



## **SYRIA, THE UNITED STATES, AND IRAQ – TWO YEARS AFTER THE DOWNFALL OF SADDAM HUSSEIN**

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*The conquest of Iraq by the United States in April 2003 was a significant event in the history of the Middle East. Apart from Iraq, it would appear that Syria was the Middle Eastern country most adversely affected by this event. The United States' control over Iraq dealt a serious blow, not only to the Syrian economy and to its regional and international standing, but also to the image of the Syrian Ba`th regime*

*However, more than anything else, U.S. occupation of Iraq, making it Syria's new neighbor to the East, created a new focus of friction, or even an open and bleeding wound, in relations between Damascus and Washington. Over the past two years, this wound has significantly contributed to the deterioration of relations between the two countries, which to begin with had not been characterized as close or in an atmosphere overflowing good will. While Syrian-American relations have not yet reached their nadir, this is liable to occur sooner than might have been expected. Evidence of this are those voices now being raised in Washington, mainly in the Pentagon, calling for a military strike against Syria in order to get it to fall into line with U.S. policies.<sup>1</sup>*

*Two years after the end of the war in Iraq, Syria, even in the eyes of the Syrians themselves,<sup>2</sup> is a weaker, more isolated country, plagued by ever-increasing internal and external pressures. This is the direct result of Syria's own mistakes, rooted in the misreading and misinterpretation of the regional and international, especially American, political scenes.*

*The war in Iraq and Syria's failure to cope with its results clearly demonstrate the bankruptcy of Syrian policy over the past several years. There is no doubt that another contributing factor to this state of affairs is the failure of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to step into his father's shoes and establish himself as a respected and authoritative leader both at home and abroad. Indeed, Bashar himself made it clear in his statements that he was fully aware of the predicament Syria was facing and of the need to change course and direction, especially in the foreign policy sphere.<sup>3</sup> However, it seems that this task has proven to be beyond his capabilities.*

*Syria's failure, for the time being, to cope with the results of the war in Iraq is liable to bring the Syrian regime to the point at which Bashar will have to make painful foreign and domestic policy decisions, which he has delayed making for years; such decisions are necessary for his survival.*

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### **SYRIA UNDER BASHAR: ON THE ROAD TO THE WAR IN IRAQ**

The outbreak of the war in Iraq in March 2003 was one of Bashar al-Asad's first tests

both in the foreign policy sphere and as a leader. Bashar came to power in Damascus in June 2000 following the death of his father, Hafiz al-Asad. At the time of his

coming to power, there were hopes that the new young leader would make revolutionary changes in Syrian domestic policy, but also, and perhaps first and foremost, in Syria's foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

However, within a few months it became clear that Bashar was finding it difficult to affect any upheaval or even a limited or moderate change in Syria. He was devoid of any experience, leadership skills, or charisma, and furthermore, he lacked any vision of the direction in which he wanted to lead Syria. It seemed Bashar was also too weak to take on the Old Guard in the regime's leadership-- namely those who had been his father's close associates. The Old Guard was supported by the power foci that held the reins of power in Syria: commanders of the Security Services and the army units, all members of the Alawite Community; political bosses and other members of the Ba`th Party; and finally government bureaucrats who controlled socio-economic life in Syria. They were all determined to maintain the status quo, i.e. the political and social order that had existed in the country for an entire generation.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, for example, the "Damascus Spring" that Bashar had initiated in the first weeks of his rule ended within a few months. This "Spring," supposedly intended to encourage political openness in the country, albeit limited, came to an end in the early months of 2001. Intellectuals and reformers who had been deluded into believing that from then on it would be possible to criticize the regime, calling for real political reforms and the institution of democracy into the State, were imprisoned. Bashar also failed in his attempts to enact economic reforms. The new economic policy which he declared, calling for the adoption of an "open market" economy in Syria, remained on paper in the form of

declarations and position papers not backed up by any actions.<sup>6</sup>

Syria's conduct in the foreign policy sphere was no better. Following the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in October 2000 and the renewal of Hizballah's activities against Israel's northern border-- which was carried out with Syrian blessing-- Bashar chose to adopt militant and radical positions, ignoring the danger of military escalation between Syria and Israel.<sup>7</sup> Bashar also failed to respond to another major event, the War on Terrorism declared by President George Bush following the September 11, 2001 al-Qa`ida terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. As part of this war, in late 2001, the United States put an end to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and in spring 2003 occupied Iraq, bringing Saddam Hussein's Ba`th regime to an end. The United States also increased pressure on Syria to separate from the Axis of Evil: Iran and its protégé, Hizballah, and also North Korea.

In response to American pressure, Syria adopted an elusive policy aiming at both eating its cake and keeping its penny. On the one hand, Damascus took steps to avoid frontal confrontation with Washington. To that end, it was prepared to cooperate with the United States in its struggle against al-Qa`ida. On the other hand, Damascus continued to adhere to its worldview and to courses of action standing in total contradiction with Washington's policies: the promotion of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the efforts to establish a stable pro-Western regime in Iraq, the isolation of Iran and possibly the overthrow of the Ayatollah regime there, and the disarming of Hizballah in Lebanon.

It should also be mentioned that beginning in the first months of George Bush's term in office, the warming of relations between Syria and Iraq, then still under Saddam Hussein, became a point of

tension in U.S.-Syrian relations. Indeed, since Bashar's rise to power, there had been perceptible efforts to turn over a new leaf in his relations with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Thus for example, in the autumn of 2000, the Syrians allowed the Iraqis to export oil via Syria. Washington was quick to protest to the Syrians for their crass violation of the boycott of Iraq. However, the Syrians chose to ignore these protests.<sup>8</sup>

### **SYRIA AND THE AMERICAN OCCUPATION OF IRAQ**

American preparations to strike out at Saddam Hussein in late 2002 raised the level of tension in relations between Syria and Washington. Damascus adopted a staunch anti-American stance. Syria strongly opposed the United States' moves and accused Washington of having a "hidden agenda," of establishing a new American order in the Middle East for itself and on behalf of Israel.<sup>9</sup> During the war, Syrian support for Iraq reached its pinnacle when Syrian Foreign Minister, Faruq a-Shar', stated before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the People's Assembly, "We want Iraq's victory." Shar' subsequently went as far as comparing the United States to the Third Reich and President Bush to Adolf Hitler.<sup>10</sup>

The United States responded quickly by accusing Syria of aiding Iraq by smuggling military equipment into that country. The Americans also accused the Syrians of allowing Arab volunteers to reach Iraq via Syria, and later, a senior American official accused Syria of allowing Iraqi leaders to escape from Iraq via its territory. The Syrians dismissed these accusations out of hand, but they were undoubtedly disturbed by their strong language. The fact is, they were quick to close their border with Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

The United States' conquest of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, was received in total shock in Damascus. Syrian television made

the decision not to broadcast scenes of Baghdad's residents pulling down Saddam's statue in the city's main square. Damascus newspapers were quick to define the capture of Baghdad by the American forces as an ignominious defeat of historic proportions, stating that the Arabs could only wait for the worst to happen.<sup>12</sup>

One of the direct results of the U.S. occupation of Iraq was the severe damage caused to the Syrian economy. The Americans immediately stopped the smuggling of Iraqi oil to Syria and also stopped trade trafficking between the two countries, which had flourished to a considerable degree in the years prior to the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. By 2003, the immediate damage to the Syrian economy was assessed at billions of dollars. In 2002 alone, Syria's revenues from the smuggling of Iraqi oil through Syrian territory, as well as from the trade with Iraq, amounted to almost \$3 billion.<sup>13</sup>

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 world, including the Gulf States, Egypt, and Jordan. It was especially disastrous for the future of Syrian-American relations. There was no doubt at the time that Bashar was acting under pressure and under the assumption that Syria may become the next U.S. target after Iraq. Furthermore, it seemed that Bashar failed to read the Americans and did not predict their decisive victory in the war. He likely ruled out the possibility of the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. It is the opinion of many that his conduct bore witness to his being firmly ensconced in the Arab nationalist and anti-Western concepts. It also bore witness to his lack of experience and self-confidence and possibly to a disorderly decision-

making apparatus, or the absence of close and experienced advisors.

With the end of the war in Iraq in April 2003, all eyes were on Washington, waiting to see how determined the Americans were to settle accounts with Syria in view of Damascus' behavior over the previous years. However, it quickly became clear that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who stood out as the anti-Syrian hawk in the group, calling for a confrontation with Syria, did not necessarily represent the entire American Administration. Rather he represented only the hawkish faction that believed Syria should be the next target of America's military actions in the Middle East. In contrast to Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Collin Powell appeared less resolved in his approach to Syria. Powell, in effect, led a more moderate line calling for granting Damascus a second chance, in hopes that it would ultimately agree to cooperation with Washington. At the time, Powell's "line," accepted by President George Bush, was, as said immediately after the war ended in April 2003, "Syria must choose between being with the U.S. or against it".<sup>14</sup> In other words, all options were left open for the Syrians; Damascus had not as yet become an enemy of Washington against which it must wage a relentless war, as had been the case with deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein

Washington's soft approach regarding Damascus, and especially that of State Department, was rooted in the fact that in the past the Syrians had been careful not to cross any red lines in their relations with United States; if it appeared they were about to cross such a line, they were always quick to pull back. When the United States became Syria's neighbor to the east in early April 2003 through its presence in Iraq, Syria was quick to announce the closure of its border with Iraq to infiltrators wanting to fight the Americans there. Furthermore,

they extradited several Iraqi senior officials, who had fled to Syrian territory, to the United States. Damascus also softened its opposition to Washington's efforts in the spring of 2003 to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.<sup>15</sup> The reason for the American State Department's determinedness to stick to the instruments of political dialogue in dealing with Syria and in securing their cooperation and good will was thus clear.

In May 2003, the then Secretary of State, Collin Powell went on a tour of the Middle East. His tour included a stop in Damascus, with the clear aim of reaping the fruits of the American victory in Iraq. Powell departed from Damascus, leaving behind a long list of American demands, such as the disarmament of Hizballah, the ending of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and refraining from any activity that could interfere with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. However, it transpired that the visit had been a complete failure. Bashar had patiently listened to these demands and had promised, at least according to Powell, to close down the offices of the Palestinian rejectionist organizations operating in Damascus. However, he did not do so.<sup>16</sup>

It would appear that the Syrian regime had decided to play for time, in the hope that the Americans' entanglement in Iraq would weaken Washington's resolve to take action against Syria. Another main component of Syria's fabric of considerations was the fact that in Damascus' view, the United States had made stiff demands of Syria, without proposing any incentives or rewards should the latter ultimately agree to fall into line with American dictates. Fawzi al-Shu'aybi, a Syrian commentator, explained that "the U.S. should know that Syria is not a charitable organizations giving charity to the U.S. getting nothing in return".<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Bashar did show some interest in

integrating Syria into the regional peace process under American leadership. He did not want to be left behind in the event of a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He declared that "Syria is interested in the Road Map not only for the Israeli-Palestinian track, but also for the Syrian-Israeli track."<sup>18</sup> However, Washington preferred progress along the Israeli-Palestinian track over dealing with the Syrian regime.

### **SYRIA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE IRAQI QUAGMIRE**

Syria's initial shock in wake of the war in Iraq was replaced in the two years that have passed since then by feelings of relief when two factors became clear: First, that the United States was in no rush to exploit the momentum that had been created in the region following its convincing military victory in Iraq in order to put military pressure on Syria. Second, that the United States was encountering increasing difficulties in enforcing its authority on Iraq and in stabilizing the security situation in that country, i.e. in establishing a stable, legitimate, and pro-Western Iraqi regime. This allowed the Syrians to refrain from meeting their commitments to Washington.

Washington, for its part, reiterated its demands of Syria, although in rather weakened terms, adding to them demands related to the deteriorating security situation in Iraq. The Americans demanded that Syria close its border with Iraq to infiltrators aiming to harm the American troops there. American sources subsequently claimed that prior to his downfall, Saddam Hussein had deposited billions of dollars in Syrian banks and that some of that money was being used to finance anti-American activities in Iraq. Therefore, the Americans demanded that under their aegis, Syria return the money to the nascent Iraqi regime.<sup>19</sup>

For its part, Syria continued to play "cat and mouse" with the Americans. On the one hand, the Syrians refrained from meeting the United States' basic demands on the Iraqi issue as well as on other issues involved, such as the support for the Palestinian terrorist organizations and Hizballah. On the other hand, they did make some essentially cosmetic moves designed to avoid bringing Washington's wrath down on them. Syria announced that it was going to increase its forces along the Syrian-Iraqi border and also reported on the construction of an earthen work embankment designed to foil the passage of smugglers and terrorists between the two countries. It also permitted American officials to visit Damascus to investigate Syria's banking system in order to determine whether Saddam Hussein had indeed invested money there. Subsequently, the Syrians announced that they were ready to return \$3.5 million out of the \$261 million that, according to Syrian findings, had been deposited in Syrian banks.<sup>20</sup> Damascus was also ready to cooperate with the temporary Iraqi administration established by the United States. As Bashar al-Asad said, "While we do recognize the temporary Ruling Council in Iraq because it is an established fact we have made it clear to them [and to the Americans] that this does not mean that we have granted it legitimacy, since legitimacy must come from the People."<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, the Syrians reiterated the denial of their involvement in the terrorist activities against the Americans in Iraq. They claimed that they were doing everything they could to prevent such acts, but that the border between the two countries was very long and it was impossible to prevent passage through it. In early January 2005, Bashar al-Asad explained that "The Americans have to understand that guarding the border with

Iraq cannot be our responsibility. The border between Syria and Iraq is exactly the same as the border between the US. and Mexico and the fact is that the U.S., despite all its efforts cannot exercise control all along the border to prevent the smuggling of goods and even people across it".<sup>22</sup> The Syrian Minister of Information, Mahdi Dakhlallah, supported Bashar's statement adding that "The border between Syria and Iraq is exceptionally long and over the years, even at the time that rivalry existed between Syria and Iraq under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, we found it difficult to guard it and close it off to terrorists who infiltrated from Iraq in order to carry out acts of sabotage against Syria".<sup>23</sup>

Alongside the minimal and largely cosmetic moves Syria has taken in connection with Iraq in order to placate the U.S., it has also taken a number of steps designed to provide an answer to the challenge created by Washington's presence in Iraq. Syria seeks to ensure its own interests in a future Iraq, whether this is to be a country established in the shadow of the United States, or whether it becomes a political entity after the Americans abandon it to its own devices.

First, the Syrians took steps to gain a foothold in Iraq by maintaining a dialogue with various power factors in the Iraqi political scene. They met with tribal shaykhs and with representatives of the Sunni political parties and religious organizations. They also met with leaders of the Kurdish factions and, finally, with the assistance of Hizballah and Iran, they met with representatives of the Shi'a. The Syrians were not averse to maintaining dialogue with representatives of the Iraqi administration established under the aegis of the United States. Senior Iraqi figures were regular visitors to Damascus. These included the Iraqi Ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense, as well as

Prime Minister Iyyad al-`Alawi and President Ghazi al-Ya'ur. These visits dealt with bilateral issues, for example, trade and economic ties between the two countries in addition to ways to strengthen security cooperation between the two sides.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it is difficult to point to any substantial Syrian success in gaining a foothold in Iraq. Deep suspicions and residue of years-long animosity existing between Syria and Iraq as well as limitations on Syria's power, have prevented it from becoming a significant element in the Iraqi domestic political scene. Moreover, the representatives of the Shi'i majority in the country did not disguise their anger at what appeared to them to be Syrian aid to the struggle of various Sunni elements in Iraq, whether it be senior officials of Saddam Hussein's Ba`th Regime or al-Qa`ida' member Mus`ib al-Zarqawi, who stood behind many of the terrorist attacks against American and Shi'i targets in Iraq.

Second, the Syrians had participated in Arab and regional consultations on the future of Iraq. Towards the end of the war they had already initiated a dialogue with Turkey and Iran on this matter, focusing on the issue of the Kurdish region in Northern Iraq. They also took part, along with Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, in the conferences of Iraq's neighboring countries.

In addition to these moves, designed to ensure Syrian interests in Iraq the day after the American withdrawal, or conversely to ensure these interests vis-a-vis any steps the Americans might desire to take in Iraq while still there (for example, partitioning of that country into three States: Shi'i, Sunni, and Kurdish), the Syrians took steps to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the United States:

First, efforts were made to improve Syrian-Turkish relations. The aim of this move was to achieve coordination and

cooperation between the two countries regarding anything related to the future of Iraq, especially the future of the Kurdish region in the north. It also had further reaching implications in view of Washington's increasing pressure on Syria and Israel's threat to Syria

Second, Syria made efforts to improve its relations with the European Union. The Syrians sought to gain political support from Europe should the United States take military action against them. They also sought to establish economic cooperation, especially important in light of the economic boycott by Washington. This Syrian effort was successful, and towards the end of 2004, the Syrians were able to initiate a trade and investment agreement with the E.U., following lengthy deliberations lasting over a decade. Nevertheless, the agreement is still awaiting ratification by the European countries, a process that could take several years.<sup>25</sup> The Syrians also endeavored to improve relations with Russia. In January 2005, Bashar al-Asad arrived in Moscow for a visit in the course of which the issue of Syria's \$12 billion debt to the former Soviet Union was settled. Talks were also held on the possibility of the sale of advanced Russian weaponry to Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Third, Syria maintained relations with Iran, which also shared a border with Iraq, and which had been in the same predicament as Syria. However, Iran, unlike Syria, did not hide its satisfaction with the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The country even took steps to strengthen radical Shi'i elements in Southern Iraq. In view of increasing American pressures directed towards Iran due to its nuclear policies, harmony was restored in relations between Tehran and Damascus.<sup>27</sup>

The Syrians had more than modest success with this policy, which had been preferred by the late Hafiz al-Asad.

Especially important was the substantial improvement of relations between Ankara and Damascus. This warming of relations reached its peak with Bashar al-Asad's historic visit to Ankara in January 2004 and another equally important visit by Turkish Prime Minister Ragib Tayip Erdogan to Damascus in December 2004. During the course of these visits, the path was laid out for achieving understanding between Syria and Turkey on the issue of the future of Northern Iraq. However, other important understandings were also reached in the economic sphere, culminating in the establishment of a Free Trade Zone between the two countries. Turkey and Syria also managed to overcome past ill feelings that had for years overshadowed their relations. This included the question of the province of Alexandretta and Damascus providing support to the Kurdish P.K.K. organization in its struggle against the Ankara authorities. The motive behind this improvement of relations was their common interest in preventing the establishment of a Kurdish State, which could have implications for the large Kurdish minorities in both Syria and Turkey.<sup>28</sup>

However, Syria's relations with the United States have remained the most important focal point for Damascus. Not only have no improvements been made in these relations, but rather they have even deteriorated and differences between them have escalated. Indeed, for some time there was a discernable American effort to motivate Damascus, through dialogue, to cooperate with the United States, but the Syrians chose to pursue their policy uninterrupted. However, they failed to take into account two factors

First, realities in Iraq had a dynamic of their own. As the attacks against U.S. troops grew more frequent, U.S. anger at Syria increased. One of the turning points

was the American attack, in early November 2004, on the town of Faluja in Northern Iraq. Faluja had been a major center of activity for the forces operating against the U.S., led by Mus'ib al-Zarqawi. According to American sources, documents bearing witness to Syrian connections with terrorist activities in Iraq were seized in this action. For example, it transpired that some of the anti-American terrorists had come from Syria, that former Iraqi Ba`th leaders were in Syria coordinating the struggle against the U.S., and finally that Syria allowed, or at least ignored, the establishment of training camps for terrorists.<sup>29</sup> In addition to these reports, for the first time, Iraqi officials accused Syria of being involved in terrorist attacks in Iraq. The chief of police in the city of Najaf reported that following a large terrorist attack there in December 2004, one of the perpetrators who was captured by his men admitted that he had trained in Syria.<sup>30</sup> Iraqi Prime Minister, Iyyad al-`Alawi, stated that during a visit to Damascus in mid 2004, he had given Bashar al-Asad information on some of Saddam Hussein's associates who had fled to Syria, among them the former Chief of Military Intelligence, Saddam Hussein's former deputy 'Izat Ibrahim al-Duri, and others.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the Iraqi Defense Minister went as far as to threaten reprisals against Tehran and Damascus, warning that terrorist operations would be carried out against them if they continued supporting the terrorism which was harming Iraqi citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Second, although it seemed the U.S. reaction to Syria's Iraq policies was both hesitant and slow, it is important to note that the American system was cumbersome and required time to change the policy and direction of activities to adopting and implementing a more assertive approach toward Syria. It should also be borne in mind that U.S. presidential elections were

held in November 2004. The election campaign also held back Washington's decision making process and delayed the adoption of a sharper tone and more severe steps against Damascus. Of note is the fact that the Syrians were hopeful Democratic candidate John Kerry would defeat George W. Bush. Syria viewed the latter's remaining in office as a danger to it. Furthermore, Syrian sources did not hide their trepidations regarding the future of Arabs when it became clear who had won re-election.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, throughout 2004, especially towards the end of the year, there were signs of a clear worsening in relations between the United States and Syria:

First, the U.S. Congress passed the "Syrian Accountability Law". This law, which dealt with leveling sanctions against Syria, was brought up for discussion in the course of 2003. However, under pressure from the Administration its adoption was postponed several times. Yet, in early 2004, the Administration lifted its opposition to the law after it recognized its failure to persuade Syria to change its policies by means of a political dialogue. In April 2004, Congress passed the law, and in May 2004, President Bush signed it. Although the Administration used only a small portion of the sanctions allowed by the law, the psychological effect of the law was greater than either Washington or Damascus had expected. For example, the sanctions leveled against the Syrian Trade Bank, the largest and most important of Syria's banks, made it difficult for Syria to carry out financial transactions with the international banking systems and drove investors away. Moreover, the "Syrian Accountability" Law was not a one-time move, but rather an on-going process: Syria's degree of accession to Washington's demands is examined every few months. In light of its results, the Administration has



the option of increasing its sanctions against Damascus.<sup>34</sup> Second, the tone of American media rhetoric against the Syrians increased. Several writers attacked the Administration in Washington, especially the State Department, for its weak policy towards Damascus. The American press featured many reports on a military strike against Syria being prepared in the Pentagon. Border incidents in which American forces fired at Syrian forces were also widely reported in the American newspapers.<sup>35</sup>

### **SYRIA-UNITED STATES: A NEW FRONT IN LEBANON**

Towards the end of 2004, another clear expression of the disastrous result for Damascus of the worsening of relations with the United States was seen, with regard to Lebanon. The United States teamed up with France, its sworn rival in the international scene, and together the two countries led a move that could pose a threat to the future of Syria's presence in Lebanon. Although Syria was called upon to pay a price in Lebanon, in reality, it was being called upon to pay a price for its acts, or rather its failure to act, in Iraq.

On September 3, an amendment to the Lebanese constitution, in which the term of the Lebanese president could be extended for another three years, under exceptional terms, was approved with a large majority by the Lebanese parliament. The parliamentary vote came the day after passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for the respect of Lebanon's sovereignty and constitution, the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and the dismantling of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. The final resolution was softer in comparison to the original version. For example, Syria was not mentioned by name. And the Syrian forces deploying in Lebanon were referred

to as foreign forces. The French and American representatives in the Security Council, however, made it clear to whom the resolution was directed.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, in mid-2004, the Syrians decided to support Emile Lahud to be re-elected as Lebanon's president. However, in full contradiction to the past, the Syrians did not bother to lay the groundwork for their choice of Lahud inside Lebanon. A strong and unprecedented reaction inside Lebanon and in the international arena resulted.

Thus, the Syrians succeeded at uniting France and the United States, an unprecedented occurrence since the war in Iraq had begun. But Syria's troubles in Lebanon did not come to an end with the reelection of Emile Lahud as Lebanese president. On February 14, 2004, former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. Lebanese opposition was quick to blame Syria for the murder. After all, Hariri had played a central role behind the scenes in crafting the American-French axis that produced U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559. For these reasons, Hariri was seen as the biggest Lebanese bone in Syria's throat.<sup>37</sup>

The murder of Rafiq al-Hariri led to unprecedented protest in Lebanon against the Syrian presence in that country. This domestic protest had been encouraged by the international, mainly American, reaction to Hariri's killing. Although the United States was careful not to charge Syria with direct responsibility, it expressed its attitude by quickly recalling its ambassador in Damascus "for consultations." When French President Jacques Chirac came to Beirut on a condolence visit to the Hariri's family, he pointedly refrained from meeting any senior government officials. The United States and France jointly initiated a demand by the Security Council to bring the killers to justice. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the dispatch of an

independent team to investigate the assassination.

The mass demonstrations in Lebanon, featuring harsh attacks against Syria, which until then had been unprecedented, encouraged the West to place increased pressure on Damascus to fulfill the terms of Security Council Resolution 1559 and remove its forces from Lebanon. With the horses having fled the stable, Bashar called a special session of the Syrian People's Assembly on March 5, 2005, and announced the evacuation of all Syrian troops from Lebanon. The withdrawal was completed on April 26, 2005, whereupon the Syrians announced that they had complied with the Security Council resolution. However, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan quickly responded, claiming that so long as Hizballah did not disarm, Syria could not be viewed as having fulfilled the totality of the conditions of the resolution.<sup>38</sup>

#### **THE RESULTS OF THE WAR IN IRAQ: THE WEAKENING OF THE SYRIAN REGIME ON THE DOMESTIC SCENE**

Bashar's problems were not limited to the sphere of his relations with the United States and to Syria's increasing isolation in the international arena. It would appear that Bashar was forced to pay a price for his behavior on the Iraqi issue in the domestic arena as well. Indeed, throughout the two years following the U.S. conquest of Iraq, there have been increasing indications of the Syrian regime's weakness and shaky status at home

In early March 2004, the Kurdish *intifada* erupted in the northern region of Hasaka, in particular in the city of Qamishli on the Syrian-Turkish border. A fight between fans of Kurdish and Arab football teams set off a tide of unrest that washed over the entire country. In protest against

the deaths of three Kurdish youths at the football stadium and the police and security force violence, Kurds themselves launched a wave of violence. This included attacks on government offices and public facilities. The fire then spread to other concentrations of Kurds, reaching even the Kurdish quarter of Damascus and the University of Damascus, where Kurdish students denounced violations of Kurdish rights.<sup>39</sup>

The Kurdish protests erupted against a historical background of tensions between Kurds and Arabs in the north, which traditionally had a Kurdish majority but had undergone a process of Arabization over the past few decades. For years, the government has struggled to suppress any expression of Kurdish national identity. It has refused to grant Syrian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds who, according to the government, fled to Syria from Iraq. At the same time, Syria's relatively decent treatment of local Kurds--certainly by the standards of Saddam Hussein's approach to Iraqi Kurds--explains the relative calm that, until recently, prevailed there.

Due to developments in Iraq itself, a signal of encouragement was sent to Kurds in surrounding areas; this upset the balance. American backing for a degree of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, verging on de facto independence, has strengthened Kurdish assertiveness against the central governments in Syria, Iran, and Turkey. This undoubtedly explains the audacity of Syrian Kurds in confronting the regime in Damascus.

In response, the regime attempted to conciliate the Kurds and refrained from relying only on an iron fist, as it had normally done in the past. It is true that several dozen Kurdish deaths have been reported, but in repressing previous rebellions, such as the 1982 Hama uprising, the regime did not hesitate to kill thousands.

In this case, it seems that in dealing with the Kurdish challenge in the north, the regime can rely on Arab support. The Arabs constitute an overwhelming majority of the population and reject any expression of Kurdish separatism, especially one relying on possible American support. And Washington will tread carefully on this issue, lest perceptions of American encouragement of the Kurds lead to serious tensions with Turkey, which is even more suspicious of Kurdish self-assertiveness.

There was no need for the regime to be overly concerned about oppositionist organizations and human rights activists protests, which spread all over Syria during 2004. For the time being, they remain a small collection of pro-reform forces, lacking any real base in the broader Syrian public. In general, the regime still appears to enjoy the support of most of the pillars of Syrian society: army officers, economic elites, and the small middle class. These elements understand better than any foreign observer that the alternative to the current regime is not necessarily a liberal democracy, as envisaged by the American administration, but rather Islamist fundamentalism of the sort that would make the Ba`th look positively libertarian in contrast.

Indeed, in April 2004 a terrorist attack directed against the U.N. offices was carried out in Damascus. The attack was the work of Islamist radicals who had returned a short time before from Iraq, where they had fought against the American forces. This attack, as unconnected and isolated as it was, demonstrated the dangers that fundamentalist Islam poses to the stability of the Syrian regime. The fundamentalist elements in Syria had forcibly been put down in the Islamic rebellion against the regime in the years 1976-1982. However, in the decades since then they have returned, and the scope or extent of their presence

within the Sunni population in the country's cities is unknown.<sup>40</sup>

### **PEACE CONTACTS WITH ISRAEL**

Since early 2004, against the backdrop of worsening of Syrian-U.S. relations, Bashar al-Asad began sending signals of his readiness for the renewal of peace negotiations with Israel, with no preconditions. These signals were sent mostly through various emissaries who visited Bashar's palace. However, these signals elicited shrugged shoulders both in Jerusalem and Washington, since they were considered to be a sign of the pressure and distress on Bashar's part, and not necessarily a true and honest desire for peace.<sup>41</sup>

In Israel, it was pointed out that alongside their peace signals, mostly inarticulate and hesitant, Syria continued granting assistance to the Palestinian terror organizations operating out of Damascus, as well as to the Hizballah. In the summer of 2004, Israel made an attempt on the life of the senior Hizballah figure in Damascus. This once more directed the spotlight on Syria's involvement in terrorism. Thus, Bashar's overtures were seen as insufficient in depth and courage. Instead of directly approaching the Israeli public or its government, he did nothing more than send messages via intermediaries, messages which were, for the most part, later denied by Syrian official spokesmen.<sup>42</sup>

It appeared that both states, especially their leaders, still had a long road to travel, with many stations along the way, before they could renew the talks. This was the case for the following reasons: First, so long as Bashar did not feel his rule to be stable, his ability to promote a concrete process with Israel, much less sign a peace agreement, was doubtful. Bashar, therefore, was likely to respond to American pressure to renew the talks with Israel and thereby

project a moderate attitude toward Israel. However, the prospect of his reaching the moment of decision before he felt his own status to be secure was doubtful. Second, the Israeli government is not prepared to accept the Syrian demand for a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights back to the June 4, 1967 lines (i.e., back to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee). In addition, the current Israeli government is busy with the implementation of its plan for disengagement from the Gaza Strip and cannot deal with two tracks-- the Palestinian and the Syrian-- at the same time. Moreover, even the U.S. administration, a key player in promoting the peace process, does not appear to be overly enthusiastic about lending the full measure of its weight to the promotion of Syrian-Israeli peace.

#### **SYRIA IN THE FACE OF FUTURE SCENARIOS IN IRAQ**

Syria's difficulties lie not only in the present realities of the region. Damascus's troubles are rooted, to a great extent, in the fact that all possible scenarios suggested in regards to the future of Iraq are working to the detriment of Syria

**First**, is American success in establishing a stable and pro-Western Iraq? This scenario would create a strong Iraq, operating close to, and alongside, the United States, and thus against Syria. Such an entity could be influenced by sediments of hostility and enmity towards Syria, their roots in the present Iraqi regime, which repeatedly accuses Syria of involvement with anti-Iraq terror. Moreover, the success of the Iraqi democratic experience could impact Syria, as the regime could find itself faced with growing criticism due to its dictatorial nature and its refusal to establish a democracy

**Second**, is the division of Iraq into three separate ethnic states? This scenario is also

dangerous for the Syrians. The establishment of a Kurdish State in Northern Iraq could arouse the large, and already agitated, Syrian Kurdish minority, as well as other ethnic elements within Syria, whose population is no less heterogeneous than that of Iraq

**Third**, is the establishment of a radical Shi'i state in Iraq? This could increase pressure on the Syrians. Syria could find itself stuck between two radical Shi'i entities-- Iraq on the one hand, and Lebanon under Hizballah leadership on the other-- which could end up turning against it. Such a move could also send shock waves throughout the Arab world. Arabs view with dread the possibility of Iraq becoming a Shi'i State; as such a state might turn to Iran, as opposed to the Arab world, for help

**Fourth**, is continuous chaos in Iraq? This is another potential problem for Syria. Such chaos could bring about further deterioration in Syrian-U.S. relations. Furthermore, chaos could also seep into Syria, as proven by the April 2004 fundamentalist Islamic attack in Damascus

Indeed, the Syrians had good reason at the time to support Saddam Hussein's continued rule in Iraq and even brought about a substantial warming of relations with him. After all, it was a centralistic regime that ensured relative stability in Iraq and prevented its collapse. However, at the same time, it was under the scrutiny of the world, which put limits on the extent to which it could harm Syria. Therefore Saddam appeared to the Syrians to be preferable over the other possibilities

To conclude, two years after the end of the war in Iraq, Syria is a weaker, more isolated, and embroiled in a web of increasing internal and external pressures. This strategic bind is the clear result of Syria's own mistakes. The domestic situation in Syria is also deteriorating. In

addition to difficulties in the social and political spheres, the Syrian economy appears to be in complete disarray; there does not even seem to be a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

Unlike his father, Bashar, according to his own statements, is aware of the difficulties facing Syria. In the past he has even indicated his desire to grapple with these difficulties by changing direction and leading Syria onto a new path. However, Bashar's good will is not enough. Thus, it would appear that the only person capable of influencing Syria's future is President Bush, and not necessarily Bashar al-Asad. Bush was very critical of Syria. The newly appointed secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, declared, only in mid-January 2005, that Syria's conduct was liable to cause deep and long-term damage to relations between Washington and Damascus.<sup>43</sup> Unless there is a substantial change in Syria's policies, an improvement in relations between the two countries seems unlikely. The question is whether the United States has decided to exert all its power in order to effect a change of this kind. Without pressure from Washington, it is difficult to assume that it will happen on its own.

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the Father, Bashsar al-Asad's First years in Power (Tel Aviv, 2004).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Weekly Standard*, December 11, 2004; *WT* (*The Washington Times*), January 5, 2005; *NYT* (*The New York Times*), January 5, February 4, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See *al-Ba`th* (Damascus), December 26, 2004; *al-Zaman* (London), December 27, 2004; AP, December 4, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, February 28, 2005; see also an interview of Bashar to the *NYT*, December 30, 2003 and to *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), January 10, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 153-75.

<sup>5</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Who Really Rules Syria?," *MEQ* (Middle East Quarterly), Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 15-24.

<sup>6</sup> See Eyal Zisser, "A False Spring in Damascus," *Orient*, Vol. 44 (January, 2003), pp. 39-62; see also Alan George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See Eyal Zisser, "In the Name of the Father, Bahshsar al-Asad's First Years in Power" (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), pp. 206-43. See also Eyal Zisser, "The Return of Hizballah," *MEQ*, Vol. 9 No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 3-12; see also 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.

<sup>8</sup> See *al-Quds al-`Arabi* (London), October 10, 2000; see also Bashar's interview with the Times, December 16, 2002; See also EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit), *Country Report (CR) - Syria - 2002*, No. 1, pp. 2-5.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Damascus, March 10, 2003; R. Damascus, March 9, 2003; Sana (Syrian News Agency), March 27, 2003; *al-Safir* (Beirut), March 27, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> This comparison was made during a joint press conference by the Syrian Foreign Minister and his French colleague, Dominique de Villepan. See Reuters, April 12, 2003; *al-Ray al-`Amm* (Kuwait), April 13, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> See AP, March 28 and April 13, 2003; Fox news, March 14, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See Syrian TV, April 9, 10, 2003; see also, *Tishrin* (Damascus), April 12, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See *al-Ba`th*, May 1, 2004; *al-Safir*, October 26, 2004; *al-Thawra* (Damascus), November 8, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> CNN, April 12, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See AFP, November 6, 7, 2004; CNN, December 22, 2004; *al-Hayat* (London), December 29, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> See h*Al-Safir*, 15 May 2003; *al-Hayat*, 27 May 2003; WP (the Washington Post), December 8, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Jazira TV, September 11, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> See Bashar's interview to al-`Arabiyya TV channel, June 9, 10, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> See *al-Safir*, July 19, 2004; *al-Hayat*, July 26, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> *Al-Hayat*, December 29, 2004; *al-Riyyad* (Riyyad), January 17, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> See Bashar's interview to al-Jazira TV, June 1, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See *al-Khalij* (Kuwait), April 13, 2004; see also *al-Watan* (Kuwait), July 4, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> See AFP, March 22 and July 11, 2004. Sana, May 20 and June 16, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> See Sana, October 18, 2004; AFP, October 19, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Hayat*, February, 24 and 25, 2005; *Ha`aretz*, February 10, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> See Sana, February 16, 21, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Hayat*, January 6 and 8, 2004; Sana, December 22, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Daily Telegraph*, December 2, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> AFP, December 25, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Al-`Arabiyya TV Channel, December 17, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Hurra TV, January 7, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> See *al-Ba`th*, November 7, 2004; Tishrin, November 9, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, May 12, 2004; WT, May 26, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> See *Weekly Standard*, December 11, 2004; *WT*, January 5, 2005; *NYT*, January 5, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Reuters, September 2, 3, 15, 2004, October 15, 2004; see also *al-Hayat*, September 4, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Reuters, February 14, 2005; *al-Hayat*, February 15, 16, 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Reuters, February 14, 2005; *NYT*, February 15, 2005; *al-Hayat*, March 6 and April 27, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> *Al-Hayat*, March 13, 14, May 4, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Reuters, April 27, 28, 2004; al-Jazira, 28 April 2004.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Bashar's interview to *NYT*, December 30, 2003; al-Jazira TV, June 1, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> See *Ha'aretz*, April 27, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Reuters, January 15 and February 15, 2005.