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The Future of Syria: Challenges and Prospects

Featuring Barry Rubin and Theodore Kattouf
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On May 30, 2007, Barry Rubin and Theodore Kattouf addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Professor Rubin, a visiting fellow at the Institute, is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA), and author of the just-released book [The Truth about Syria](#) (Palgrave). Mr. Kattouf, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria and the United Arab Emirates, is president and CEO of AMIDEAST, a nonprofit group dedicated to enhancing educational links between the United States and the Middle East. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

BARRY RUBIN

To understand Syrian politics, one should not focus on the most recent quotes from Syrian officials, but should instead analyze the structure and interests of the regime and interpret its actions accordingly. The leadership has succeeded in establishing a relatively stable country, facing no serious internal challenges for three dozen years. But as a dictatorship under Bashar al-Asad, the Syrian government has neither succeeded economically nor fulfilled its pan-Arab promises. The question, then, is how to reconcile long-term internal stability with extremely poor performance overall. This contradiction often leads to upheaval, but Damascus has managed to avoid this outcome.

The regime requires conflict and radicalism as tools for maintaining internal control. From this perspective, its policy positions are not just the results of whim or personality but are in fact based on defined regime interests. Damascus correctly assumes that any strengthening of U.S. influence in the region will run counter to Syrian interests, so it is no accident that the regime has become the most systematically anti-American in the Arab world.

Damascus also has an interest in shaping an Iraq that is pro-Syrian and fits its worldview. If this scenario proves unattainable, however, the regime will accept the next best thing: an unstable Iraq. In its own evaluation, the cost of the war being waged in Iraq is almost zero to Syria. Likewise, the Syrian alliance with Iran is not merely a whim, but a necessity, with Tehran serving as a strong protector and economic benefactor. Given the regime's interests, it is a perfect match.

Although economic reform would also seem to be in the government's interest, it is actually dangerous. A freer economy means more capital -- and thus more control -- in the hands of an independent middle class. It is far more lucrative for the regime to retain control over the economy. Even if the overall pie is smaller, the regime's piece remains bigger. With an open economy, independent businesspeople -- mainly Sunni Muslims -- would benefit the most. They could then use their capital and independence to support democracy, Islamism, or both.

Based on this analysis, the Syrian government uses two major tactics in its dealings with the world. The first is duplicity: Damascus has been adept in exploiting the lengthy international diplomatic process to gain concessions and force the removal of sanctions without any intention of reaching agreements or changing its

behavior. The second is resistance -- the idea that Syria is leading the struggle against the West and therefore deserves the support of others with the same interest.

Control of Lebanon remains a Syrian priority, primarily for economic reasons. Blocking the proposed international tribunal on the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri is of paramount importance. If the tribunal implicated Asad's brother and brother-in-law in the crime, it would certainly threaten his grip on power.

The bottom line in dealing with the Syrian regime is that it must be persuaded that crossing certain lines and behaving in a certain manner will jeopardize its survival. Tough diplomacy is required, including maintaining pressure, forcing Syria to change its behavior, and allowing for nonmilitary punishment of its continued defiance. It is important to withhold unilateral concessions and confidence-building measures when nothing substantive is offered in exchange. The United States should work with its European partners without undermining their efforts, and also protect the positions of the Lebanese government, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and the new status quo in southern Lebanon. Throughout, Washington should employ a diplomatic strategy that is long term in scope, tough, and systematic.

THEODORE KATTOUF

Since Damascus and Beirut were home to the earliest proponents of Arab nationalism, it is no surprise that many Syrians believe they should be a part of some larger Arab or Muslim enterprise. Rather than dwelling on the actions of a regime that is nearly forty years old, observers should contextualize and understand how Syrians themselves view certain issues.

Under Baathist rule, the Syrian people have become a bit insular and isolated. Rapid population growth and a slow-growing economy have forced them to focus inward on their everyday needs. The regime has not been able to create adequate job opportunities for the burgeoning youth population. Like many Arabs, Syrian youths are disenchanted with their political marginalization, poor economic prospects, and often unpromising futures. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that Syrians are resigned to the current regime.

Very few Syrians believe U.S. intentions are pure. Indeed, the war in Iraq has strengthened the regime internally and emboldened it regionally. The regime could certainly have done much more to staunch the flow of insurgents and terrorists into Iraq if it had believed doing so was in its interests. Although it is currently doing a better job on that front, it could have even greater incentive to help quell the violence if the Syrian people become convinced that U.S. forces are truly withdrawing from Iraq -- such a scenario would allow the regime to focus the people's attention on the domestic security ramifications of the chaos next door.

In any case, the country faces major challenges, both internal and external. Its dwindling oil production may soon cause it to become a net importer of petroleum, drying up a major source of regime revenue. It also lacks a reliable external benefactor. Despite patched relations with Saudi Arabia, Syria is unlikely to see more support unless it radically alters its position on Hizballah and the Lebanese opposition. Grumbling in Iran about Iranian financial support for Hizballah makes it unlikely that Tehran would bail Syria out of trouble if its economy falters. In the short term, however, the West will not be able to break Syria away from Iran.

In a closed society like Syria, the prospect of an existing regime being replaced by a liberal democratic movement is highly unlikely without significant reforms in multiple areas and at multiple levels. In the absence of such reforms, the current government could well be replaced by radical Sunni Islamists, or even a failed state in which terrorism would flourish far beyond the Asad regime's calculated support of Hizballah and Hamas. This may be why Israel did not attack Syria during the summer 2006 war in Lebanon: there is simply no viable successor that would improve Israeli security.

As for Lebanon itself, Damascus seeks to maintain control there in order to forestall one of its chief fears: that the United States or Israel will use the country as a staging ground for destabilizing Syria. The regime

therefore strives to create as much havoc in Lebanon as possible and, above all, to block any international tribunal on the Hariri assassination.

In general, unilateral U.S. sanctions have not modified the regime's behavior or destabilized Asad's hold on power. The regime's miscalculations are overshadowed by U.S. mistakes. Washington was arrogant during its most recent high-level dialogue with Damascus: no government, let alone that of Asad and the Baath Party, would have accepted the U.S. demands. These issues will not be resolved unless the United States and Israel once again test whether Asad is serious about making peace. In looking toward possible future negotiations, one must reflect on past events and context in order to draw the proper conclusions.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Steven Leibowitz.

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