

U.S. Policy toward a Weak Assad

Bashar al-Assad's rule of Syria has been characterized by vacillation and a constant pattern of miscalculation. Whether his regime can survive its most profound error and the potential loss of its control of Lebanon remains to be seen. For now, U.S. policy, while emphasizing the need for full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 to withdraw all foreign forces from Lebanon, should avoid engaging with the Syrian leadership before its future becomes clearer. In the meantime, the United States should also engage with Syria's neighbors in discrete contingency discussions to deal with the possible regional consequences of Syrian instability.

In 24 years of dominating Syria, Bashar's father, the late Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad, never put himself in such a precarious political position. Over the years, I spent countless hours with Hafiz al-Assad negotiating the smallest details of the Middle East peace process. He was not an easy person to negotiate with because he treated every point raised as a contest. Assad had a conspiratorial background: he was part of a minority sect, the Alawites—a heterodox offshoot of Islam who compose approximately 10 percent of the Syrian population; he had been involved in coups and countercoups with the military and the Ba'ath party; and he had a history of paranoia, seeing enemies everywhere. His zero-sum mindset and perception of the negotiations as a process of attrition, rather than a give-and-take, should not have been surprising. Although Assad's attitude that no issue was too small to debate might have been numbing and frustrating, there was never any doubt about his grasp of Syria's interests as he defined them. His main priorities included regime survival and stability, controlling Lebanon, recovering the

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Golan Heights, and preserving Syria's centrality in decisions that affected the region. Even if one disagreed with how Hafiz safeguarded these interests, at least his behavior was predictable.

Hafiz was guided by a belief that Syria must never reveal its weaknesses. Because he recognized Syria's vulnerabilities and feared their exploitation, he placed great importance on maintaining his leverage and was loath to

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surrender any of it. I would often remind Assad that his connection to Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad was undermining his professed desire to reach a peace agreement with the Israelis. For Assad, however, relinquishing these "cards" meant giving up his leverage. In his eyes, the influence of Damascus on these groups gave the Israelis a crucial incentive to deal with him; he would give them up only for a price. My arguments that Syrian support for

these organizations was convincing the Israeli public that Assad had no real interest in peace and that acts of terrorism by these groups were subverting every opening for peace had precious little impact on him. Peace was acceptable only on Assad's terms and, in any case, was secondary to securing his interests. Without leverage, he was convinced that Israel would seek to have its way, the Lebanese would break away, the Saudis or Jordanians might think they could ignore Syria, and the United States might come to believe that Syria did not matter or, worse, that it could be coerced and Syria would be threatened.

Assad was also a good calculator of power. He was very careful not to cross certain thresholds with those who could hurt Syria. Although he might not give in to the Israelis, he understood the danger of provoking them. He knew when to challenge and when to stand back. In 1970, during "Black September," the period when King Hussein decimated the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and ultimately expelled it from Jordan, Assad would not commit the Syrian air force to rescue the PLO once Israel signaled its readiness to intervene in the event of Syrian involvement. Later, beginning in 1976, he would not deploy Syrian forces to Lebanon, below the Israeli redlines, lest he trigger an Israeli response. Following Syria's disengagement agreement with Israel in 1974 until he died in 2000, he never permitted acts of terrorism to be launched from the Golan Heights in order to avoid giving the Israelis any pretext for direct retaliation. Ironically, its border with Syria has been Israel's safest and most secure since 1974. Many more deadly incidents have occurred on Israel's borders with Egypt and Jordan, even after they signed peace treaties.

Assad used Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad to apply terrorist pressure on Israel, but he always maintained his deniability and never permitted

the Syrian territory to be used as a springboard for attack. He was ready to use these groups when they served his purpose and dispense with them when they did not. During our negotiations, the Syrians made it very clear that these terrorist groups would be simply shut down if peace was achieved. U.S. negotiators were baldly told that no one could threaten Syria's national interests and, if the Israelis and Syrians reached an agreement, these groups would not be permitted to threaten its terms.

The Syrian negotiators also frequently reminded us that Assad always kept his word. In fact, he delighted in drawing a contrast between himself and Yasser Arafat in this regard. Assad was a responsible leader who fulfilled his commitments, unlike Arafat, who made commitments easily but rarely followed through on them. All this was part of the persona of a leader who understood the limits of his power but was certain to exercise the authority he had to preserve Syria's interests as he defined them.

The Generation Gap

Hafiz al-Assad's rule was marked internally by intolerance, intimidation, and coercion; externally, it was characterized by caution, largely covert threats against neighbors, and meticulous calculation. Yet after nearly five years in power, his son and successor, Bashar al-Assad, has exhibited neither the strength nor the calculating ability of his father. Domestically, Bashar's initial promise of a new openness, which resulted in initiating "salons for discussion" on political liberalization throughout Syria, was quickly reversed, and the salons and other civil society forums were shut down in early 2001. Similarly, his plans to modernize Syria's economy and reorient it away from its statist moorings have failed to materialize. In his foreign policy, Bashar al-Assad seems to have none of his father's guile and appears to have an extraordinary capacity for miscalculation.

To be fair, it is unknown what Hafiz al-Assad would have done, for example, after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon created a new reality and reinforced Hizballah's strength in Lebanon (Assad died within weeks of the Israeli pullout), the eruption of the intifada, or the September 11 attacks, much less how he would have responded to the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the United States. Although some of Hafiz's reactions would likely have been similar to those of Bashar, it is still easy to discern some fundamental differences between father and son.

For one, Hafiz al-Assad never had any illusions about Hizballah. He saw the group as a useful tool to advance Syrian interests, but not as a reliable force. Hearing Bashar describe Hizballah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, as a democratic figure who understood broad social and public forces and

from whom he could learn a great deal—as I did in 2000—reflected what appeared to be Bashar’s genuine admiration for Hizballah. Bashar even invited Nasrallah to speak at a ceremony in his family’s village on the first anniversary of Hafiz’s death. Hafiz would have understood the value of Hizballah up to a point, but he would never have made himself or Syria’s interests beholden to Nasrallah. Hafiz never even met him personally. In fact, during our meetings, the elder Assad left very little doubt about his basic distrust of Hizballah. His relationship of convenience with the organization was based on the logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Bashar seemed far more affected by Hizballah’s success in driving the Israelis out of Lebanon and the importance of Hizballah for him and for Syria.

Bashar has also differed substantially from his father in dealing with the Israelis. Hafiz would have seen the intifada as a form of pressure on the Israelis. He would not have shied away from dealing with the Israelis, provided of course that he received something in return. After Dr. Baruch Goldstein’s killing spree in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron in 1994—with the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations suspended and much of the Arab world up in arms—it was Hafiz who, at Washington’s request, resumed talks with the Israelis. Bashar, however, failed to recognize when his readiness to deal with the Israelis might have gained something. After the 2000 Camp David summit and possibly after the beginning of the intifada, when Israel’s government under Prime Minister Ehud Barak might have been open and forthcoming to Syria, Bashar shied away from contact, believing that he could not deal with the Israelis either in the late summer or in the politically heated atmosphere of the fall of 2000. His potential for accomplishing anything was bound to be far less with the Israeli government under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who took office in 2001. Later, beginning in late 2003 and after apparently deciding to try to improve relations with the United States (rather than genuinely working toward peace) Bashar reversed course, stating Syria’s willingness to resume negotiations with Israel. It is an approach that his father might have considered in comparable circumstances, but Hafiz would have first used private channels to gauge Washington’s interest before publicly shifting his policy without a guarantee of a positive U.S. response, which in this case never came.

The difference between the two leaders was also demonstrated by Bashar’s response to the September 11 attacks, which was essentially a caricature of what his father might have done. Like Bashar, Hafiz would have certainly recognized the immediate value of cooperating with the United States in its fight against Al Qaeda. Yet, Bashar failed to understand how the terrorist attacks transformed the Bush administration strategically and shaped its approach to the world. Hafiz certainly would also have been tempted to get by on the cheap with the U.S. government, hoping to change little of his be-

havior and policies in the process, but he understood the fundamental realities of power. He fully grasped that the United States is a “hyperpower” with no peer and would have known to tread carefully in a situation where the United States had suffered a great trauma. With the Bush administration preoccupied with the war on terrorism, Hafiz would likely have compelled Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad to temper their behavior and halt attacks for an extended period of time. He would not have wanted to give Washington a pretext for placing Syria in the enemy category.

In contrast, Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad escalated their attacks between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2002. After a cooling-down period in the late summer of 2001, Hizballah resumed limited attacks on the Sheba farms border region with Israel in October, just a month after the World Trade Center fell, and then began ratcheting them up in subsequent weeks.¹ Suicide attacks in Israel by Hamas and Islamic Jihad also escalated dramatically from November 2001 to April 2002, with the groups’

leaders in Damascus pressing for more attacks. In addition, Hizballah helped to facilitate Iran’s sale of \$100 million worth of arms to be smuggled into Israel to Palestinian militants on the *Karine A*. Even though the Israelis intercepted this particular shipment, there were others, all of which sought to upgrade Palestinian capabilities for conducting the intifada dramatically (by adding rockets, for example). Even if Bashar did not mandate these behaviors, he did nothing to stop them; his father would not have allowed these groups to put Syria in a potentially vulnerable, exposed position with a U.S. administration determined to fight terrorism worldwide.

Yet another distinction between Hafiz and Bashar can be seen in the latter’s mishandling of the Lebanon issue. Although Bashar at least initially sought to create a “kinder, gentler” Syrian approach to Lebanon by reaching out to some of the Maronite opponents, allowing some exiled Lebanese critics of Syria to return home, and reducing the Syrian troop deployment in Lebanon, he also increased the size and presence of the Syrian intelligence apparatus and undermined Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri’s efforts to foster greater Lebanese autonomy. Although Hariri tested the limit of what reforms and autonomous behavior Syria would tolerate, he nonetheless always stayed within the Syrian redlines of preserving its dominance in Lebanon. Bashar crossed Hariri’s own redlines, however, by imposing a change in the Lebanese constitution in 2004 permitting the extension of pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud’s term—an overt act against Lebanese independence.

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This ham-handed maneuver pushed Hariri to join the opposition and support the September 2004 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, requiring that foreign forces such as the Syrian military and intelligence apparatus withdraw from Lebanon completely. Hariri was assassinated shortly thereafter, in February 2005. Perhaps Syria's Old Guard, fearing a loss of control in Lebanon, was responsible for the assassination without

Basher's direct command. Regardless, the miscalculation took place on Bashar's watch. Hafiz would have been no more willing to surrender Syria's control in Lebanon, but it is difficult to believe that he would have let the situation deteriorate to the point that a clumsy Syrian intervention would isolate Damascus both regionally and internationally.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that Hafiz would have played Syria's response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the way that Bashar has. If nothing else, Hafiz would likely not have been providing military material and dual-use equipment to Saddam right until the eve of the U.S. invasion.² Moreover, Hafiz's own interest in bringing down Saddam would have tempered any impulse to oppose the United States publicly as Bashar did. During the first two weeks of the war, Bashar seemed to be anticipating that Saddam would survive and wage an extended resistance. Bashar's public posture made him appear completely out of touch with the reality on the ground. Even worse, his misreading of the situation and subsequent willingness to provide a sanctuary for remnants of Saddam's regime, permitting them to transmit money, material, and fighters across the border, was a dangerous undertaking for Syria.

It is difficult to see Hafiz playing with fire in quite the same way. Of course, even with all his antipathy toward Saddam, Hafiz would still not have felt comfortable with the idea of Washington ousting a secular, Ba'athist regime next door. Yet, Hafiz would have been far more subtle in supporting those elements capable of tying U.S. forces down in Iraq, at least until he saw how Washington might respond and whether the administration was threatening him. In addition, Hafiz would have probably worked with the Saudis and others to try to influence the role of the United States in post-Saddam Iraq. In 1990–1991, Hafiz al-Assad's actions during the Persian Gulf War demonstrated that he grasped the realities of power very differently than his son understands them today. He joined the U.S.-led coalition and even sent Syrian forces to Saudi Arabia at Washington's request. At the time of the 2002 war in Iraq, Hafiz would have looked for a deal with the Bush administration and, like Bashar, might have found only U.S. demands in response.

The current Bush administration eschewed engagement with Syria, instead insisting that it stop busting the sanctions regime and halt the oil shipments from Iraq, end its material supply relationship with Saddam, cut its supply lines to Hizballah, close down the operations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Damascus, ease its control over Lebanon, and terminate all programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Of course, once the United States went to war in Iraq, the administration understandably also demanded that Syria close down its border with Iraq to stop the movement of material and volunteers supporting the insurgency. All of Washington's demands were legitimate, but the administration gave them little priority, and even less thought was given to what might be done if the Syrians were willing to respond in part or completely. To make matters worse, Washington did not clarify the specific consequences it would impose if the Syrians failed to respond. The United States warned the Syrians repeatedly, but ultimately the only real penalty the administration sought to impose was the passage of the 2003 Syrian Accountability Act. Yet, this legislation alone offered little more than a symbolic penalty on Syria. To materially add to the sanctions that being on the terrorism list already imposes, the Syrian Accountability Act would have to have prevented all U.S. investment in Syria. Moreover, because the sanctions are only unilateral, Syria can turn to other trading partners in Europe and Asia to mitigate the consequences.

The strategic differences between Hafiz and Bashar would have taken effect at this point. Without U.S. attention to Syrian behavior, Hafiz al-Assad would have undoubtedly come to believe that the costs of challenging the United States were limited and the gains of cooperating were nonexistent as long as Syria could avoid being isolated by the rest of the region and the world. In this context, he would have attempted to show Washington the price of its approach, especially in places such as Iraq, but with an eye toward gaining something from the United States in return for stopping that which Washington opposed. Parallel to such an effort, Hafiz would have also made much more of an effort to align himself with the Europeans as well as with the Saudis and the Egyptians. Bashar's policies in this regard have been inept: he slow-rolled negotiations with the EU on an economic cooperation agreement that would have blunted the impact of U.S. sanctions, and his efforts with President Husni Mubarak and Crown Prince Abdullah have left both leaders unwilling to go to bat for him.

Bashar's Bizarre World

In fact, one often gets the sense from the Egyptian and Saudi leaders that Bashar simply does not get it. Certainly, his public posture since becoming

president has, at a minimum, suggested a remarkably skewed view of the world. From the outset, he has had a penchant for making extreme statements, which some suggest was his way of trying to appeal to the broader Arab public. However, these statements produced a series of public relations disasters. In his initial address to the Arab summit in October 2000, he offered a harsh description of the Israelis reminiscent of rhetoric from the 1950s. When he hosted Pope John Paul II—the embodiment of reconciliation among all religious faiths—he chose to speak of the treacherous mentality of the Jews, declaring that they had “betrayed” and “tortured” Jesus Christ.³ At the Arab

summit in Beirut in March 2002, although he declared support for the Saudi peace initiative, he announced that any Israeli was a legitimate target for attack⁴ and declared that, “as much as we are concerned about peace, we should also be eager to remain steadfast and maintain the intifada [sic].”⁵

When Bashar spoke about the situation in Iraq just prior to the war, his comments bordered on the hysterical. At one point, he

noted that a disaster on par with the creation of the state of Israel and the British betrayal of the Arabs after World War I would befall the Arab world if there was war in Iraq. After the war began, he declared that Arab friendship with the United States was “more fatal than its hostility.”⁶ Bashar’s rhetoric has continued to remain incoherent and infused with a sense of conspiracy. In a speech he delivered to the Syrian parliament on March 5, 2005, after the assassination of Hariri and the resignation of the Lebanese government, he referred to the “assassination” of Arafat.⁷

The consistency of such public statements, rather than suggesting a calculated effort to establish himself as a radical to take advantage of growing anti-U.S. sentiment, instead points more to Bashar’s bizarre perception of reality. Just as Arafat was guided by his own mythologies, which prevented him from seeing the changes in the surrounding regional landscape, Bashar’s reality must be recognized for what it is: his own. This does not mean that there is no way to influence him because he has demonstrated that he does draw back when pressured and the threat of danger, as he defines it, becomes clear. For example, in October 2003, Syria mustered only a tepid rhetorical response after Israel bombed an alleged Palestinian terrorist training camp in Syria. Similarly, as international and regional pressure builds for Syrian troops to get out of Lebanon, Bashar has taken steps to try to defuse the situation by reaching an agreement with Terje Larsen, UN secretary general Kofi Annan’s personal representative, on a general timetable for with-

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drawal. Although he hoped to keep the timing of withdrawal vague, he has given in to continued pressure and agreed to withdraw all Syrian military and intelligence personnel by the end of May. Once again, Bashar's perceptions and miscalculations appear to be imposing a heavy price on Syria.

One has to wonder what will happen in Syria now. How will the Old Guard react to missteps that, if not reversed, could cost Syria much of the leverage it has in Lebanon? Perhaps Bashar, working with and becoming increasingly dependent on Hizballah, will be able to preserve a measure of Syria's position in Lebanon. Such an outcome might secure his leadership for the time being and allow him to continue to muddle along until economic problems, including the depletion of oil resources and the loss of Lebanon as a financial lifeline, mount and change can no longer be avoided. Alternatively, some of the senior Alawi figures in Syria's security and military apparatus could decide that Bashar's rule is jeopardizing their future and carry out a coup against him. Perhaps the world will learn that Bashar knew nothing about the plans to assassinate Hariri. In this case, Bashar may conclude that the Old Guard is threatening his hold on power. He could then seize on their miscalculation to remove the remnants of his father's regime and strike out on his own course.

U.S. Policy toward Bashar's Weak Leadership

In light of all the uncertainties about Syria's future, now is not the time for the United States to launch a major new policy initiative. Instead, Washington should focus on getting the situation in Lebanon right. What happens there will affect Syria and the Middle East more broadly as Arab populations throughout the region watch to see if people like themselves can in fact shape their own future. So far, the Bush administration's course of action has been correct, emphasizing the importance of Resolution 1559. Preserving an international and regional consensus on the resolution and insisting on its full implementation should remain the administration's first priority. Fostering a consensus on the consequences of a Syrian-backed military crack-down on the Lebanese public, should that occur, is also worth considering, not only to convey those consequences to Syria but also to other regional states who may face a similar dilemma in the future.

The United States should go to some lengths to make it clear that it will accept whatever decision the Lebanese people make about their future, even if Hizballah may be a part of that future. Emphasizing this theme will force Hizballah to decide which state's agenda it is going to serve in the future: Lebanon, Syria, or Iran. Hizballah, led by Lebanese Shi'a, has always sought to become politically dominant in Lebanon. How will it look if Hizballah is serv-

ing Syrian or Iranian interests at the expense of Lebanon's? If Nasrallah is as politically clever as Bashar believes him to be, under current circumstances he will have to choose Lebanon or lose a significant part of his support.

Why not integrate such a policy into a broader carrot-and-stick approach toward Syria to cease Syrian support for terrorism and separate it from Iran? Before the Hariri assassination, such an approach seemed to be the best policy option. The problem was that neither the gains nor losses conveyed to Bashar were ever really spelled out or very impressive. Too many questions remained:

A new reality will likely emerge in Syria due to Bashar's ineffectiveness.

If Bashar really did shift course on Iraq and stop Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad from using terrorism to disrupt any hope of peace, what would Bashar and Syria get in return? How would Syria benefit economically? How would relations between Syria and the United States have changed? Would Washington make a serious effort to resume the Israeli-Syrian negotiating track, and if so, would the United States reembrace the principle of land

for peace as it related to withdrawal from the Golan Heights?

Alternatively, if Bashar did not alter his behavior on either Iraq or on terrorist groups, what price would Syria pay? Was the United States prepared to encourage more direct military pressure on Syria by permitting hot pursuit of insurgents by U.S. forces across the border from Iraq? Was Washington open to greater military pressure from Israel in response to acts of terrorism? A lesser effort such as the Syrian Accountability Act was unlikely to persuade Bashar unless the Europeans were also prepared to apply sanctions, which was not possible prior to Hariri's assassination and the Lebanese demonstrations. They are possible now, however, especially given the tough French position in the aftermath.

Even if Bashar is presented a clear, unified package of carrots and sticks, he may not be capable of making the tough decisions to accept such a bargain. To hope to change any leader's behavior, Washington must clearly signal what can potentially be lost or gained by pursuing a particular course of action. Reluctant leaders will not make painful choices without knowing their consequences and being able to justify such choices to their key constituencies. If a leader is strong, such a clear choice is both necessary and likely to be effective. If a leader is weak, however, uncertainty is much greater. A weak leader may not be capable of, or perhaps even interested in, affecting change. In Bashar's case, although I perceived that he was weak even prior to the Hariri assassination, the opaque nature of Syria's reality before February 2005 argued for testing him for no other reason than the possibility that such an assumption about him was wrong.

Today, the uncertainty of Bashar's future argues for not testing or engaging him. Whether or not he survives, the United States can always adopt the carrot-and-stick approach later. For now, the White House should not throw Bashar a life preserver or try to sink him and should deal with him through the UN. If Bashar survives, his interest in engaging the United States will increase, and he can be dealt with at that time.

If Bashar fails to survive, it is impossible at this point to predict with any confidence who or even what is likely to succeed him. Syria could return to a strong ruler like Hafiz al-Assad, perhaps led by Bashar's brother-in-law, Assaf Shawqat, the head of Syria's military intelligence. Alternatively, even though a more enlightened Alawi-Sunni coalition of officers might come together to replace Bashar, Sunni extremists could also possibly trigger an uprising and shape Syria's new leadership or produce ongoing instability in the country. Given these uncertainties, the U.S. administration needs to position itself to contain possible instability in Syria as well as its consequent regional fallout. That strategy argues for beginning a discreet set of dialogues with Syria's neighbors to plan for different contingencies. Certainly, instability in Syria could affect Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and Iraq in different ways. Turkey, for example, will be very concerned if the Kurds in Syria suddenly begin to push hard for autonomy. Israel will worry that leadership instability could increase Syria's incentive to create a crisis with Israel to forge a domestic coalescence. The United States needs to coordinate strategies with Syria's neighbors carefully to prevent potentially destabilizing interventions and to shape approaches to whatever emerges.

Ultimately, a new reality will likely emerge in Syria due to Bashar's ineffectiveness and his inability to gain the respect that his father had at home and abroad. The United States should make clear to whomever assumes leadership in Syria, including Bashar if he survives and consolidates his power, what will continue to create problems in U.S.-Syrian relations, as well as what could offer genuine opportunities for a more productive future. The logic of a carrot-and-stick approach has probably always made sense in dealing with Syria. To be successful, however, that tactic requires the United States to define what it is prepared to do both on its own and with others to make Syria's gains or losses meaningful. Perhaps the situation unfolding in Lebanon will give U.S. policymakers a reason to develop a more explicit policy vis-à-vis Syria and to adopt a strategy to make it work.

Notes

1. Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), pp. 112–120.

2. Ibid., pp. 134–142.
3. Quoted in Eyal Zisser, “The Damascus Blood Libel,” *Tel Aviv Notes*, no. 18 (May 10, 2001).
4. Quoted in Eyal Zisser, “Does Bashar Al-Assad Rule Syria?” *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 19.
5. “Syrian President Addresses Beirut Arab Summit,” BBC Monitoring International Reports, March 27, 2002.
6. Quoted in Eyal Zisser, “Syria and the United States: Bad Habits Die Hard,” *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 34.
7. For the full text of the speech, see <http://www.sana.org/english/reports/assad.htm>.