if we restrict ourselves to limited reforms to make Syria more competitive. We should also mention the economic costs to Syria of the pull-out from Lebanon. Are hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers going to come back unemployed. Is the Syrian elite going to lose the privileges it obtains from such things as counterfeiting, drug smuggling, other

smuggling, and regular business in Lebanon? So he has a very heavy burden in fact on his rule and regime.

**Martha Neff Kessler:** Well I would certainly second the points that Barry has made. But I also think there are some very eerie parallels between what this young man faces and what his father faced back in the early 1970s when he came to power. And that is nearly the most compelling truth about Syria: that regional and international politics have constrained what is possible in that country in a way that is more dramatic than virtually any place else. Yet Bashar's strategic problem is also bigger than almost anything his father faced. That will be what will preoccupy him and any reform effort will be of secondary concern and probably motivated at this point more by foreign policy considerations, that is placating or accommodating or acquiescing to whatever is foisted upon him from the outside rather than things genuinely instigated from his own agenda.

**Prof. Amatzia Baram:** It's extremely difficult for me to imagine a moderating Ba'th regime. It is possible, but it is near impossible. What a Ba'th regime can do with relative ease is economic liberalization. Like China. It would have happened in Iraq--at least on a small scale--had Iraq not gone through such huge crisis, had Saddam Hussein not pushed such horrible adventures. The balance to this change is the

continued power of the secret police. When Saddam started to liberalize economically, and he really meant to do that--no political liberalization, only economic--he found very quickly that the security agencies stymied this whole project as they started breathing down the necks of entrepreneurs.

But, had he had more time he would have been able to do something. So I can see it happening in Syria, and I can see happening not only because it's possible but because it's unavoidable. Because when 1 million Syrian workers go back from Lebanon to Syria he'll have to do something and the Iraqi oil revenues are no longer streaming into Assad's pockets.

So he will have to do it I would say there is a reasonable chance he will do it. Very slowly, but he'll do it. When it comes to political liberalization, this would be very difficult. Maybe in very small steps maybe over many years, so much so that we won't even feel it very much. Is Assad really a hardliner or he is a would-be reformer who cannot deliver? It is very difficult to tell. I don't know. But I do know that the memory of what happened to the rulers of the USSR, Romania, and Yugoslavia is very much in the minds of the Syrian elite. And he will be very worried of similar developments. So, again, I see a hardline leader in practice with some economic changes liberalization but what he truly is I don't know. I think he is working according to constraints. I agree 100% with Martha; I don't know when Assad,

the father, was under such stress. And Bashar is now under huge pressure – from almost every direction.

**Dr. Kedar:** I think that one point should be added here—that many people in the political arena in Syria accuse Bashar of personal responsibilities for the failures of the policies of Syria during the last 5 years. He started gambling on Iraq—he renewed the connections between Iraq and Syria--and it exploded in his face. He is losing Lebanon, after he was given this state by his father as a gift. And now, he is having his relations with Europe, which traditionally was behind him, in a very problematic stage, not to mention what he is going through with the United States. I think that everybody there accuses him for what he did or for what he didn't do. This also doesn't ease his situation vis-à-vis his own people.

**Dr. Flynt Leverett:** His father didn't really become the uncontested master of Syria, perceived as this very astute player of the regional game, until he had passed through a series of defining challenges. He established Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. He defended that hegemony against both the United States and Israel. He put down a significant challenge to the regime from the Muslim Brotherhood, and he put down a challenge to his own authority from his brother. After he had passed through all of these challenges, he was the lion of Damascus, he was the uncontested ruler of Syria, and he was perceived as this master of regional diplomacy.

Bashar has not passed through those kinds of defining challenges almost five

years into his presidency. I think Martha's right that he's in the middle of such a challenge now. And in contrast to Kr. Kedar, I would at least like to throw out a scenario in which Bashar could emerge from this situation, actually maybe stronger than he is right now. If four months from now, six months from now, a year from now, he is seen as being able to maintain the ability to influence the most important strategic decisions—in Lebanon, through Hizballah, through other pro-Syrian actors, through other connections that he has to Lebanese power structure—if he can still set the outer limits of Lebanese policy, in the face of all the pressure that's been put on him, I think he will be seen domestically and regionally as a stronger figure than he is today.

He may end up being seen as someone who lost Lebanon, who blew it in Iraq, who squandered an important part of his father's legacy, and if that is the way he is seen six months from now, a year from now, I think that could have serious consequences for him at home. But I don't think it's inevitable that that's the way things come out. He could still emerge as effectively a winner.

**Dr. Paul Jureidini:** There are some other factors to be considered. First, as we know, minorities in the Middle East are mistrusted and minorities in power are hated. The Alawites in Syria are a minority in power and the Sunnis don't like it. This regime, like Hafiz Assad's regime, will never share power. Because sharing power means the dissolution of the present set-up. I don't think political reform will ever come because it may mean the end of the Alawites.

Two, when they talk about economic reform, it's always from above. It's always the state guiding that process. Even with the few reforms he's done, economic reforms, they don't amount to anything. If we want an example of Assad the hardliner, take a look at Lebanon. He could have gotten rid of the openly pro-Syrian cabinet and appointed other friendly but respected figures without creating a crisis in Lebanon. Yet he insisted on extending the term extending the term of Emil Lahoud's presidency by three years, which brought on a crisis when the Lebanese demanded a change. I really believe him to be a hardliner with a not very good understanding of the world around him.

**Dr. Hillel Frisch:** When you have a country under international pressure as indeed was the case in Eastern Europe, you have revolution. When you don't have that international relations' pressure, you might be able to continue the regime. I think that the United States is aiming for revolution in Syria. It's aiming for revolution in Syria for two reasons.

One, as a first step in isolating Iran and its nuclear policy and the future showdown that is inevitable between the United States and Iran, and the second reason is that it jibes well with the promotion of democracy. Iraq was never since the downfall of the Hashemite kingdom, really a respectable Arab state. Syria was different. Syria

was always perceived in the Arab world as responsible. And the impact, of creating of a democratic opportunity and moment in Syria, will be even much greater than Iraq.

I don't think that Bashar Assad in the near future has a fighting chance. I agree with Flynt's remarks that if he does pass this stage he might become the Lion of Damascus as his father was. But I think that the very, very dramatic international and regional changes make the situation in his father's day in the 1970s and the situation today totally different. I think that Syria just has to go the Eastern Europe, Russian route. Any kind of opening will not be an opening, but a deluge and he has very little possibility of extricating himself from the situation.

**Dr. Flynt Leverett:** I think I would largely agree with Dr. Frisch's characterization of the emerging American strategy toward Syria and I think this administration is increasingly implying, even though it's not made a formal change in its declaratory posture, to say that it's seeking regime change in Syria. I think increasingly that is the animating vision for our posture towards Syria. And I say that as someone who has written a book that argues that we can actually achieve our objectives toward Syria more efficiently by engaging Bashar in a kind of conditional carrots-and-sticks approach. But I think that the voices who might argue for that kind of force within this administration

are getting fewer and fewer in number, weaker and weaker in influence, and the voices of those who say really it's time for this regime to go are getting stronger.

We'll see if that really proves to be a fruitful course for U.S. policy. I have my doubts. Even if it does work I think it's problematic, but I'm really not sure that it's going to work. As I indicated, I think that Bashar could end up emerging as something of a winner in this situation. I at least take seriously that possibility.

In terms of the way Bashar has played the regional game, approached the conduct of Syrian foreign policy, I think there you can really talk about a legacy of continuity with his father. The way I like to characterize it is that Bashar inherited a script for Syrian foreign policy from his father, and one of the challenges of his time in office so far has been to adapt that script to circumstances which have changed in some very important ways from the past.

For example, you've had the collapse of the Syrian-Israel peace process with basically no meaningful diplomacy between Israel and Syria during the time that Bashar has been in office. You have had the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon which created an initial challenge on how to refigure Syria's position in Lebanon and Hizballah's role in the region. That was an early challenge for Bashar.

You've had of course the September 11 attacks and the launch of a U.S.-led war on terror focusing on the Middle East; U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and, from a Syrian perspective more problematically, in Iraq. The Iraq intervention, in particular, created some strains between Syria and

Iran, and Bashar has to recalibrate that relationship. So I think that Bashar has faced a number of foreign policy challenges and I think it really does boil down to how do you adapt his father's script for stalling Syria's encirclement?

These are what I see as the major challenges on the foreign policy front, on the regional front, for Bashar. This is, what I think, has occupied him in his foreign policy during the time in office. But now you have this added layer of challenge and difficulty in that in order to do a lot of these things he obviously would like to have a better relationship with the United States that he has at the present, or I think is going to have for the foreseeable future. And I think this is going to be a real challenge for him, moving forward. It is part of that defining challenge that I think he is going through right now.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I don't think that Bashar will emerge as a winner. The way that I would define the issue is will he emerge as a survivor, and I think that that is likely. In the 1990's, his father faced a situation which was easier, but had a lot of parallels. And I'll list four things Hafiz Assad did to manage that situation.

Number one he worked hard to get close to the United States, by being cooperative on Iraq during the Kuwait crisis and by saying he was ready to make peace with Israel. One of his goals in this strategy was to get the United States to support his continued position in Lebanon. In the end, though, he gave Washington very little.

Secondly of all, toward Israel he negotiated about peace though, again, in the end he gave nothing.

Thirdly of all, on an Iraq crisis, as I've said, he cooperated with the West and especially the United States and

Fourthly of all, he stayed close to the Egyptians and what might be called the Arab consensus.

Now the problem is that on each of these points his father played his cards very well. He avoided confrontation, often pretending to be cooperative while giving up nothing. In contrast, Bashar is openly confrontational. In Iraq, he's basically supporting a proxy war against the United States; he is giving safe haven to high Saddam-era officials; he very possibly has Iraqi WMD equipment; he has lots of Saddam's money in the country; and is allowing the recruiting, training people, and arming of Iraqi terrorists on Syrian soil. By his adventurism in Iraq and Lebanon, he forfeited U.S. and European acceptance of Syria's role there. Although there have been some half-hearted gestures towards negotiating with Israel, they're not likely to go anywhere, partly because Israel isn't going to fall for it and also since the United States probably doesn't want it.

So his strategy is very different from the strategy his father used successfully in the 1990s. The problem is not that Bashar is weaker than his father--which would be bad enough--but that he is acting as if he is far stronger.

Why do I say nevertheless that I think that Bashar is much more likely to survive--not as a big winner but at least to survive--than to fall? One reason is however much U.S. policymakers want the regime to fall they are not going to do--or be able to do--much to make that happen. Short of an all-out U.S. attack or really major campaign of subversion, the regime should remain in place. Of course, he does have the option to change his Iraq policy if he's smart enough to do it, lowering the heat both with the United States and with the emerging Iraqi government.

Perhaps the most important card he could play is that of national patriotic appeal. Syria is under threat by all these forces, he can say using traditional rhetoric. We all have to stick together as lovers of Syria and Syrian patriots. What's happening in Lebanon is anti-Syrian, it's against us, it's hurting us, so we all have to rally together and rally behind the regime. And I think he could do that to a fair degree of success.

One of the elements that he is using--that may have long-run dangers--is the Islamist element. Bashar is showing much more permissiveness toward Islamist movements, letting them organize and speak; cooperating with them on the war in Iraq and in opposition to an Arab-Israeli peace process. So in the short run, I think that will let him survive though in the long run it's very dangerous to him. But I don't think he will survive as one of the strongest figures in the Middle East. For



him, survival is that he will continue to govern Syria. But watch that Islamist-Sunni factor in the future because over the course of ten years it might be the real mortal threat to the regime.

**Dr. Mordecai Kedar:** President Bush keeps talking about democratizing the Middle East. I do agree with this, but I would change the terminology. I would use human rights instead of democracy, which is far more real when you talk about those regimes in the Middle East. In Syria's case this means abolishing martial law, which has been there ever since 1963, more than 40 years, and it's really time to get rid of it.

A second reasonable demand on Syria is the releasing of political prisoners. There are some 600 people like this. A third demand would be abolishing the censorship, including that on the Internet, and opening newspapers free of censorship. Insisting that Syria open an embassy in Lebanon is also a very legitimate demand, as a symbol that Syria really recognizes that country's sovereignty. Even small gestures, like the official publication of a pack of cards showing Syrian officials most involved in violating human rights -- as was done in Iraq -- would be effective as a psychological measure.

The idea is to have demands that maintain pressure on the regime, but that which it could conceivably meet, without directly making demands that would force the regime's downfall. In a sense, this would constitute a kind of tax on the regime for doing business.

**Dr. Hillel Frisch:** I think this discussion is underestimating some very basic and

important changes in the region that will lead to Bashar being crushed. Many of the structures that supported his father--the USSR, Ba'thist Iraq (despite the differences between those two neighbors), and key forces in Lebanon--are gone. Today, Syria, Bashar, and the Ba'th are hated by everyone. Everyone! I mean almost every force almost in the world is out there, both internally and externally, trying to get this regime destroyed.

I mean we have to change course. After thirty years of analyzing Arab politics through personalities, we just have to come to grips with these tremendous structural changes. The most important structure is a unipolar world. I don't know for how long it will continue, but the United States is under a presidency that is just bent on destroying this regime.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** The problem though, Hillel, is that change only takes place if the internal factors are there to bring it about. That's also true of Iraq. The internal factors in Syria may be building but they're a long way from building enough to overthrow the regime. And if Bashar and his colleagues can inspire in people a sense of national patriotism--Syria is under attack--then I think he can rally most of them. But the price may be to build up the Islamic factor in the future. There are also real limits to how far the United States is going to go, or can go, to bring down the regime.

**Martha Neff Kessler:** There needs to be more emphasis on the strategic change of enormous proportions of the United

States being embedded in Iraq and being to the east of Syria. The entire Arab world is grappling with that new reality, that unipolar world with the United States as the sole real superpower. They have been unbalanced by it but are beginning to pull themselves together and I'm not quite sure how they are going to ultimately manage this situation. A great deal will depend on how long the United States is in Iraq. There is an attitude among Arab leaders of waiting out the clock, the next three years of this administration, and wondering what the United States is going to throw out there next. They're acutely aware of how thinly spread, how stressed the United States military establishment is in Iraq.

I think that the triangle between Iran, Hizballah and Syria has actually been strengthened. My understanding of Turkey, for example, is that it's been very uncooperative with moving in any meaningful way against the Syrian regime. I'm not so sure that the Syrian regime faces such a bleak outlook in terms of allies and institutions in support of it. I would also point out that the Syrian government has a good deal of bench strength, both in terms of its ruling family's members and in terms of what I would call the ten key individuals that Bashar Assad relies on. That group is evenly split between Sunnis and Alawites. Finally, the pressures on Syria have had an enormously galvanizing effect on a population that is deeply suspicious of the United States... I think

those factors have to be taken into account.

**Dr. Paul Jureidini:** The fact that the January 2005 voting in Iraq was seen across the Middle East is of major importance. No Arab leader now can claim a 99% vote support. The upsurge in Lebanon, also reported in the Arab media, has had a major impact on Syria itself internally. For change to take place in Syria doesn't require a military coup. The only way for change in Syria is if you can convince the Alawite community that Bashar is endangering their survival. Go back to 1969, when President Salah Jadid began to put the Alawites in a difficult situation. Overnight the majority of the Alawite officers supported Hafiz Assad against Salah Jadid and the regime was gone.

So we may see a palace coup. The Ba'th party is meaningless. Nobody in Syria wants to be a member of a party unless it gets them a job. Even the sons of the high officials try to avoid being a member of the party. The ideology is meaningless. Nobody believes in it. The fact that Syria is an orphan--no Iraqi Ba'th in power, no support from Saudi Arabia or Egypt, the trouble in Lebanon--is not going to give Syrians a lot of confidence in Bashar Assad. He created a crisis that he did not have to create and the results are still echoing in Syria.

So I would look more toward something akin to a palace coup than to a revolution from outside the regime. The Sunnis tolerate the Alawite regime

for one simple reason: they don't want another Lebanon in Syria because they know there will be blood in the streets and the Alawites will fight to the last man. They are willing to wait. But a palace coup is very likely if the Alawites can be convinced that Bashar is in fact endangering their survival as the rulers of Syria and even perhaps as a community.

**Martha Neff Kessler:** I agree with Paul that the spectacle of Syria being basically pushed out of Lebanon in part by the United States is one that they will pay a high price for. However, I don't think that we should be misled into thinking that 50 years of influence in Lebanon can be dismantled overnight. There are still longstanding personal, family and economic relationships, Syria has assets throughout every Lebanese institution and there is the reality of geographic interconnections and common strategic interests in many ways. So, Syrian influence is in my view going to continue no matter how fully there is a withdrawal of Syria's army.

I think Syria will be able to protect its interests in Lebanon even with the formal withdrawal of all of its military forces and at least the most obvious of its intelligence components. These interests include controlling the Beka valley as it goes into Syria and blocking Lebanon from negotiating a peace agreement with Israel independent of Syria, I think they will be able to achieve these things. The key question is whether Syria can prevent instability in Lebanon from generating similar instability inside Syria.

The irony of course now is that Hizballah, which has goals of Islamist revolution which are antithetical to those of secular Syria, is now a key factor for Syrian influence in Lebanon. How Syria manages Hizballah and its continued relationship with Hizballah within the triangle of the relationship between Damascus, Tehran and Hizballah is very important. What will Hizballah become inside Lebanon, and if it remains under pressure from the United States and is not able to fulfill its mission as it sees it will it be inclined to reengage in terrorism on an international level?

**Prof. Amatzia Baram:** Until early 2005 there were one million Syrian workers working in Lebanon. When Syria's army gets out of Lebanon, Damascus won't be able to keep them there and the Lebanese will get rid of most of them. It's a huge loss to the Syrian economy and the Syrian economy is already in dire straits. Moreover, Syria may no longer be able to control the poppy fields that produce so much in drug revenues for the Syrian elite and won't be able to smuggle goods into Syria, which has also provided great compensation for the officers who can't be paid very high salaries by Bashar Assad.

On the economic level I think Bashar and the regime are going to be facing a huge problem. Huge. And the Ba'th system has always rested on money and gifts. If you cannot provide these things you are in big trouble. So that's an important destabilizing factor.

Today you see Sunni Arab Islamists everywhere in Syria. You see them even in the government. This is partly due to the regime's policy but also due to a

strategy by the Islamists themselves to infiltrate the system rather than engage in a head-on clash with it.

When the situation is getting very bad economically, Bashar and the regime will come again under great pressure. It is in this context we have to understand Syrian support for the Iraq insurrection. There is no love lost between Assad and the Sunni Arab Islamists-that is obvious. But in order to compensate for this problem, to somehow play up to the Sunni Arab majority in Syria, I believe Assad needs to show that he is doing something to help the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, even though they are Islamists. And in fact it doesn't matter to him because they are in Iraq.

So this is a very interesting crisis situation. Less money, less employment, and more frustration inside Syria; less money to use to bribe people combined with a drive to send people cross the border into Iraq and do mischief there in order to placate his Sunni Arab audience at home. I am not sure what is going to happen -

Within Iraq itself, it should be noted, the alliance of Shias which won the January 2005 election are historically on very close, very intimate, terms, with the Syrian regime. They were there for many years as political refugees. Their affinity with the Alawite leadership is quite close and suddenly they are facing a situation in which this very regime with whom they were friendly and which gave them refuge is helping

people cross the border and murder Shiites, murder their own people.

I've never seen such ambivalence in Iraq before. They are at a total loss about what to do. Ironically, for the defectors from the old Ba'th party, who were anti-Syrian after all, it is easy to talk of confrontation. But for the Shia Islamists it is very difficult and an Iraqi government they head may not show a tough stand toward Syria.

And so the Americans are going to have a problem now because of this ambivalence within the new Iraqi government.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** If Iraq's leaders perceive that the Syrians are going to keep up the war against them, they'll have to defend themselves at some point. But let me address the Lebanon issue. If we ask what is the main source of instability in Lebanon right now the answer is that it is Syria. The Syrians want to show, in part by covertly sponsoring terrorism, that if they leave Lebanon will be in crisis. The Lebanese know that instability in their country serves Syrian interests.

Two factors have emerged in Lebanon in recent months. One of these is massive--possibly temporary--involvement of the population. This is the first time this is happened in the region on behalf of a moderate cause. The second factor is Lebanon's nation-state patriotism which is very rare in the Arab world, though Lebanon is the only

place where it has really been seen before.

This movement is a very good thing involving many courageous people. But the main goal, quite understandably, is a nationalist not a democratic one. It has been to get Syria out and to reestablish what mainly amounts to the traditional Lebanese system under the traditional Lebanese political leadership. The fact that Walid Jumblatt was the most important single leader of this movement shows that it is being steered by all the old, traditional politicians who basically want to be in power.

So it is a movement not to establish a democratic liberal revolution within Lebanon--which is an outcome, it should be added, that might end up putting Hizballah into power as Lebanon's ruler--but to restore a sovereign Lebanon under the system of pluralist deal making. Under these conditions, the Lebanese leadership wants to get along with Syria; they just don't want Syria to be running the country.

Clearly Hizballah wants to be a strong factor in Lebanon. Clearly Hizballah views its claim to be continuing the war on Israel as a main factor to its advantage, its unique service to Lebanon. But I think that the new situation would tend to restrain them from doing much more than talking. The vast majority of Lebanese do not want trouble on the border. They want investment, reconstruction, they want to prove that they will maintain a stable country and do not need the Syrian army there. The number of Hizballah's cross-border attacks on Israel has fallen dramatically over the last four years.

So I think that there will be a tendency in practice--not in rhetoric--but in practice, in which Hizballah will be restrained. They will talk their talk their hardline militant rhetoric, to show why they are so important and why people should vote for them, but I think they're going to ease off. Where Hizballah is doing things is secretly, to establish its own networks and those among Palestinians it controls in Gaza and the West Bank. Remember, there is no Hamas in southern Lebanon. Hizballah has kept Hamas from organizing among the Palestinians there. It has an imperialist attitude towards Palestinian Islamists.

**Martha Neff Kessler:** I agree that the issue of the economic effect on Syria is a terribly important one but I would suggest that there are closer to 500,000 than to one million Syrian workers in Lebanon. It is still a serious problem but not quite the magnitude. And it's not clear to me they are all going to be ejected and the Syrians might still be able to take advantage of narcotics production in the Baka Valley. I think that the network of interrelationships are there and have certainly been strengthened over the years that Syria has been present in Lebanon. It's not clear that the economic impact is quite as dire as has been suggested.

In terms of Barry's remarks about Lebanon, I wholeheartedly agree with that. I do not believe that this is a transformative effort. I think the coalition between the Druze and the Christians is one that could very easily fall apart. I think that the actions by Jumblatt now suggest that his Pan-Arab

sentiments are coming to the fore and I'm not exactly sure where that's going to go and whether they are able to make it through elections putting together a stronger democratic front. I think is very problematic. As for Syrians wanting the appearance of instability inside Lebanon right now to prove that they are the only ones that can really manage the problem, however, I think that they fully understand that trouble in Lebanon is trouble for them. Still, my personal estimate is that there is going to be some serious trouble in Lebanon and therefore it may be the major destabilizing challenge for Syria.

**Dr. Jourdini:** One reason why the Syrians wanted to eliminate Hariri is that he was always seen as a threat to Syria by the Syrians. I have a feeling that now that he's gone, the Sunnis basically are leaderless and the Syrians can lead. What disturbs me here is the emphasis on Hizballah as if Hizballah is the Shiite community. Hizballah is not the Shiite community of Lebanon. It's a faction, it's an important faction. The Shiites of the Baka, especially the farmers and those who raise chickens and what not, hate the Sunnis because they've destroyed their agriculture. The Shia of the south is where Hizballah recruits, not the middle Baka or the north where the tribes are located.

Hizballah gained a lot under the Syrians. Before, they were the low man on the totem pole. Right now, they've become-- because of the Syrians and the

Iranians and because of their numbers-- an important factor in Lebanon. But the Shia cannot remain as Syria's watch dog in Lebanon. With all the Lebanese opposed to a Syrian presence, they can't stay there as the only sycophant sect because the Lebanese are going to target them in the end. Also, a change or weakening in the regime in Syria would force the Shia to distance themselves.

But I also think that the traditional political system is basically gone in Lebanon. What you have is three communities trying to come to a new arrangement in Lebanon, even if the Shia are the majority. I suspect, and the discussions are going on, Lebanon will change its system to give one-third representation each to the Shia, Sunni, and Christians. This will affect parliament, the presidency, and the prime minister. Everybody in Lebanon fears that if things continue this way and if the Shia's high birthrate continues, within twenty years they'll dominate Lebanon completely. So everybody has an interest in this political rearrangement where everyone gets rights and the Shia get the protection they've never had, except when Syria was there.

Also there's something else. Will Ayatollah Sistani, the leading figure in Iraq, and Najaf, as the religious center for Shia there, challenge Qom and Iran as inspiration for Lebanese Shia? My point is that the relationship between the Lebanese Shia and the Syrian Alawites was a marriage of convenience. It might be more attractive for Lebanese Shia to

ally themselves with other communities in Lebanon rather than with Syria, and with Iraqi Shia rather than Iranian Shia.

All communities in Lebanon see security for themselves. There are continuously shifting alliances in pursuit of this goal. The Shia of Lebanon also want to make sure that if Syria leaves, Syria weakens, or if the regime is overthrown and the Sunnis take over, they will retain the advantages they have gained since the 1970s. This can only be done by making deals with their fellow Lebanese.

**Flynt Leverett:** I think that one of the consequences of the course that the United States has embarked on with the cooperation of France or the European Union will be the empowerment and the strengthening of Hizballah as a force in Lebanon and as a force in the region. I find it very curious that the Bush administration, the declarer of a global war on terror in the aftermath of the Sep. 11 attacks, has put pressure on Syria, a regime that it's identified as a state sponsor of terror, to the advantage of Hizballah, the terrorist group that before September 11 killed more Americans than any terrorist group in the world and that maintains an international capability to harm American interests, that exceeds that of al-Qa'ida.

Make no mistake about it: Hizballah will emerge as a stronger political force in Lebanon. The notion that Hizballah is somehow now going to have to choose between its identity as a Lebanese political party and its identity as an Islamist resistance movement, I think is folly. That argument has been out there since the Israelis withdrew from

southern Lebanon in 2000. Hizballah has not had to make that choice so far. I think Hizballah's leadership is very adroit at making sure it is not put in a position where it is pressured to make that choice and Hizballah's popular standing in Lebanon has not suffered as a result of it's not making that choice. I don't think its popularity will suffer over the coming year. What the United States is doing is setting in place a dynamic which is going to lead to a more powerful, more influential Hizballah with greater political standing, and believe me, that will still have its guns. And I really don't see why that's a good thing for U.S. interests.

I thought Resolution 1559, demanding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, was a good thing because it gave the United States leverage over something that Syria cares about. But rather than use it as leverage to pursue a range of objectives that we have with Syria--in Iraq, on anti-Israeli terrorism, on a number of other fronts--we've made pushing Syria out of Lebanon the be all and end all of our policy toward Syria. I think there's a real risk of unintended consequences here. There is no way that you can constitute a new political order in Lebanon without Hizballah playing a much more important and central role in that order than it plays even now. It will not be sustainable or truly representative without Hizballah playing that role.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Participant Biographies**

**Prof. Amatzia Baram** *Professor Amatzia Baram is head of the Jewish-*

*Arab Center and the Gustav Von Heinemann Middle East Institute, Haifa University. His books include Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-1989 and Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival. He is co-editor of Iraq's Road to War.*

**Dr. Hillel Frisch-** *Dr. Hillel Frisch is a Senior Research Associate at the Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, and a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University. He specializes in Arab and Palestinian politics, regional economic issues and military and Security affairs in the Arab world.*

**Dr. Paul A. Jureidini-** *Dr. Paul A Jureidini is a consultant to a number of corporations and private business enterprises as well as being director and senior associate of Jureidini & McLaurin. From 1975-1995 Dr. Jureidini was Vice President at Abbott Associates. From 1961 to 1975, he was at the American Institutes for Research where he filled the positions of director of the Middle East Center in the Center for Research in Social Systems, and branch chief of the Middle East/Africa Branch in the Cultural Information Analysis Center. In addition to articles and research studies, Dr. Jureidini has authored seven books on the Middle East and has been a substantial contributor to six others.*

**Dr. Mordecai Kedar-** *Dr. Mordechai Kedar is a research associate of the BESA Center for Strategic Studies and a lecturer at the Department of Arabic, Bar-Ilan University. His book - Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar was recently published by Sussex Academic Press. Kedar's research ranges includes mass media in the Arab world, Islamic movements and gender issues in today's Islamic societies.*

**Martha Neff Kessler-** *Martha Neff Kessler was an intelligence officer with the CIA from 1970 until her retirement in 2000. She was the Assistant and the Acting National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for the Near East and South Asia as well as the author of numerous national intelligence estimates (NIEs) on Middle East issues. She headed the Directorate's efforts on the Arab-Israeli area for six years. She has also been a research scholar at the National War College and Brookings Institute, and is author of a book on Syria.*

**Dr. Flynt Leverett-** *Flynt Leverett worked in the CIA, where he was senior analyst on Syria, at the State Department's Policy Planning Staff where he worked on the Middle East and counterterrorism as senior director for Middle East Affairs. He is now at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at*



*the Brookings Institution as a visiting fellow and has just published a book on Syria.*

**Prof. Barry Rubin-** *Professor Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research for International Affairs (GLORIA) Center at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. He is editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs MERIA) Journal and of Turkish Studies Journal. His books include Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography, The Tragedy of the Middle East, and The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East.*