

# MERIA

## WHITHER SYRIA?

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*This article focuses on the current regime in Syria, its successes and the hardships it has faced, as well as the prospects for the future and what this might mean for Israel.*

To answer the question, "whither Syria?" in the briefest possible terms would be by saying: Nowhere. If Bashar al-Asad were to deliver a state of the nation speech, he would view 2006 as a year during which Syria's domestic and geopolitical strategic situation in the region improved. So he would not see a good reason for doing things differently.

In contrast, the year 2005 was catastrophic for the regime in Damascus. Things began to deteriorate in the latter part of 2004, when, following the Syrian dictate to reelect Emile Lahoud as the Lebanese president for another three-year term, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1559 calling for the Syrians to withdraw from Lebanon. In February 2005, following the Hariri assassination—whether or not the Syrians were responsible—the situation in Lebanon escalated and led to the Cedar Revolution. The pro-Syrian government collapsed, and the new, openly anti-Syrian, pro-Western government was elected.

The Syrian official who in effect served as the regime's proconsul there, Rustum Ghazala, ceased to be the key foreign influence in Beirut. Earlier, on March 5, 2005, Asad was required to announce the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The Lebanese masses broke into the army camps and headquarters abandoned by the Syrians, and every remnant of the Syrian

presence was destroyed. Pictures of Bashar and his father were torn up and memorials and billboards were destroyed.

It seemed this would be the end of the Syrian era in the country. The rest of the year proved no less catastrophic. In September, the Syrian interior minister, Ghazi Kana'an, committed suicide, and in October, Detlev Mehlis, the German investigator in charge of the Hariri murder investigation committee, announced that the evidence pointed to Bashar's palace in Damascus. He demanded Bashar be investigated. Finally, that same year, on the last day of 2005, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the Syrian regime's veteran vice-president, defected and became head of the opposition against that regime.

The Muslim Brotherhood—which in the past had attempted to assassinate Khaddam—also joined with him, and both Khaddam and the Brotherhood were ready to accept help from the United States. By the end of 2005, the framework of stability and strength which Bashar had always exuded were beginning to crumble. I believe that from every aspect, 2006 restored the calm and stability for Syria.

It is remarkable the extent to which the Asads have been able to maintain such a great image internationally. Since his death, Hafiz al-Asad has been described as a great leader. Yet, in fact, after 30 years in power,

he left behind a devastated, destroyed, failing and faltering dictatorship. One of the regime's few claims to fame is that it represents today about 50 percent of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hafiz al-Asad wasn't a great man. He was not a man to take creative steps. He was a man who did little.

Hafiz al-Asad, however, did do some things very well, especially knowing how to take advantage of his enemies' failures. Syria used the 1982 war with Israel, followed by the driving out of the international forces that arrived to restore stability, in order to take over Lebanon. In doing so, he managed to get support from both the United States and Israel. The argument was that only Syria could keep the peace in Lebanon—an idea that has been revived today under even more questionable circumstances.

To a great degree, his son, Bashar, entered his father's shoes much faster than was expected. Bashar has been in power in Syria for six years now. Though he is only just starting out, six years is a sufficient amount of time to offer some insight. The Syrian regime has survived six years, and his rule is stable. There is no real threat to its existence, apart from the possibility of being dragged into some disaster by Iran.

In practice, the United States is not much of a threat to Syria. After what happened in Iraq, the United States is not in a position to take military action against Syria. Also, there is no real organized opposition against the Syrian regime.

Bashar's success in establishing his status in Syria can be attributed to two important factors:

1. Its anti-American and anti-Western policy—which is very popular in the Arab world and in Syria especially—may cost the regime in some ways, but it also has its

dividends, which are arguably more profitable.

2. Every Syrian who looks at the situation in a country freed by the United States, Iraq, believes it is better to remain under this dictatorship than to be freed and to face Syria's breakdown, violence, interethnic civil wars, and the loss of the minimal security that the Syrian citizens have today (to be able to go to work or to the market without the fear of being blown up). This is something that the Iraqis do not have, as we know. This strengthens Bashar.

So the regime is ultimately stable. In this context, Bashar is the one who makes the decisions, and we are seeing the true Bashar. Anyone who believes he will start an internet revolution, turn Syria into Switzerland, or—in his own words—might create “an environment like Bill Gates works in... in Syria,” is going to be disappointed. Basically, Bashar continues to rule in his father's way, without any breakthrough or dramatic change. We are simply seeing more of the same.

Consider, for example, Bashar's “romance” with Saddam Hussein. From 2000 on, he allowed Saddam to smuggle oil through Syria. It is not known whether he hid unconventional weapons for the Iraqis. The very formal relations between Syria and Iraq became a very intimate friendship with Saddam's regime. This strategy goes back to Hafiz al-Asad's time. Both the “romance” with Iran and the coalition with Hizballah were not started by Bashar. Bashar also did not start the calls for peace with Israel. Bashar, however, is continuing in his father's footsteps, though less carefully, with less attention, and more hastily.

One image that has been used is that under Hafiz al-Asad, Syria's leader was driving the war, with the Iranians sitting beside him and Hizballah in the back seat. Today, the Syrians are no longer in the driver's seat, and, in fact, we can ask whether the relationship is one between an Iranian patron and the Syrian client—something that never happened during Hafiz al-Asad's time. Thus, while Syrian policy has a strong continuity, there are also changes that show a deterioration of both Syria's leverage and of Hafiz al-Asad's caution.

Bashar's calls for making peace with Israel are neither surprising nor new. For those who have studied the interviews and speeches, about every two to three weeks since he came into power, he has been calling upon Israel to make peace with Syria. I believe that basically he is willing to do what his father was willing to do. Sometimes, we hear that it is as if the Syrians have agreed to negotiations with no preconditions; sometimes they deny this. Such preconditions mean withdrawal to the bank of the Sea of Galilee. This must be understood and taken into account. This is something that we have had on the table since the early 1990s, and even more so in the late 1990s. From this perspective, there is nothing new in Bashar's call.

It is important to note that when we speak of this call, we are talking about the hardest negotiation partner in the Arab world. We are not talking about Sadat, who was a creative leader with a vision and with self-assurance, who came to Jerusalem and convinced every last Israeli that he was interested in peace.

At most, the only gesture we can expect of the Syrian regime is not necessarily a dramatic move by Bashar, but rather another appearance by Khalid Mashal on Syrian television to announce yet another

terror attack—these are the only gestures we have. We must understand that the Syrians have always been difficult, and this time around as well they will be difficult. However, for those who think Israel has strategic interests in making peace with Syria and are willing to pay the price, in this case, I think that Bashar is a partner, and it is possible to attain this goal with him. Negotiations, however, are not relevant.

First, based on everything I have previously mentioned, if one goes all the way to Damascus and shakes his hand, there is in fact somebody to talk to. The Israeli government, however, is busy with its own political survival. It doesn't have the time to discuss this strategic debate to decide if it is or is not worth it. I respect a government that says, "This is in my view and world perception and from a strategic analysis." This is not what Israel wants to do or should do. I have less respect for a government that only cares about its political survival.

Regarding the United States, I don't see any change in its stance that Bashar is not a partner, but rather an evil regime whose downfall needs to be assisted. This being the case, there is no hope or fear for renewed negotiations between Israel and Syria.

However, on August 15, 2006, on the day Bashar delivered his victory speech in which he announced Hizballah's victory against Israel, we heard a new tune. This was echoed both before this and after. Bashar had said that he wanted peace with Israel and that he was willing to sign a peace agreement. I feel it is important to note the fact that he still stresses that he is not Nasrallah or Ahmadinejad, and that he is indeed interested in an agreement with Israel. I do not know how long he will continue to do so.

In Syria, as has been told, they are taking down the posters of Bashar, his father, and his deceased brother Basil and putting up pictures of Bashar next to Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah. I say, however, that beyond the statement, "I want a political agreement," Bashar also said something else: "It is my understanding, you are not interested, and therefore, I am exploring my other options."

What is the meaning of this? That he decided he wanted to go to war in the summer? I won't pretend to understand and to know beyond what Assad says. He is not saying that he is going to war in the summer. He is not saying he will encourage the Druze villages in the Golan Heights to start an intifada. He is not saying he will stir things up on the border between Israel and Syria along the Golan Heights and that he will execute terror attacks like the Hizballah. However, this means that in his perspective, he is letting us know that he is weighing other options.

At present, Bashar, other officials, and the Syrian media say that the peace process has apparently worn itself out and other options need to be considered. It is possible that the Syrians will come to the conclusion that they have no other viable options and certainly not a military option with Israel. In regards to their insights of the war with Israel, what happened here? Hizballah's rockets silenced and neutralized Israel and eventually brought Israel to a compromise. This is not something so catastrophic, but it is possible that they believe that Israel will be determined to destroy Syria, and therefore there is no military option. It is possible they are considering other options.

I do not know what conclusions they will make in the end, but at present, as Bashar has declared, the Syrian leadership and the public are undergoing a rethinking process. I think we need to be attentive to the voices coming from Damascus, just as I take

seriously Bashar's statement that he, in principal, is willing to come to a peace agreement with Israel. We must take these statements seriously as well his threats that if there will not be peace, Syria will consider other options.

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