

Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad

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Abstract

Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad is pulled in contrary directions by Syria's traditional Arab nationalist stance and the West-centric imperatives of its economic reform program. The conflict with Israel and the US invasion of Iraq stimulate continuing nationalist resistance but the success of Syria's move to a market economy requires integration into the world capitalist system, dominated by the US hegemon. This essay examines Bashar's foreign policy inheritance from his father, the political economy determinants of his policies, his reform project, Syria's policy toward Israel, its defiance of the US over Iraq, its involvement in Lebanon, and the broader struggle for the Middle East of which Syria is a part.

Keywords: Syria, Foreign Policy, Bashar al-Asad, Lebanon, Iraq War.

Beşer Esad Dönemi Suriye Dış Politikası

Öz

Beşer Esad döneminde Suriye dış politikası, ülkenin geleneksel Arap milliyetçisi duruşu ve ekonomik reform programının gerektirdiği Batı merkezilik arasında iki zıt yöne doğru çekilmektedir. İsrail ile yaşanan çatışma ve ABD'nin Irak'ı işgali devam eden milliyetçi direnişi kamçılanmaktadır. Ancak Suriye'nin piyasa ekonomisine yönelimi, ABD hegemonyasının hakim olduğu dünya kapitalist sistemine entegre olmasını gerektirmektedir. Bu makale Beşer'in babasından kalan dış politika mirasını, izlediği siyasetin politik-ekonomi belirleyicilerini, reform projesini, Suriye'nin İsrail politikasını, ABD'ye Irak üzerinden meydan okumasını, Lübnan'daki durumunu ve kendisinin de bir parçası olduğu Ortadoğu'da verdiği daha geniş çaptaki mücadeleyi incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Dış Politika, Beşer el Esad, Lübnan, Irak Savaşı.

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On Bashar al-Asad's accession to the presidency in 2000, Syria was at a cross-roads. Its new leader's priority was economic reform, which dictated a Westward foreign policy alignment and depended on a benign international environment. The latter, however, was not to come about. To be sure, Bashar did initially receive a positive welcome from most foreign governments and quickly moved to improve Syria's relations with most of its neighbours, notably Iraq and Turkey, while launching a strategic opening to Europe. What would not have been predicted in 2000 is the way he was soon demonized in various Western circles. A series of external events, notably the breakdown of the peace process, the Iraq war, which Syria opposed and the assassination of Lebanese ex-Prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri for which it was blamed, all contributed to precipitating a period of unrelenting US hostility. Under extreme pressure, Syria's Arab nationalist identity was aroused, the regime's old Machiavellian foreign policy instincts revived and the domestic reform agenda was constrained. In spite of this, Syria continued to seek inclusion in the world order, albeit in a way that preserved its identity and interests. A revived strategy of power-balancing against threats to its vital interests from Israel and the US was paralleled by a continuing economic liberalization strategy through which Syria sought to diversify its economic dependencies and acquire the economic resources needed to sustain the regime.

Bashar's Foreign Policy Inheritance

Certain relatively durable determinants have conditioned the behaviour of Syrian leaders and Bashar cannot escape this influence, especially as much of it is an inheritance from his father.

First, Syria is imbued with a powerful sense of grievance from the forced partition of historic Syria (*bilad al-sham*) by Western imperialism and the creation of Israel on the territory of geographic southern Syria. Radical Arab nationalism, the dominant identity of the country and ideology of the ruling Ba'th party, is a direct consequence of this experience. Syria's Arab nationalist identity, leading it to support Palestinian *fedayeen* operations against Israel, was a key factor in provoking the 1967 Arab-Israeli war in which Israel captured Syria's Golan Heights. Since then, all Syrian foreign policy behaviour has revolved around the recovery of the Golan. This is a matter of national honour and regime legitimacy.

Equally important for understanding Syria is its pervasive sense of insecurity. It is a small state surrounded by several stronger powers that, at one time or another, have been a threat. Historically its borders have been violated, most recently by both Israel and the US. It faces a great military imbalance, in re-

spect to Israel, and is now sandwiched between Israel in the West and the US in the East (Iraq). As such, Syria continues to perceive a threat from what it takes to be Western imperialism, a view that has been repeatedly reinforced, particularly since the rise of the George W. Bush administration (2000-2008). Syria currently sees the West's policies as replete with double standards. International law is selectively enforced; thus, Syria's chemical deterrent force has been targeted by the West while Israel's nuclear one is accepted. The Iraq war showed how the strong "take the law into their own hands." For Syrians, it is a Machiavellian world where a state's interests are respected only if it has the power to defend them. Hence, great power-engineered demands, advanced in the name of the 'international community,' enjoy no normative legitimacy in Syria. Indeed, Damascus consistently evades the dictates of great powers and those who want something from Syria have to negotiate for it.

Given its threatening environment, Syria's grievances and ambitions have had to be tempered by the reality of its vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Hafiz al-Asad was the first Syrian leader to systematically bridge the gap between Syrian goals and means.¹ On the one hand, he scaled down and replaced Syria's formerly revisionist aim of liberating Palestine with the more realist goals of recovering the Golan and creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. On the other hand, steadily expanding Syrian military power resulted in a mutual deterrence that relatively stabilized the Syrian-Israeli military confrontation.² Syrian-Israeli rivalry was thereby largely diverted into political struggle over the conditions of a peace settlement. In these struggles, Syria's deterrent meant that Asad did not have to bargain from weakness and could apply limited military pressure on Israel in southern Lebanon (via Hizbollah) at reasonable risk.

Second, Hafiz realized, by contrast to his radical predecessors, that Syria could not do without alliances and he assiduously diversified them, relying for a period on Egypt and Saudi Arabia, later on Iran, while balancing close alignment with the USSR, crucial for protection in a predatory world, with a readiness to engage with American diplomacy over a peace settlement. Additionally, because Syria's slim economic base and feeble tax extraction capability could not sustain its enormous military burden, Hafiz used external alliances to access enormous levels of external aid and loans by virtue of Syria's front line status against Israel, largely from the USSR and Arab oil

1 Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988; Moshe Moaz, *Asad, the Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988.

2 Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Syrian-Israeli Deterrence Dialogue*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1987.

producing states, in order to fill the resultant permanent resource gap. The national-security state Hafiz built greatly enhanced Syria's military security but ultimately helped enervate its weak economic base.

Hafiz was also acutely aware, at least after Syria failed to recover the Golan in the October 1973 war, that this aim, as well as an acceptable resolution of the Palestine issue, made negotiation of a peace settlement with Israel unavoidable. He believed, however, that successful negotiations depended on a sufficient balance of power; if it was too unfavourable, Syria had to be patient and wait until it shifted, while taking advantage of every opportunity to contribute to such a shift. Syria, he believed, should never negotiate from weakness and unless it had bargaining "cards." Effective bargaining might require the use of asymmetric warfare to give the stronger Israeli opponent an incentive to negotiate an acceptable deal; this was best pursued via proxies and not from Syria territory (hence Lebanon became the arena of struggle) and required a military deterrent so that the enemy did not bring his full retaliatory superiority to bear on Syria. Aware, too, that only the US could broker a negotiated settlement, Syria constantly sought to demonstrate to the US that it could advance US objectives, presumed to be regional stability, if its interests were accommodated and if not that it could also block US plans—such as separate peace agreements excluding Syria. Insofar as the US wants a peace settlement in the region, it cannot avoid dealing with Syria, for as Henry Kissinger famously said, the Arabs cannot make war without Egypt or make peace without Syria.

Bashar al-Asad attempted to alter this approach, preferring dialogue to confrontation and deploying a conciliatory and more reasonable personal discourse. However, rising external threats forced him to fall back on his father's *modus operandi*.

Political Economy Determinants

Just as much a threat to regime survival as external enemies was the vulnerability of the Syrian economy. Bashar al-Asad's reform program was a continuation and deepening of economic liberalization begun under Hafiz that originated in the exhaustion of import substitute industrialization and the statist-populist model from at least the eighties. This was exacerbated by the decline of Arab aid from the 1980s, but interspersed with recoveries when new resources, mostly rent from Syria's own petroleum exports, were accessed. At the end of the 1990s, however, stagnant growth, combined with a burgeoning population resulted in unemployment rates reputedly reaching 20%. These problems threatened to deepen as revenues from oil exports inexorably declined, posing the prospect of a fiscal crisis in the medium

term. In the short term, the regime had accumulated considerable reserves in foreign currency to buffer it against emergencies and ease the stress of transition to a market economy. Over the long term, a consensus emerged that, given the stagnation of the public sector, economic survival required a sustained takeoff of private investment which, in turn, depended on Syria's integration into and conformity with the standards of the global market and an accompanying Westcentric foreign policy.

There were, however, formidable obstacles to deepening Syria's economic liberalization, including the rent seeking behaviour of the emergent new crony capitalists around the regime, the "social contract"--under which regime legitimacy is contingent on public provision of subsidized food and fuel, state jobs and farm support prices, and the need of the regime to dispense patronage to keep core elites loyal. Moreover, private investment, particularly in long-term productive enterprise, was deterred by bureaucratic obstacles, lack of rule of law, and the regional insecurity generated by interminable regional conflicts. Ironically, just as Bashar launched his reform initiative, regional conflicts substantially worsened. More than that, integration into the Western market had to be reconciled with Syria's Arab nationalist identity and this was impossible as long as the conflict with Israel and Western "imperialism" continued and, indeed, dramatically deepened after 2002.

The failure of the peace negotiations with Israel in 2000 was the first external factor that had important negative consequences for reform prospects; at the end of the nineties, in the expectation of imminent peace, Hafiz, with Bashar as his chief lieutenant, was preparing or initiating major liberalizing and anti-corruption reforms needed to take advantage of a hoped-for major influx of (mostly Arab and expatriate) investment. However, with the failure of the peace process, Bashar's regime had to look elsewhere for resources and found them in an opening to Iraq, hitherto a bitter rival but which was now seeking Syrian co-operation in evading UN sanctions by re-opening the closed pipeline between the two states. Re-export of Iraqi oil sold to Syria at subsidized prices provided a billion dollar yearly windfall to the treasury.

When this lifeline was shut down by the US invasion of Iraq, accompanied by a major and burdensome influx of Iraqi refugees into Syria, the regime actually *accelerated* its economic liberalization in a bid to get a cut of the wealth accruing to the Gulf Arab oil producers from the new post-war oil price boom. In spite of a fraught regional and international environment, Syria did enjoy an influx of Arab investment in the mid-2000s that stabilized the economy and fuelled the crony-capitalist network supportive of the regime. At the same time, however, Syria's determination to hold onto "cards" needed in the

struggle with Israel, manifest in its role in Lebanon and its support of Hizbolah, soured political relations not only with the US, but also for a time with Europe and Saudi Arabia, key economic partners. Very much in doubt also was how far Syria's integration into the world market was compatible with a foreign policy that brought recurrent conflict with the US hegemon; American sanctions worked to economically isolate Syria and Washington pressured Europe to obstruct Syria's bid for an economic association agreement. As a result, Syria shifted its economic relations eastward to Russia, Asia and especially toward China but this could not wholly substitute for relations with the West.

Post-Hafiz Leadership: Bashar's Reformist Project

While it is now taken for granted, Bashar's succession and consolidation of power, without jeopardizing Syria's hard-won stability, was not self-evident to observers in 2000. When Hafiz died, the establishment, fearful of instability, settled on Bashar as its choice: as an Asad, he reassured the Alawis; would not likely betray his father's heritage (not be a Sadat); and he was not seen as a threat to them. Yet he was popular, being seen as uncorrupted and a modernizer, with the public, especially the younger generation.³ Indeed, Bashar's succession evoked great expectations that generational change in leadership would be a watershed for Syria. When taking office, he spoke of the need to improve and modernize the economy, education and the administration. He also raised expectations of political change by emphasizing 'democratic thinking' and 'the principle of accepting the opinion of the other'.⁴ Hence, he represented both continuity and change.

Yet, initially lacking a personal power base and inheriting a state constructed by his predecessor meant he had to share power with several power centres that surrounded the presidency—the party politburo, the cabinet, the army high command and the security forces—all initially dominated by the old guard of his father's close colleagues. He also inherited an experienced foreign policy team from his father, headed by Vice President Khaddam and Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, that imparted continuity to foreign policy. However, Bashar did soon establish himself as “the prime decision maker” and his reform team became the dominant tendency in the regime.⁵ Through the extensive legal powers of his office, he engineered the replacement of the old guard as it reached retirement age with appointees beholden to him-

3 David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

4 Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Papers, London: Oxford University Press for IISS, 2004.

5 Ibid.

self. This process of power concentration was crowned at the 2005 Ba'th party 10th Regional conference by the resignation of Khaddam, the senior old guardist, and some half dozen other top Ba'th party officials.

Aware of the flaws in the Syrian economic model and familiar with the West, Bashar was a reformer at heart, despite the slow pace of actual change. Ba'thist ideology ceased to govern Syria's economic policy but Bashar lacked an elaborate blueprint to substitute for it.⁶ The Chinese model of spreading the private sector and the market while retaining a reformed public sector was in principle embraced but it provided only the roughest of guides and reform proceeded piecemeal, by trial and error, and constrained by the need for a consensus within an elite divided over far and how fast to go.⁷ Reform had to be incremental, initially to avoid arousing enemies before Bashar had built up his own reformist faction and thereafter to avoid unleashing social instability.

Bashar's project can be understood as "modernising authoritarianism," making the system work better so that it could survive and deliver development.⁸ The first priority was to renew cadres and leadership personnel and he engineered, within three years of succession, a renovation of the political elite, with a turnover of 60% in top offices, thereby transferring power to a new generation.⁹ His priorities were reflected in those he recruited to ministerial office, most of whom were technocrats with advanced Western degrees in economics or engineering and favouring integration into the world economy.¹⁰ His reforms included restricting the interference of the party and security forces in economic administration, creating the legal framework for a more market oriented economy, the opening of private banks and insurance companies, trade and foreign exchange liberalization, and internet start up. But he made no direct assault on the new class of "crony capitalists,"—the rent-seeking alliances of Alawi political brokers (now led by his own mother's family, the Makhloufs) and the regime-supportive Sunni bourgeoisie--whose corrupt stranglehold on the economy deterred productive investment; he hoped, instead, to use international economic agreements, notably the Euro-Mediterranean partnership--to force an opening of the economy that would require them to become competitive capitalists; in this respect the EU's use of the partnership agreement as a tool of pressure on Syria retarded the reform Europe ostensibly wanted.

6 David Lesch, op. cit.

7 Samer Abboud, "The Transition Paradigm and the Case of Syria," in *Syria's Economy and the Transition Paradigm*, St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, St. Andrews, 2009.

8 Volker Perthes, op. cit.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

Syrian Foreign Policy Under Bashar

Syria's policy could have been transformed under Bashar and its position in world politics might have turned out quite different than it has. In the late 1990s, peace negotiations conducted under US auspices offered the prospect of a settlement with Israel. Bashar, bringing the outlook of a new generation, was in some ways predisposed to approach Syria's challenges differently. His political socialization took place in a radically different environment from that of his father and the regime "old guard." While the latter were socialized in the era of Arab nationalism, war with Israel, and non-alignment, their sons came of age in an era in which state-centric identities were fragmenting the Arabs, American hegemony and economic globalization had replaced the Cold War, and a peace agreement with Israel seemed attainable. While his father had remained hunkered down in Damascus and had little direct experience of the outside world, Bashar had acquired education in the liberal environment of the UK, married a British citizen of Syrian descent and, as president, traveled widely in Europe. Evidence of Bashar's modernizing worldview was his persuasion of his father to start opening Syria to the Internet on the grounds that a closed society was handicapped in the competitive world of globalization. It is worth cautioning, however, that Bashar's exposure to the West does not compare with that of most other Middle Eastern leaders. Moreover, the father-son relation, a presumably powerful socialization mechanism, would have committed him to the preservation of his father's Arab nationalist legacy while the apprenticeship he served under his father, including time within the military, would have socialized him into the code of operation of the establishment. And the legitimacy of the Bashar's presidency was contingent on faithfulness to the standard of national honor defended by his father, namely the full recovery of the Golan from Israel without being seen to abandon the demand for Palestinian national rights.

On the other hand, Bashar faced a deteriorating strategic situation. With its old Soviet patron gone and its newer American interlocutor turning hostile, Syria could no longer maneuver between rival global superpowers and lacked a great power protector. Bashar had immediately to deal with the consequences of the 2000 failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process and inherited a Turkish-Israeli alliance that potentially put Damascus in a pincer. A burst of opposition to Syria's position in Lebanon followed Israel's withdrawal from the south in 2000. At the same time, the fragmentation of the Arab world made it harder to mobilize Pan-Arab political support or financing for Syria's policies.

Worse, Syria's military position was deteriorating. After the 1990s collapse of its Soviet arms supplier, it faced the degradation of its deterrent. The army's

combat strength deteriorated dramatically during the 1990s, its Soviet equipment increasingly obsolescent, with Soviet/Russian demand for payment in hard currency and threatened US sanctions against Russian companies that sold Syria arms denying it enough ammunition and spare parts. These constraints on Syria's prospects of sustaining the conventional military balance with Israel, plus a growing technological and airpower gap with it, led its defense effort to take non-conventional directions. Hizbollah's capacity to fire rockets deep into Israel and to engage Israeli forces in asymmetric warfare became the first line of Syria's new deterrent. Syria's 1990 Gulf war aid windfall was invested in a second line deterrent of chemical weaponized missiles in hardened sites targeting all of Israel. Perversely, it was unilateral Syrian renunciation of this deterrent, crucial to maintaining the Syrian-Israeli peace, that the EU, at US urging, tried to make a condition of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership agreement with Syria.

Bashar's first response to this situation was to try to construct multiple alliances, at both the regional and the international levels, through which the pressures on Syria might be diluted and external resources accessed. He sought to improve relations within the region and particularly with Turkey and at the global level he sought a strategic opening to Europe and Syrian admission to the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, with all the more urgency as friction rose with the US. But the 2000 failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process also triggered Syria's 2001 opening to Iraq under Saddam which would bring Syria, via a chain of events, into a conflict with the West that substantially diverted Bashar's foreign policy from his initial Westcentric path. Instead Syria ended up a partner with Iran in an axis of resistance locked in a struggle for the Middle East with the US and its regional allies. Bashar could not have anticipated this outcome when in 2000 US Secretary of State Madeline Albright attended the funeral of his father and welcomed his accession as a reforming president.

Policy toward Israel

Bashar pursued an ambiguous policy toward Israel, reflective of his dual nationalist and modernizing impulses. Peace negotiations had broken off in early 2000 but on assuming power, he affirmed that Syria was willing to resume them if Israel acknowledged what Syria took to be the commitment made under Yitzhak Rabin to a full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders on the Golan. But thereafter, the rise of Ariel Sharon to power in Israel pushed a settlement off the agenda and his repression of the Palestinian *intifada* inflamed Syrian public opinion against Israel. Bashar therefore revived Syrian militancy toward Israel, both to generate personal nationalist legitimacy essential to his power consolidation and to send the message to Israel that it could not enjoy a peaceful environment and still keep the occupied territories.

Syria returned to its earlier insistence that a Syrian-Israeli settlement had to be part of a comprehensive one that included a Palestinian state (briefly set aside after the Palestinians took responsibility, at Oslo, for their own destiny), called on the Arabs to support the Palestinian *intifada*, allowed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to maintain offices on Syrian territory even though these groups were involved in suicide bombings in Israel and supported Hizbollah operations against Israeli forces in the disputed southern Lebanon Shebaa Farms enclave. Israel, seeking to make this strategy too costly, twice bombed Syrian positions in Lebanon and in 2003 attacked what it said was a Palestinian training camp near Damascus after an Islamic Jihad suicide attack. As Syrian-Israeli relations deteriorated, anti-Syrian enmity grew in Washington, particularly evident in George W. Bush's support for these Israeli attacks on Syria. Syria facilitated the rocket armament of Hizbollah as a deterrent against the increased Israeli threat¹¹ and made massive arms deliveries to it during its summer 2006 conflict with Israel. But Bashar still wanted a negotiated settlement with Israel and, also in part to disarm the US neo-cons after the US occupation of Iraq, he again offered to resume peace talks with Israel. The neo-cons, believing a peace settlement to be a benefit of which Syria was undeserving, discouraged Israel from responding, but Israel's failure to crush Hizbollah in its 2006 war (and to pacify the Gaza Strip), may have incentivized it to explore his offer and in 2008 Turkey began brokering informal discussions between the two sides; since an agreement would require keen US engagement, however, it would have to await departure of the Bush administration.

Defying the Hegemon

In 2000 when Hafiz al-Asad died US-Syrian relations were still amicable; within a few years of Bashar's succession they had degenerated into an enmity that is not easy to explain given Bashar's Westcentric reform agenda. This was also at odds with the long recognition of the two sides that they needed each other: Syria saw the US, although Israel's main backer, as a necessary broker in a peace settlement and the US under Clinton had seen an Israeli-Syrian peace as pivotal to completing a "circle of peace" around Israel and empowering 'moderate' forces in the region. However, Syria was publicly blamed for refusing an Israeli offer regarding the Golan at Geneva in 2000, although in fact, as US participants such as Martin Indyk and Robert Malley later admitted, it retreated from Israel's prior promise of full withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Nevertheless, the failure of the peace process interrupted the US-Syrian engagement that had paralleled it.¹² and with a settlement off the agenda, Syria ceased to be pivotal to US Middle East policy.

11 Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2005.

12 Ibid.

Most decisive in the decline of US-Syrian relations, however, was the rise to power in the Bush government of the Likud-linked “neo-cons” who had been advocating Israeli use of force against Syria, and once in power wanted to similarly use American power.¹³ In Congress US politicians linked to the Israeli lobby began preparing economic sanctions against Syria, under the so-called Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA), which the executive initially opposed but later accepted. For the neo-cons, Syria was a threat to Israel rather than a partner in the peace process and a Syrian-Israeli peace in which Israel would have to concede the Golan was a positive evil. As US-Syrian disagreements increased, so did the influence of the neo-cons overshadow that of US moderates who wanted to retain amicable relations with Syria. Thus, after 9/11 Bush announced that all states not with the US in the war on terror were foes, but Syria tried to take a middle ground supporting the US war on al-Qaida with valuable intelligence assistance, but objecting to the bombing of Afghanistan. Syria also objected to Washington’s designation of what it regarded as national liberation movements--Palestinian militants and Hizbollah--as terrorists; it also regarded these groups as “cards” in the struggle with Israel and evaded US demands that it cease its support for them. The neo-cons made concerted efforts to paint Syria as a threat under the new doctrine that any state that both supported “terrorism” and had WMDs was a direct threat to the US and liable to suffer a US “preventive war.” Neo-con John Bolton regularly raised the issue of Syria’s chemically armed missiles, even though this was a purely defensive deterrent that enhanced the regional power balance and accused Syria of seeking nuclear weapons, although the CIA dismissed his claims. The US later supported a 2008 Israeli strike on what it claimed was a North Korean built nuclear facility. Its disinterest in Syria’s proposal to turn the Middle East into a WMD free zone exposed its double standards: this would have put Israel’s nuclear capability on the table while Washington’s aim was to force a unilateral disarmament of Syria.

Iraq was, however, the main issue that led to worsening Syrian-US relations. Bashar’s 2001 opening to Iraq coincided with the Bush administration’s attempt to prevent Iraq from inching out of the isolation the US had tried to maintain since 1990. It objected to Syria’s receipt of Iraqi oil outside the UN

13 A 1996 document, “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” drafted by a team of advisers to Benjamin Netanyahu by subsequent Bush advisers Richard Perle and Douglas Feith called for “striking Syrian military targets in Lebanon, and should that prove insufficient, *striking at select targets in Syria proper.*” Similar documents advocated the US use of force against Syria justified its possession of WMDs (“Is Syria Next?,” *The Nation*, November 3, 2003; Tom Barry, “On the Road to Damascus: the Neo-Cons Target Syria,” *Counterpunch*, March 8, 2004).

oil-for-food regime even though US allies Turkey and Jordan received similar privileges. US Secretary of State Colin Powell mistakenly believed that he had obtained Bashar's agreement to put the proceeds from Iraqi oil in UN escrow accounts and when this did not happen Powell professed to find Bashar untrustworthy.¹⁴

The immediate catalyst of the crisis in US-Syrian relations was, however, the US determination to invade Iraq. At the UN and in the Arab League, Syrian diplomacy attempted to build a coalition to block or at least withhold legitimation from an invasion. Yet Syria, keen not to be isolated from "international legitimacy" voted for UNSC 1441, mandating the renewal of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq, in the hope this might deprive Bush of an excuse for war; indeed US Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote a letter assuring Syria that the resolution aimed at a peaceful settlement of the Iraq WMD standoff. Bashar infuriated Washington when, in a famous interview on the eve of the war with *al-Safir* (on March 27, 2003), he observed: "No doubt the U.S. is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but... the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq."

Syria did little to actually oppose the US invasion. Security barons close to Bashar allegedly facilitated pre-invasion sales of arms to Iraq, which, although meant for Iraqi self-defense, were considered illegitimate in Washington. Riding the tide of anti-American fury that swept Syria and expecting that Iraq would hold out for months, the regime allowed the movement across the Iraqi border of thousands of Arab resistance fighters, many from northern Syria with its close ties to Iraq and concentration of Muslim militants. Once the Saddam regime fell, Syria also gave refuge to some Iraqi officials fleeing Iraq.

Bashar al-Asad's defiance of Washington over the war, in striking contrast to the appeasement of other Arab leaders, was no idiosyncratic choice but it did reflect Syria's Arab nationalist identity rather than a pure calculus of interest. There were many incentives for Syria to acquiesce in the invasion. Opposing it gave the neo-cons in the Bush administration the opportunity to depict Syria as a US foe. Hafiz al-Asad had been rewarded for siding with the US in the first US-Iraq war of 1990 with control of Lebanon, which Bashar lost for opposing the US in 2003. Had circumstances been similar Bashar probably also have bandwagoned with the US, but in 2003 they were entirely different: If in 1990 Hafiz had a US commitment to a vigorous pursuit of the peace process, in 2003 the neo-cons made sure no such offer was on the table. If in 1991, Iraq was the aggressor against another Arab state, in this instance an Arab state was the victim of aggression by an imperialist power. Indeed,

14 Flynt Leverett, op. cit.

Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the invasion that regime legitimacy dictated opposition, a more important consideration for Bashar's unconsolidated rule than was the case for Hafiz in 1990.

But the risks were high. In the wake of its triumph over Saddam Hussein, Syria was in Washington's crosshairs as the last remaining voice of Arab nationalism. The neo-cons were keen for the US to make an object lesson of Syria to convey the message that Arab nationalism was very costly and clear the way for a pro-Israeli Pax Americana in the region. The US presented Syria with a list of non-negotiable demands that threatened its vital interests: to end support for Palestinian militants, dismantle Hizbollah, withdraw from Lebanon, and co-operate with the occupation of Iraq—in short, to give up its “cards” in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, and its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world. No Syrian government could accept such demands without a major *quid pro quo*.

The regime believed, in fact, that it could steer a middle way over Iraq between unrealistic defiance of US power and surrender to it. The US, Syrian strategists believed, could not as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq: Syria was not subject to international sanctions, and the destruction of the regime would likely further spread the chaos and radicalism unleashed in Iraq. While the US could easily defeat the Syrian army, the real military costs would come from pacifying a conquered Syria where the US would be harder pressed than in Iraq to find collaborators and would have no comparable oil resources to fund its occupation.

Nevertheless, under US threat, Syria rapidly backed away from overt support for the resistance in Iraq. Syria also continually sought an accommodation with the US, using what it thought were bargaining “cards”: depending on whether Washington respected its interests, it could either advance or obstruct US interests, given its status as a key to settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; its unique ability to restrain or unleash Hezbollah's proven ability to hurt Israel; the offer of intelligence co-operation against al-Qaida and its ability to contribute to the stabilization or de-stabilization of Iraq. But it was imperial overreach that ultimately gave Syria a certain space for maneuver between defiance and submission. The hegemon had expended a lot of soft power over Iraq and its military was so over-committed that it could not take on another war and occupation.

Still, under unrelenting pressure, Syria did make further incremental, but ultimately significant concessions to appease Washington: borders with Iraq were tightened, Hezbollah was encouraged to stop its campaign against Israeli forces in the Shebaa farms, and in 2005 Syrian forces were withdrawn

from Lebanon. Believing that much of US animosity to Syria was propelled by the neo-con's Likud connection, Bashar tried to disarm them by proposing to restart the peace negotiations with Israel. However, since Bush's policy was not to offer inducements to "rogue states," these concessions only encouraged US hardliners to demand more. Washington succeeded in depriving Syria of some of the vital "cards" by which it exercised political leverage in regional politics and especially towards Israel, most notably its dominant role in Lebanon. Equally important the Bush administration's devaluation of the traditional goals of US Middle East policy, regional stability (for which the neo-cons substituted "creative destruction") and the peace process, correspondingly devalued the "cards" by which Syria could promise to deliver or obstruct these goals. The 2006 Baker Commission's recommendation that the US engage with Syria and Iran, an acknowledgement of imperial overreach, raised hopes in Damascus that were dashed by Bush's rejection of this advice.

Syrian Policy toward Lebanon

Syria's role in Lebanon was another issue fraught with contention between it and the West, as well as pro-Western states such as Saudi Arabia. They viewed Syria's tenacity in defending its influence in Lebanon as obstructive and negative. As Damascus sees it, however, it has permanent interests in Lebanon. One relates to identity: Lebanon is seen as a detached part of Greater Syria, hence Syria's natural sphere of influence and also a country that must be brought to acknowledge its Arab identity and not become a Western outpost like Israel. Lebanon has also been a source of economic resources for regime patronage networks. Syria has vital security interests in Lebanon: it must not be allowed to become a base for forces threatening to the Syrian regime. This includes Syrian opposition elements that have sometimes made Lebanon a safe haven. It also includes keeping Israeli influence out of the country, and specifically the reconstruction of the Israeli-Maronite alliance of the eighties; the Israeli military threat to use Lebanon's Bekaa valley to attack Syria's Western flank must also be deterred, a main justification for Syria's troop presence there. Moreover, the Hezbollah-Syria alliance had become strategic for Damascus, with each supporting the other against common enemies. Hezbollah's ability to stand up to Israel is a pivotal part of the Israeli-Syrian power balance. Bashar developed close personal relations with and was said to admire Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and the enormous Arab nationalist prestige Hizbollah won in standing up to Israel also benefited its Syrian patron. Finally, Lebanon was one of Syria's strategic "cards" in any peace negotiations: Syria could both veto a separate Lebanese peace with Israel and help deliver Lebanon into an acceptable one; it could also keep a hand on the 'Palestinian card' through Lebanon or Hezbollah.

From the point of view of Damascus, the US and France set out to deprive it of its “cards” and sphere of influence in Lebanon. It was their attempt to undermine Syria’s role in Lebanon, seen as a potential weak spot, that may have precipitated the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri which was then blamed on Syria and used to mobilize demands for its expulsion from the country. The idea that Lebanon after Syrian occupation would be neutral and independent was not seen as credible in Damascus: either it would be the sphere of influence of Syria or succumb to that of the US-French-Saudi axis or even be penetrated again by Israel—*their* Lebanese clients would dominate instead of Syria’s. Lebanon also now came to be seen as the main instrument through which they could threaten the Syrian regime. Their unprecedented use of international institutions against Syria has been very alarming for Damascus. UNSC Resolution 1559 calling on Syria to withdraw from the country and for Hizbollah to disarm was pushed by the US and France despite the reluctance of other Security Council members and despite the protest of the Lebanese government against this interference in its sovereign affairs and that it was a bilateral matter with no implications for international peace and security, normally needed to justify UN intervention. The unprecedented setting up of an international tribunal to investigate the Hariri assassination was seen in Syria as a tool of regime change. Lebanon was also seen as a battleground in a wider struggle for dominance in the Middle East between the US and the forces of nationalist resistance, led at the state level by Iran and Syria, with parallel struggles in Iraq and Palestine expected to be affected by the outcome in Lebanon. Although Syria understood there was no prospect, after its forced 2005 withdrawal, of wholly restoring its old role as arbiter of Lebanon, it was determined to blunt the advance of its enemies there.

Syria’s strategy in this struggle for Lebanon included several prongs. The alliance with Iran was tightened. Keeping the Hizbollah card was seen as essential to making sure Lebanon would not become a platform for regime change in Syria. Hizbollah’s ability to stand up to Israel in the 2006 War showed its special value in any peace negotiations and as a deterrent against Israel. The key to protecting Hezbollah was to restore the ‘consociational’ system in Lebanon wherein no key decisions could be made without a consensus of the major sects—thus institutionalizing a veto for Hizbollah. This was against the attempt of the Western-backed March 14th coalition to use their majority in parliament and government to push through policies inimical to Syria and Hizbollah.

This strategy carried considerable costs. Europe was alienated, over the Hariri affair in particular and, at US urging, suspended the Euro-Mediterranean

partnership agreement Bashar had sought. “Moderate” Arab regimes, notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt were antagonized. However, the strategy seemed to pay off when Hizbollah’s May 2008 power demonstration in taking over West Beirut broke the Lebanese deadlock and led to the Doha agreement on formation of a national unity government in which Hezbollah had a veto over policy and the election of a neutral (if not pro-Syrian, pro-Hizbollah) President, Michel Suleiman. Syria would not now likely be undermined from what Washington had considered its main point of vulnerability, Lebanon; however the Lebanese elections of June 2009, won by the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition, threatened to again disrupt governance by a national unity coalition and split Lebanon, in part over the role of Syria.

The Domestic Political Consequences of the Iraq War

Bashar initially had hoped to expand political liberalization, at least to the extent that it could be made to support rather than undermine regime legitimacy, economic reform and his own power position. His authoritarian reformist faction was flanked by two other political tendencies which he had to master. Old guardists sought to preserve the role and privileges of the Ba’th party, the nationalist line and perhaps the populist contract with the people. The loyal opposition ultimately wanted a democratic transformation of the system, but sought to gradually advance it through a coalition with Bashar’s modernizers. The Damascus spring of 2001, in which Bashar encouraged civil society to express constructive criticism, seemingly in an effort to foster forces that would strengthen his own reformist agenda against the old guard, suggested that a modernizer-loyal opposition coalition was possible. But when hardline opposition elements framed the conflict in zero-sum terms (attacking the legacy of Hafiz) and put the spotlight on the corrupt activities of regime barons, the hard-liners in the regime were empowered and Bashar shut down the experiment. Western democracy, he asserted, could not just be imported and democratization had to build upon social and economic modernization, as in the Chinese model, rather than precede it – lest instability, a la Gorbachev, ensue. Indeed, if Bashar’s economic reform program entailed rolling back the social contract and entering a stage of crony capitalism, authoritarian rule would be needed to contain popular opposition.

At the same time, as the neo-cons trumpeted the US conquest of Iraq as a first step toward inspiring revolt against similar regimes across the region, Bashar laid down red-lines for the opposition: threats to national unity (by stimulating sectarian conflict) and any collaboration with foreign forces were unacceptable. Human rights campaigner Haitham al-Maleh and hardline opposition figurehead Riyad al-Turk agreed that US pressures undermined re-

formers and enabled the regime to justify continued emergency powers.¹⁵ The loyal opposition asked to be included in a national unity government to strengthen Syria against the external threat and there were good reasons for bringing it in: 'To stand up to the Americans you have to make internal changes and mobilize people around you,' said one analyst. 'If not, you have to follow the Americans...The regime...has not decided which way to go.' No opposition figure advocated submission to US demands to reduce support for Hizbollah or militant Palestinians. Syrians of all ages, sects and classes seemed to share a profound dislike of Bush for having attacked Iraq, as they believed, on behalf of Israel and to seize its oil. Some favorably compared their president's stands to the failure of the 'cowards who run the Arab countries' to stand up to Bush.¹⁶ The Iraq war stimulated an Islamic revival and the regime tried to use it to strike a détente with Islamic forces that had long represented the main alternative to Ba'thist rule.¹⁷

The legitimacy of the regime must, however, have suffered from the foreign policy reverses inflicted by the US, given that this had long rested on its claim to act for Syrian Arab nationalism. If Hafiz was respected for his effectiveness on behalf of this cause, Bashar had to swallow several American and Israeli military provocations and Syria's forced evacuation of Lebanon. The mounting costs of defying the US stimulated growth of a 'little Syrian' identity. Yet the very fact that Washington targeted the regime for its stands on behalf of still popular *Arab* causes--its support of Palestine, its association with Hizbollah and its opposition to the invasion of Iraq--generated a certain solidarity between regime and people. Many Syrians, feeling victimized by the US-orchestrated global demonization of Syria over its Lebanon presence, rallied around the government rather than turning against it. Additionally, the chaos and sectarian conflict in Iraq, together with the fear--ignited by the Kurdish riots of 2003 and the rise of Islamic militancy--that the 'Iraqi disease' could spread to Syria, led the public to put a high premium on stability. This generated for the regime what might be called 'legitimacy because of a worse alternative.' However, the regime could not be brought to undertake political experiments that might constrain its monopoly of power at a time when it had to both cope with threat from without and push economic reform within. From the "Struggle for the Middle East" to Partial Emergence from Isolation A major consequence of Syria's stands on the Iraq (2003) and Lebanon (2006) wars was a shift in regional alignments as Syria was estranged from its traditional Arab partners, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Bashar was highly critical of

15 *Financial Times*, 26 August 2003.

16 Saul Landau, "A Report from Syria: Between Israel and Iraq...a Hard Place", www.counterpunch.com, 26 July 2003.

17 www.csmonitor.com, 3 November 2003.

their acquiescence in the US invasion of Iraq and they blamed Syria and Iran for the 2006 Lebanon war; the Saudis also blamed Syria for the assassination of their long time ally, Rafiq al-Hariri. Syria accused the Saudis of backing terrorist attacks in Syria “to ruin Syria’s image as island of stability that the West should deal with.” By 2006 Syria had become involved in a struggle for the Middle East between what some saw as two axes, a “moderate” one aligned with the US, backed by the EU and including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan and, on the other side, Iran and Syria, aligned with Hizbollah and Hamas, which stood for Arab nationalist and Islamic resistance to the US in the region and enjoyed wide support in Arab public opinion. Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine were the key battlegrounds between the rival alliances. As Syria faced isolation in the West as a “pariah” state, its links with Iran and the radical axis were strengthened.

Yet by the end of 2008, Syria seemed to have survived the Western campaign against it and relations seemed to improve. Even before that the manifest disaster brought on the US by the neo-cons’ policies had led to the decline of their influence in Washington and a corresponding decline in US enmity toward Syria. Bashar outlasted his two main nemesises, Bush and Chirac, with both of their successors apparently abandoning their efforts to isolate the country. But the change of heart in the West toward Syria also resulted from a realization that the policy of isolating it was counterproductive. The 2008 shift in the power balance toward Syria in Lebanon precipitated a shift at the international level in which French President Sarkozy broke with the US policy of isolating Syria, the symbol of which was his invitation of Bashar to the Paris launch of his new European-Mediterranean union where Syria’s accession to the European-Mediterranean partnership was again put on the agenda. On the other hand, relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia were subsequently exacerbated by Syria’s backing for Hamas in the 2008 war over Gaza and their ambivalent stance on the Israeli invasion, although there were some signs thereafter that Riyadh and Damascus were trying to end their feud.

By 2009, Syria had managed to position itself between two networks: on the one hand, it was part of the Iran-led “resistance axis,” a defiance of the West enabled by diversified economic connections to Asia and renewed security and economic relations with Russia (taking advantage of Georgian crisis); on the other hand, the Westcentric option had been revived: Western Europe, manifest in detente with France; in Turkish-sponsored peace talks with Israel; and in a cautious dialogue with the new Obama administration. If its interests were ignored or respected Syria could tilt one way or the other.

Yet, Syria still laboured under serious vulnerabilities. To advance economic

reform and overcome the looming resource/ fiscal crisis, it accelerated its integration into the global economy through a kind of “Lebanonization” in which inward investment in tertiary and luxury businesses was prioritized. This, however, made the country more vulnerable to global economic pressure and turmoil in financial markets. Moreover, the departed Bush administration had engineered an institutionalization of Syria’s “pariah-hood” that would be very hard to reverse. It has thus strewn several “mines” in the path of Syria’s attempted integration into the global economy. US sanctions on the economy and particularly the Syrian commercial bank obstructed aspects of the regime’s attempted global financial integration, discouraged companies from doing business in Syria and made more difficult and expensive the acquisition of key components needed for flagship sectors of the economy such as banking, oil, and telecommunications; in May 2009, the Obama administration renewed US sanctions, amidst accusations that the flow of “terrorists” through Syria to Iraq had been resumed. The international Hariri tribunal constitutes a permanent threat that can be used to extract concessions from Syria by its enemies. The IAEA charges over an alleged nuclear site destroyed by the Israelis near Deir ez-Zor may likewise be used against Syria (while, typically, Israel’s air attack on a sovereign country was ignored by the “international community.”) Were these threats to the regime to be actively deployed, it would undoubtedly do whatever is needed to survive. In this respect, the “Qaddafi option”—surrendering its “cards”—would only be possible in the unlikely event Israel was prepared to return the Golan. Its most likely response would therefore be to tilt away from the West and back to the resistance axis, again seeking to outlast its antagonists.

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السياسة الخارجية السورية في عهد بشار الأسد

رايموند هيننبوش

خلاصة

تتجاذب السياسة الخارجية السورية في عهد بشار الأسد عنصران قد تكون احداها نقبضا للثاني، وهما الموقف القومي التقليدي للبلاد من جهة وبرنامج الاصلاح الاقتصادي الذي يتطلبه الاتجاه نحو الغرب من جهة اخرى. ان الصراع القائم مع اسرائيل واحتلال الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية للعراق، يؤججان حدة المقاومة القومية التي هي موجودة أصلا. على ان اتجاه سوريا نحو اقتصاد السوق، يوجب عليها ان تتواءم مع النظام الرأسمالي العالمي الذي تسيطر عليه الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. ان هذا المقال يتناول بالبحث والتدقيق السياسة الخارجية التي ورثها بشار الأسد من والده، والعوامل السياسية والاقتصادية التي تحدد النهج السياسي الذي يتبعه، وبرنامجه الاصلاح، وسياسة سوريا تجاه اسرائيل، وتحدي سوريا للولايات المتحدة الامريكية على خلفية العراق، والموقف السوري في لبنان، والنضال الذي يخوضه الأسد على نطاق اوسع في الشرق الأوسط الذي تعتبر سوريا جزءا منه.

الكلمات الدالة : سوريا، السياسة الخارجية، بشار الأسد، لبنان، الحرب العراقية.