Eyal Zisser

Bashar Al-Assad: In or Out of the New World Order?

When President Bashar al-Assad inherited power following the death of his father, Hafiz al-Assad, on June 10, 2000, many Syrians hoped that he would transform Syria into a more politically, economically, and culturally open society. Such speculation was based largely on contrasts between the father and the son: the gap in their ages, the dissimilarity in their educational backgrounds, and the difference in their degree of exposure to the West. At the start of the twenty-first century, amid dismal socioeconomic and political conditions, Syrians needed to hope. Toward the end of the 1990s, the ruling Ba'ath regime in Damascus seemed to have reached a dead end. Hafiz al-Assad had always been convinced that time was on his side, that there was no need for reform.[1] His son, however, seemed aware of his country's dire situation and of the need to initiate genuine reform to ensure the regime's survival. He also appeared aware of the need to bridge the deep gulf between Syrian and Western society, primarily in the realm of technological and scientific progress, but also in the political and the economic spheres, and thus enable Syria to integrate into the new world order.[2]

In mid-2005, however, five years after Bashar came to power, it has become increasingly evident that he is finding the conduct of a significant change of course difficult and has still not freed himself from his late father's shadow. Moreover, many observers argue that, if any difference does exist between the two men, it has less to do with their policies and outlooks than with the fact that the father was perceived as an authoritative and powerful leader, while the son's image remains that of an upstart. In domestic and foreign policy spheres, Bashar still seems to lack sufficient legitimacy and charisma, as well as the experience needed to achieve genuine change.

Eyal Zisser is a professor and chairman of the Department for Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University.

The Washington Quarterly • 28:3 pp. 115–131.

In fact, all of Bashar's efforts to introduce reforms, even limited ones, have clearly failed, from his early efforts to permit a certain degree of political openness to his attempts to liberalize the Syrian economy. Even Bashar's efforts to improve Syria's standing regionally and internationally have not succeeded, and the country remains more isolated and threatened than ever.

When probed during a 2003 interview with the *New York Times* about the gap between the promises and hopes that arose on his coming to power and the reality more than two years later, Bashar responded that the problem does not lay with his world view, determination, or ability to make difficult decisions. Rather, the trouble stems from Syria's lack of reformist cadre with the knowledge and experience necessary to introduce genuine change. Bashar added that, although he would continue moving toward reform, he would proceed at the "Syrian pace," a pace sufficiently slow and gradual to guarantee political stability.[3] Yet, Bashar may no longer have that luxury. Syria's failures to cooperate fully with the United States in the war on terrorism and to cope with the results of the war in Iraq, as well as with the dramatic recent events in Lebanon, are liable to bring Bashar's regime to a point at which it will have to make painful decisions in domestic and foreign policy, decisions that it has delayed making for years. The regime will have to make them if it hopes to survive.

Is Bashar a Different Assad?

Bashar's reign came when Syria faced a crossroads, if not an impasse, in light of a series of political, social, and economic policy challenges. The ability of the Ba'ath regime, which has ruled Syria since the Ba'ath Revolution of March 8, 1963, to continue in its present form was and is being questioned. The Ba'ath Party was founded in Damascus in 1947 as an all-Arab party with branches in other Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The Iraqi branch of the party separated itself from the Syrian branch to become a totally different party, although ostensibly committed to the same basic principles of Pan-Arabism. The Ba'ath regime in Syria, established in the wake of the 1963 revolution, however, soon became embroiled in an intense internal power struggle that ended when Hafiz took control of the regime in November 1970. By all accounts, one of Hafiz al-Assad's (1970–2000) most definitive achievements was to establish a strong, stable regime, even if it was also highly repressive. With such unprecedented political stability, Hafiz was able to transform the country from a weak, ineffectual entity into a regional power of stature and influence.[4]

By the late 1980s, however, cracks began to appear in the secure image that Hafiz projected during his rule. A series of factors were responsible for

this setback, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria's close ally and patron; the ascendance of the United States as the world's sole superpower; the spread of globalization, the effects of which became palpable even in Syria; a spiraling birth rate as well as a stagnant economy during the 1990s; and Hafiz's deteriorating health, which led to his seclusion.[5]

A False Spring in Damascus

The Syrian people thus welcomed Bashar's rise to power as a refreshing wind. From the little that people who had met him reported, as well as from newspaper interviews Bashar so sparingly granted, the new president appeared to be an open-minded and intelligent young man with a modern, Western worldview who recognized the need for reform. His prolonged stay in London, where he was a resident in ophthalmology at a local hospital, as well as his deep familiarity with the Internet—knowledge in which he took great pride—were all signs for optimism.

> Bashar seems to lack sufficient legitimacy, charisma, and experience to change Syria.

At the beginning of his rule, Bashar made some hesitant efforts to encourage greater open-mindedness, including some moves, although rather limited in scope, toward economic and political reform. Observers noted these developments and coined the term "Damascus Spring" to refer to this new era of progress. Bashar even encouraged intellectuals to form cultural and political forums throughout Syria in a relatively open atmosphere, touching on the need to advance democracy in Syria. Bashar's support for the forums encouraged Syrian intellectuals to speak out and level criticism at the political system prevailing in the country.[6]

This tendency toward political openness was quickly curbed. Aside from Bashar's lack of experience, leadership skills, and charisma, he also appears to have been too weak to take on his father's close associates in the regime's leadership who had remained in office. The Old Guard was supported by Syria's true powerbrokers: commanders of the Security Services and the army units, all of whom are members of the Alawite community, a heterodox Muslim sect, which account for roughly 12 percent of the Syrian population; political bosses and other members of the Ba'ath Party; and the government bureaucrats who controlled Syria's socioeconomic life. They were all determined to maintain the political and social order that had existed in the country for an entire generation.

In mid-2001, just a year after assuming power, Bashar found himself leading, or perhaps impelled to lead, a counterattack of the regime against sup-

porters of reform. Spokespeople for the regime and even Bashar himself quickly labeled the reformists as "Western agents whose only aim was to undermine Syria's internal stability from within, in the service of the state's enemies."[7] At the peak of this counterattack, the regime issued orders to terminate the forums, and several reform-camp activists who stood out for their criticism of the regime were imprisoned.

An Economic Burden

Bashar also quickly found himself confronting an economic crisis, the first signs of which had already become evident toward the end of his father's rule. The crisis centered on several key problems, the first being demographic. Syria held the dubious distinction, during the 1970s and 1980s, of having one of the highest rates of natural population growth in the world. Estimates put its population at the start of 2003 at 20 million, compared to six million when Hafiz al-Assad came to power in 1970 and three million in 1946, the year Syria had gained independence.[8] Subsequently, in the late 1990s, Syria's economic growth rates froze and then dropped; government services available to citizens regressed; the already overloaded infrastructure was further strained, causing water and electricity stoppages; unemployment rose sharply, especially among entry-level workers; illiteracy increased; and unprecedented signs of poverty appeared on the city streets.

In light of these difficult economic circumstances, Bashar's regime decided to focus its efforts on advancing economic reforms, even if only limited in scope. The government attempted to encourage the development of private banking, an industry that had not existed in the country until the beginning of 2000. Moreover, the regime began slowly to abandon the socialist terminology to which it had devoted itself for a generation. In early 2005, people in Damascus began to speak openly about the need to adopt a market economy. Yet, the collection of these reforms turned out in practice to be quite limited, cosmetic, and declarative. The difficulty the regime experienced in confronting the existing power centers, such as the governmental bureaucracy and the party activists who exercised economic control in Syria, and the people close to the centers of power who controlled a significant portion of the Syrian private sector prevented any genuine reform of the Syrian economy.

The Enduring Ba'ath System

Domestic tensions within Syria have accelerated in the wake of the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq, although they do not threaten the integrity of Bashar's regime. In early March 2004, for example, a Kurdish intifada erupted in Syria's

northern region of Hasaka, especially in the city of Qamishli on the Syrian-Turkish border. Three Kurdish youths were killed by the brutality of police and security forces during a fight between fans of Kurdish- and Arab-supported football teams. In protest, Kurds launched a wave of violence that included attacks on government offices and public facilities and even reached the Kurdish quarter in Damascus as well as the University of Damascus, where Kurdish students denounced violations of Kurdish rights.[9] Previously, Damascus would have responded exclusively with an iron fist as it had in repressing previous rebellions, such as the 1982 Hama uprising when the regime killed thousands. This time, although several dozen Kurdish deaths at government hands have been reported, the regime appears more willing to be conciliatory and seems to be relying on the support of Arabs, who constitute an overwhelming majority of the population.

Syria remains more isolated and threatened than ever.

The regime need not be overly concerned about the protests of oppositionist organizations and human rights activists that spread throughout Syria in 2004. For the time being, these groups 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. Those elements understand better than any foreign observer that the alternative to the current regime is not necessarily a liberal democracy as envisaged by the current U.S. administration, but rather Islamist fundamentalism of the sort that would make the Ba'ath look, by contrast, positively libertarian.

In April 2004, Islamist radicals who had recently returned from fighting U.S. forces in Iraq carried out a terrorist attack at the UN headquarters in Damascus, aimed at a Western target but also at destabilizing the secular Syrian Ba'ath regime.[10] This attack, although isolated, was the first successful operation since the regime had forcibly put down an Islamic rebellion in 1976–1982. These fundamentalist elements have subsequently resurfaced, and the true scope and extent of their presence within a population throughout the country's cities that is 60 percent Sunni is unknown.[11]

The Challenge of Globalization

Although these domestic political and economic challenges do not yet threaten to undermine Bashar's regime, they have increased as globalization has accelerated. It is no wonder that Syrians began considering globaliza-

tion, which has been scapegoated by the state, to be the root of all evil. Hafiz aptly reflected this perception in remarks he made when meeting with trade union representatives in March 1999: "Globalization is flooding our markets with its products and is preventing our products from reaching its markets. It forces the world into a threatening cultural and ideological mold. We are farmers, and the land belonged and will continue to belong to the farmers."[12]

The regime still appears to enjoy the support of most of the pillars of Syrian society.

In a series of interviews in the late 1990s, Bashar al-Assad displayed a more nuanced approach. Speaking to the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Watan*, Bashar stressed that globalization and not, for example, the conflict with Israel was the central issue of the times and would determine Syria's ability to enter the twenty-first century. Bashar was forthright in expressing his opinion that Syria must respond to this challenge and embark on the road to progress and modernization.[13]

Nevertheless, once in power, he soon adopted his father's line of thinking about the dangers of globalization. In a speech welcoming the Chinese vice president to Damascus in January 2001, Bashar pointed out that "[t]he nations of the world who work together to achieve peace, security, stability and development, today face a series of challenges topped by the challenge of globalization. This perception constitutes a flag but also a mask for those who work to bring about ... cultural and economic hegemony ... that abolishes national identity."[14]

Syria's approach to the question of globalization, and more so to the question of economic openness, reflects the regime's difficulty in adjusting to the new international reality. One sign of this was the government's method of allegedly promoting but actually controlling or even impeding the introduction of advanced communications technology into Syria. Eventually, these advances did penetrate the country, but the slow pace of the process exemplified Syria's difficulty in integrating into the global economy and the world at large.

Computers and the Internet

A Western diplomat, meeting with Hafiz al-Assad in 1995, tried to persuade him of the importance of allowing Syrians access to the Internet. Although Hafiz listened and appeared to be convinced, at the end of the meeting he said that Bashar had tried to convince him of the same but that the heads of his security bureaus, who had the final say, still opposed permitting access.[15] Indeed, in the mid-1990s, Syria's integration into the world's information revolution appeared remote.

Dramatic change, by Syrian standards, in the authorities' approach to computers, the Internet, and information technology came only after Bashar assumed power in June 2000. In 1992, there were 2,500 computers throughout all of Syria; in 1998, there were 15,000; and by the end of 2002, there were some 330,000.[16] Syria's exposure to the Internet has proceeded slowly as well, in parallel with the gradual rise in the number of computers in the country. In 1999 the government announced the first stage of a plan to link the country to the Internet, beginning with 2,500 subscribers in various government ministries. Only in 2000 did the government offer the possibility for ordinary citizens to connect to the Internet through two official servers, the Syrian Computer Society and the governmental Communications Authority. The number of Internet subscribers rose gradually, reaching approximately 8,000 by the end of 2000; 70,000 by mid-2003; and an estimated 250,000, or a little more than one percent of the population, in mid-2005.[17] Notably, many Syrians connect to the Internet through Lebanese or Jordanian servers, despite the high costs involved, because of the absence of censorship. Ordinary Syrians' access to all sites via the two Syrian servers is controlled by the authorities. Banned web pages include Israeli sites, all e-mail sites, sites that "offend morality," and all discussion groups or chat rooms. All told, the scope of Internet use in Syria remains small, estimated at 0.3 percent of the population in 2005, compared to 24 percent in Lebanon, eight percent in the Persian Gulf emirates, and 50 percent in Israel.

Cellular Telephones

Cell phones entered the Syrian market in the late 1990s. Typically, the authorities viewed them with suspicion or, more accurately, with a lack of understanding of their significance. They showed no inclination to invest in an infrastructure capable of providing the country with an advanced wireless network. Slowly, decisionmakers came to realize the economic potential of cell phone networks and began accepting tenders for the establishment of such networks through the Ministry of Communication. Prohibitively high prices initially kept consumption by the average Syrian citizen low in this service as well. By the end of 2004, cell phone subscribers in Syria numbered around two million, or about 10 percent of the population.[18]

The exposure of Syrian society to modern technology has remained slow for political reasons, but perhaps more so because of Syria's economic backwardness. Syrian journalist Yusra al-Misri has observed that "each of us must utilize the opportunity opened up by advanced technology and the communications revolution, yet the question arises as to how we, with our below modest income, can bear these costs? I acquired a computer by taking a loan from the Journalists Union, but I have no

money to acquire a cell phone."[19] Even a rapid increase in the entry of Western technology into Syria, however, will not allow every household to have Internet access. Poverty and deprivation will keep the Internet, the cell phone, and even the pager beyond the reach of a significant proportion (perhaps most) of Syrian society. Globalization, however, will inexorably march on, even in Syria.

The Collapsing Foreign Policy Environment

Under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad, it was often argued that, until a solution to the conflict with Israel was reached and as long as Syria's differences with the United States were not resolved, Hafiz would preserve the status quo in Syria, avoiding any changes and reforms that would integrate Syria into the global economy and world politics. When Bashar came to power, it seemed that he was ready to move along two tracks: introducing changes inside Syria and at the same time improving Syria's relations with the outside world. Nevertheless, the result has been a total failure in both regards. Bahsar's failure at home, as described above, was due to his lack of experience and to his personal weakness as a leader. Yet, it also had to do with the international arena Bashar had to face. Some of these changes had nothing to do with Bashar's policies and decisions, such as the campaign against terrorism or the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, Syria failed to adapt to them, to address them, or to meet the challenge they posed to its regime. As a result, Syria found itself under attack, paying a heavy price for its leader's lack of experience, determination, and political power, both at home and on the international scene.

Bashar's foreign policy troubles started as early as the winter of 2000, following the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising (the al-Aqsa Intifada) and the renewal of Hizballah's activities, with Syria's blessing, against Israel's northern border. Bashar, ignoring the danger of military escalation between Syria and Israel, adopted militant and radical positions, such as allowing Palestinian militant groups to operate and plan terrorist attacks against Israeli targets from Damascus or encouraging Hizballah to carry on its attacks against Israel along the Israeli-Lebanese border. His conduct seemed to demonstrate not only the influence of Arab nationalist and anti-Western concepts, but also his lack of experience, self-confidence, and possibly even an orderly decisionmaking apparatus or experienced advisers. The young leader was venturing into places his father had refrained from going.[20]

Bashar also failed to respond to the war on terrorism declared by President George W. Bush following the September 11 attacks. As part of this

war, the United States increased its pressure on Syria to separate from the remaining members of the "axis of evil": Iran, with its protégé Hizballah, and North Korea. On one hand, Damascus took steps to avoid a direct confrontation with Washington. To that end, it was prepared to cooperate with the United States in its struggle against Al Qaeda. Indeed, U.S. agents arrived in Syria early in 2002 to investigate these possibilities. Among others, the name of Muhammad Ata, mastermind of the September 11 attacks, came up, as did Mamun al-Darakzali, a Syrian-born member of Al Qaeda who was involved in handling its finances. Later, the Syrians also arrested Muhammad Haydr Zamar, a Syrian-born German citizen who apparently had recruited Muhammad Ata into Al Qaeda. The United States was grateful to the Syrians for this assistance, and Bush telephoned Bashar to thank him. High-ranking U.S. officials were quoted as implying that the information delivered by Syria enabled the deterrence of attacks against U.S. targets and saved many lives.[21] On the other hand, Damascus continued to adhere to a nationalist, pan-Arab, anti-U.S., and anti-Western worldview and adopt courses of action that contradicted a number of Washington's policies by impeding the Arab-Israeli peace process, continuing to encourage Hizballah in Lebanon to launch military attacks against Israel, aligning with Iran, and interfering with attempts to establish a pro-Western regime in Iraq.

> The alternative is not a liberal democracy, but rather an Islamist fundamentalist regime.

The U.S. Occupation of Iraq

Syria's foreign policy challenges became more acute as the United States prepared for the spring 2003 war in Iraq. The conflict itself held the promise of major change in the Middle East, heightening pressure on Bashar and his regime from within to change its socioeconomic policies and from abroad, especially from Washington, to change its foreign policy (as Mu'ammar Qadhafi of Libya did) by separating from Iran, ceasing support to terrorist groups, moderating its anti-American rhetoric, and joining forces with other moderate Arab regimes in the region, such as Egypt or Jordan, who maintained friendly and close relations with the United States. Of all Middle Eastern countries besides Iraq itself, the war appears to have affected Syria most dramatically.

Initially, U.S. preparations to strike Saddam Hussein in late 2002 raised the tension level in relations between Damascus and Washington, with Syria quickly taking Iraq's side. Attempting to foil Washington's efforts to consoli-

date international support for its war in Iraq, Syria accused Washington of seeking to establish a new order in the Middle East for Israel's benefit and its own.[22] The United States responded quickly, accusing Syria of smuggling military equipment into Iraq and allowing Arab volunteer fighters to reach Iraq via Syria prior to the war.

The U.S. conquest of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, shocked Damascus. Syrian newspapers defined the capture of Baghdad by U.S. forces as an ignominious defeat of historic proportions, implying that the Arabs could now only wait for Syria itself to be attacked next.[23] Senior U.S. officials accused Syria of allowing Iraqi leaders to escape through Syrian territory.[24] Although the Syrians dismissed these accusations publicly, the strong language of the U.S. allegations undoubtedly disturbed them, and they were quick to subsequently close their border with Iraq.[25]

Many Syrians have begun to consider globalization to be the root of all evil.

In the ensuing two years, the initial shock has been replaced by feelings of relief with realization that the United States was in no rush to and may also not be able to exploit the momentum for regional change to put military pressure on Syria. Contributing to this sense of relief was the knowledge that Washington was encountering increasing difficulties in enforcing its authority throughout Iraq; stabilizing the security situation; and establishing a secure, legitimate, and pro-Western regime. Such circumstances afforded the Syrians some leeway to refrain from responding to basic U.S. demands in Iraq, such as stopping the infiltration of terrorists from its territory to Iraq and closing all their training and logistic centers in Syria, as well as on other related issues, such as terminating support for Palestinian terrorist organizations and Hizballah.

Syria continued to play cat and mouse with the United States, with Damascus making some essentially cosmetic moves designed to avoid incurring Washington's wrath. Syria announced that it would increase its forces along the Syrian-Iraqi border and construct an embankment to foil the passage of smugglers and terrorists between the two countries. U.S. officials were also permitted to visit Damascus and examine Syria's banking system to determine whether Saddam had indeed invested money there. The Syrians subsequently announced that they were ready to return $3.5 million of the $261 million that, according to Syrian findings, Saddam had deposited in Syrian banks. According to Syrian sources, other parts of the money would be used to cover Iraqi debts to Syrian individuals and companies.[26] Damascus was also ready to cooperate with the temporary Iraqi administration established by the United States until a "legitimate" government could be established by the Iraqi people.[27]

Desperate Overtures toward Israel

As relations with the United States deteriorated, Bashar began sending signals in early 2004 of his readiness to renew peace negotiations with Israel without preconditions. Instead of directly approaching the Israeli public or its government, Bashar sent messages via intermediaries, and for the most part, Syrian official spokespeople later denied them.[28] Both Israel and the United States dismissed such tentative signals, which they considered to be an indication of the pressure and distress that Bashar felt rather than a true and honest desire for peace.[29] Israel instead viewed Syria's actions, such as continued assistance to Hizballah as well as to the Palestinian terrorist organizations operating out of Damascus, rather than these tentative words as indications of Damascus's true policy. In the summer of 2004, Israel made an attempt on the life of the senior Hamas activist in Damascus, once more directing the spotlight on Syria's involvement in terrorism, for example.

Five years after Bashar's ascent to power, Syria still appears to be committed to the peace process as the preferred route to retain the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in June 1967. Nevertheless, it appears that both states and especially their leaders still have a long road to travel before they could renew the talks between them, for several reasons. First is Bashar's need to secure his status as his country's ruler. So long as Bashar does not feel his rule to be stable, his ability to promote a concrete process with Israel, much less sign a peace agreement, is doubtful. Bashar, therefore, is likely to respond to U.S. pressure to renew the talks with Israel and project a moderate attitude but is unlikely to reach any final decision before he feels confident in his own status. In addition, Bashar's moves and especially his pronouncements, at least during the first years of his rule, have not demonstrated an ability to adopt a realistic or pragmatic policy unaffected by emotion or youthful impulsiveness. His late father required a similar maturation process too before he was ready to embark on peace talks with Israel.

Second, it has required an Israeli dialogue partner prepared to accept the Syrian demand for a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights back to the June 4, 1967, lines, that is, back to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Finally, even the U.S. administration, a key player in promoting the peace process, has not appeared to be overly enthusiastic about lending the full measure of its weight to promote Syrian-Israeli peace. After all, the United States is not interested in promoting its relations with a Syrian government that they view as a threat and as one of a series of evil regimes, in contrast to the U.S. view of Damascus after the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s, when Syria was viewed as a potential U.S. ally.

U.S. Patience Expires

Meanwhile, throughout 2004, as attacks against U.S. troops grew more frequent, U.S. anger at Syria increased. In the spring, the U.S. Congress passed the Syrian Accountability Act, which levels sanctions against Damascus. The legislation had been discussed since 2003, but pressure from the administration to allow time for its direct political dialogue with Damascus convinced Congress to postpone its adoption several times. In early 2004, the administration accepted that its efforts had failed and lifted its opposition to the legislation, which Congress passed in April 2004 and the president signed into law in May. Although Washington applied only a small portion of the permissible sanctions, their effect was greater than either the United States or Syria had expected.

The sanctions against the Syrian Trade Bank, the largest and most important of Syria's banks, in particular made it difficult for Damascus to carry out financial transactions with the international banking systems and drove off investors. Moreover, the Syrian Accountability Act was not a one-time action but rather an ongoing process, providing a mechanism that examines the degree of Syria's accession to Washington's demands every few months. Depending on the results, the United States has the option to increase its sanctions against Damascus.[30] The U.S. sanctions damaged and even blocked Syrian efforts to integrate into the global economy. It deterred investors from investing in Syria and created a negative economic atmosphere that worsened Syria's failing economy.

In early November 2004, the U.S. assault on Fallujah, a major center of activity for the anti-U.S. forces of Al Qaeda member Mus'ib al-Zarqawi, revealed evidence that exacerbated tensions between Damascus and Washington even further. According to U.S. sources, documents seized during the assault bore witness, albeit not always directly, to Syrian connections to terrorist activities in Iraq. They showed, for example, that some of the anti-U.S. terrorists had come from Syria, former Iraqi Ba'ath leaders were coordinating the struggle against the United States from within Syria, and Syria had allowed or at least ignored the establishment of training camps for terrorists.[31] The tone of U.S. media rhetoric escalated, with more than one writer attacking the U.S. administration, especially the Department of State, for its weak policy toward Damascus. Reports emerged that U.S. forces fired on Syrian forces along the Syrian-Iraqi border, and rumors increased that the Pentagon was preparing military plans to strike Syria itself.[32]

Checkmate: Lebanon

Events in Lebanon at the end of 2004 also reflected the disastrous results for Syria of its worsening relations with the United States, as well as the Syrian

failure to integrate politically and economically into the new world. The United States and France, working together for the first time since their schism over the Iraq war, sought to expel Syria's presence from Lebanon. Syrian troops first entered Lebanon in 1976 to bring to an end the civil war that erupted in Lebanon the previous year. Since then, nearly 40,000 Syrian soldiers have been deployed in Lebanon to ensure Syria's political, military, and economic interests in that country. When the civil war in Lebanon came to an end following the signing of the Tai'f accord in October 1989, the Syrian troops remained, ensuring that the emerging Lebanese state would follow Syria's dictates. When Bashar came to power in June 2000, he ordered the redeployment of Syrian troops in Lebanon, leaving in early 2005 almost 15,000 soldiers and security agents that were able to maintain control over Lebanon's politics as well as its economy.

U.S. sanctions damaged Syrian efforts to integrate into the global economy.

On September 3, 2004, the Lebanese parliament approved 96 to 29 (with three absences) an amendment to the Lebanese constitution enabling pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud to extend his term for another three years, for exceptional reasons. Because Lebanon's constitution limits presidents to a single six-year term, the country's political elite had been busy for several months trying to divine who would be picked to replace Lahoud. The concept of a single six-year term was viewed as virtually sacrosanct in Lebanon, and all previous efforts to change it were met with firm opposition.

Although Syria's complete political and military control of Lebanon is no secret, conventional wisdom in Beirut had been that Damascus would not try to coerce locals into accepting an extended term for its ally, Lahoud. Instead, it was assumed that Syria would try to promote the candidacy of a friendly successor through quiet dialogue with various Lebanese political factions, complemented by efforts to reach a tacit understanding on the issue with France and, if possible, the United States. Eventually, Syria settled on Lahoud, a weak leader with no substantial power bases either domestically or outside of the country, in contrast to Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who had close ties to Saudi Arabia and key Western states. Lahoud's weakness was his greatest asset in Syria's eyes, causing Damascus to ignore or simply not predict the possible outcome of such an uncalculated decision.

The parliamentary vote in Lebanon came only a day after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1559, calling for the respect of Lebanon's sovereignty and constitution, withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and dismantlement within Lebanon of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese mili-

tias.[33] Thus, Syria and its Lebanese allies chose to challenge the international consensus on Lebanon as consolidated by France and the United States, signaling that Syria was not willing to give up its hegemony over Lebanon.

Yet, Syria's troubles in Lebanon did not end with Lahoud's reelection. On February 14, 2005, former Lebanese prime minister al-Hariri was assassinated in Beirut, and the Lebanese opposition was quick to blame Syria for the murder. Hariri had, after all, played a central role behind the scenes in crafting the U.S.-French axis that produced Resolution 1559.[34] Unprecedented protests against the Syrian occupation in Lebanon erupted and were encouraged by the international (primarily U.S. and French) reaction to Hariri's death. Although Washington was careful not to charge Syria with direct responsibility, it quickly recalled the U.S. ambassador in Damascus for "consultations." French president Jacques Chirac, meanwhile, visited Beirut to pay condolences to Hariri's family but pointedly refrained from meeting any senior pro-Syrian Lebanese government officials. Together, the United States and France initiated a demand by the Security Council to bring the killers to justice, and UN secretary general Kofi Annan dispatched an independent team to investigate the circumstances of the assassination. The team's findings placed indirect blame for the murder on Syria for its contribution to the tense atmosphere created in Lebanon before the assassination and on Bashar himself for threatening Hariri's life in the last meeting the two held in the summer of 2004.[35]

Looking to the Future

From his rise to power until the present, Bashar al-Assad has not succeeded in filling the void left by his father. He has not managed to obtain the same level of reverence, legitimization, and public support, but there is no evidence of any immediate danger to his rule. The experience of similar Arab regimes indicates that they are able to manifest an impressive ability to survive even in the face of a large array of domestic challenges and that only a serious external threat, such as a U.S. military undertaking, is capable of overthrowing them. Yet, the price of Bashar's survival has meant his refraining, for the time being, from confronting the challenges facing his country, particularly globalization, democratization, and rising U.S. influence and hegemony in the Middle East.

Five years after Bashar's rise to power, Syria is a weaker and more isolated state, subject to an intensifying cluster of domestic and external pressures. The strategic distress that Syria confronts today is not an unavoidable phenomenon. Rather, it is a direct result of the faulty manner in which Syria's regime has governed in recent years, including its deteriorating relations

with the United States. It has been the result of inactivity, stemming in no small degree from Bashar's weakness as a ruler.

In the spring of 2000, Bashar was a young leader with a bright future, who seemed to be endowed with a firm grasp of events, curiosity, and a readiness to learn. More importantly, he appeared to understand the need for change, observing that "[t]he difference between my father and my grandfather was amazingly slight, for life changed slowly then. In contrast, the difference between me and my father is very great, and the difference between me and those younger than me by only a decade is even greater."[36]

There is no evidence of any immediate danger to Bashar's rule.

Hafiz was not endowed with an abundance of charisma either, yet the Syrian people came to revere him and governments abroad respected him. Will Bashar similarly grow to be a worthy and admired leader who radiates power and steadfastness, or will Bashar's era become a passing, marginal episode in Syrian history, with the Assad dynasty coming to an end after just two generations? The course of U.S.-Syrian relations in the coming months or, to be more specific, Bashar's decision on whether to integrate into the new world order may provide the answer to this question. Imagining any improvement in Syria's foreign policy environment, U.S.-Syrian relations, or the advancement of Syria's integration into a globalizing world without genuine reform of Syria's domestic and foreign policies is difficult, yet it remains unclear whether Bashar has the power to implement these needed reforms.

In the meantime, Bashar has chosen to forestall the increasing domestic and international pressures being placed on him. After all, that was what his father used to do during his 30 years in power. Although domestically his regime can survive due to the lack of any organized opposition and many Syrians' fear of the emergence of radical Islamist groups, such passive conduct may not help Bashar overcome his deteriorating relations with the United States, which has come to see the Syrian regime as an antithesis to all that it is trying to achieve in the Middle East. Even if Bashar's regime survives its current crisis, however, the Syrian people will pay the heavy price of their leader's failure to integrate the country into the new globalizing world.

Notes

1. See "The President's Speech to the Nation," *Tishrin* (Damascus), March 12, 1999, p. 2.
2. See *Al Jazeera*, May 1, 2004 (Bashar al-Assad interview); "Bashar al-Assad Speaks to al-Sharq al-Awsat," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 10, 2005, p. 3.

3. *New York Times*, December 30, 2003.
4. See Patrick Seale, *Assad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).
5. Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
6. Eyal Zisser, "A False Spring in Damascus," *Orient* 44 (January 2003): 39–62. See Alan George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).
7. "Syrian President's Interview to al-Sharq al-Awsat," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 8, 2001, p. 2.
8. Onn Winckler, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba'thiser Syria*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999). See al-Jumhuriyya al-'Arabiyya sl-Surriyya (the Syrian Arab Republic), Ri'asat Majlis al-Wuzara (the Prime Minister's office), al-Maktab al-Markazi lil-Ihsa, al-Majmu'a al-Ihsa'iyya liSanat 2000, pp. 59–60 (annual statistics for 2000). For the 2002 figures, see "The Natural Growth in Syria," *al-Thawra* (Damascus), August 10, 2002, p. 6.
9. *Al-Hayat*, March 13–14, 2004; "Kurdish Protest in Syria Continues," *Al-Hayat*, May 4, 2004, p. 3.
10. *Al Jazeera*, April 27–28, 2004; "Attack in Damascus," *Al-Hayat* (London), April 29, 2004, pp. 1, 3.
11. *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2004; See Eyal Zisser, "Syria, the Ba'ath Regime and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path," *Muslim World* 95, no. 1 (January 2005): 43–66.
12. "President Assad on Globalization," *Ha'aretz*, March 31, 1999, p. 9. See Radio Damascus, March 11, 1999 (cited in SANA [Syrian Arab New Agency], March 11, 1999).
13. "Syrian President: We Are to Meet Our Challenges," *Al-Watan*, April 4, 2000, pp. 1–2.
14. "President Welcomes Chinese Guest," SANA, January 11, 2001.
15. Unnamed U.S. diplomat, interview with author, Washington, D.C., June 23, 1998.
16. "On the Computer Revolution in Syria," *Tishrin*, February 8, 2003, p. 8.
17. "The Internet in Syria," *Al-Ba'th*, May 17, 2002, p. 6; "On the Computer Revolution in Syria," p. 8.; "Syria Moves Forward," *Al-Hayat*, September 25, 2003, p. 3.
18. "Internet Services in Syria," *Al-Ba'th*, March 2, 2002, p. 6; "Internet for Whom?" *Tishrin*, February 8, 2003, p. 7.
19. Yusra al-Misri, "An Opinion," *Tishrin*, March 4, 2001, p. 10.
20. See Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashsar Al-Assad's First Years in Power* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), pp. 206–243. See also Eyal Zisser, "The Return of Hizballah," *Middle East Quarterly* 9 no. 4 (Fall 2002): 3–12.
21. "American Agents to Syria," *Al-Hayat* (London), April 21, 2002, p. 1; "Washington Thanks Syria," *Al-Hayat*, November 25, 2002, p. 1.
22. See "What Is Behind American Policy in Our Region," *Tishrin*, March 10, 2003, p. 9.
23. See Syrian TV, April 9–10, 2003. See also "The Fall of Baghdad," *Tishrin* (Damascus), April 10, 2003.
24. Associated Press, March 28, 2003; Associated Press, April 13, 2003; Fox News, March 14, 2003.
25. "Syria Will Fulfill Its Commitments," *Tishrin*, April 12, 2003, p. 1.
26. "Iraqi Delegation Visits Syria," *Al-Ba'th*, May 15, 2003, p. 1; "Syria to Return Iraqi Deposits to Iraq," *Al-Ba'th*, June 1, 2004, p. 2.

27. *Al Jazeera*, May 1, 2004.
28. "Bashar Al-Assad Signals to Israel," *Ha'aretz*, April 27, 2004, p. 1.
29. "Interview With Syria's President," *New York Times*, November 30, 2003, p. 1; *Al Jazeera*, June 1, 2004.
30. "American Sanctions Against Damascus," Reuters, May 12, 2004; *Al-Hayat*, May 26, 2004, p. 1.
31. "Mosques Sending Fighters to Iraq," *Daily Telegraph*, December 2, 2004, p. 1.
32. See "America May Strike Ba'athists in Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, December 24, 2004, p. 1; "Getting Serious About Syria," *Weekly Standard*, December 20, 2004.
33. Reuters, September 2, 2004; Reuters, September 3, 2004; Reuters, September 15, 2004; Reuters, October 15, 2004. See "Lahoud Was Elected President," *Al-Hayat*, September 4, 2004. p. 1.
34. Reuters, February 14, 2005; "Lebanon Mourns Hariri," *Al-Hayat*, February 16, 2005, pp. 1–3.
35. Reuters, February 14, 2005. See *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2005; *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2005; Reuters, March 26–27, 2005.
36. "Interview With Syria's President," p. 1.