Syria's Role in the Region
Mediator, Peacemaker, or Aggressor?

Moshe Ma'oz

A Century Foundation Report

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This paper is one of a series that The Century Foundation is commissioning as part of its Prospects for Peace Initiative, which focuses on the conflicts in the Middle East that not only destabilize the region but also increasingly threaten American security and empower extremists. The Prospects for Peace Initiative seeks through dialogue and policy research to inform and enrich the American policy debate on long-running conflicts in the Middle East—core among them the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and to advance pragmatic policy solutions to resolve them. The initiative works to bring a wide range of perspectives to the debate to help lay the groundwork for a durable peace supported and guaranteed by the international community.

Introduction: Putting Pan-Arab Ideology to the Test

Syria has long been a hotbed for pan-Arab ideals in modern times and has been considered the "beating heart" of Arabism. Since the inception of the Arab nationalist movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Syria has hoisted the banner of Arab revival and unity. In 1958 the Syrian government, with strong Ba'thist inducement, initiated the Syrian-Egyptian union, called the United Arab Republic, the first pan-Arab union in modern times. During the past sixty years, the Syrian Ba'th, the most genuine pan-Arab party, has articulated such ideas and established the longest would-be pan-Arab regime (since 1963) in the region.

Syria was also highly instrumental in instigating the first all-Arab war against Israel, the newly born Jewish state, in 1948. The Ba'th regime constituted the main actor in the crucial developments leading to the eruption of the second all-Arab war with Israel, in June 1967, and, seven years later in October 1973, Damascus joined forces with Egypt in another war against Israel. Whereas Egypt subsequently embarked on a peacemaking process and agreement with Israel (1977–79), stressing its nation-state policies, Ba'thist Syria further continued its pan-Arab/anti-Israel stance. Even during its own peace process with Israel (1991–2000), Ba'thist Syria, still under Hafiz Asad's leadership, adopted a quasi–pan-Arab strategy that contributed to the collapse of this process.

Throughout the twentieth century there developed a structural gap between Syria's ideological ambitions and its capability to implement them. Asad's successor and son, Bashar (2000–present), reinforced Syria's pan-Arab ideology in response to new constraints, including the U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003) and persistent Israeli hostile attitudes. Following the fall of the Ba'th regime in Iraq (1968–2003), as well as the continued policies of Egypt and other Arab states, Syria has nominally retained the only pan-Arab, Ba'thist state, but has lacked tangible pan-Arab leadership and influence. Damascus, once the center of the first vast Arab empire, the Umayyad state (661–750), has suffered during

the twentieth century and beyond, from political-military and socioeconomic weakness, as well as from serious regional and international constraints. Syrian leaders have thus been induced to adjust to changing circumstances and adopt opportunistic policies.

History

In the period from 1918 to 1920, Syria became the first Arab state to emerge from Ottoman rule with pan-Arab aspirations under British auspices and the rule of Amir Faysal.[1] Faysal aspired to unite "Greater Syria," including Lebanon, Palestine, and Trans-Jordan as a basis for Arab unity under his throne. But, unlike his radical nationalist comrades in the Syrian congress, Faysal was pragmatic and willingly cooperated with "imperialist" Britain, the Zionist Jewish movement in Palestine, and the French-oriented Christian Maronites in Lebanon. Faysal's eviction from Syria by French troops in 1920, however, and the subsequent division of the region into British- and French-dominated states under the terms set out in the Sykes-Picot treaty of 1916, complicated the ability of the Syrian Arab nationalists to work for pan-Arab unity (*wahda*). While continuing to praise the ideal, Arab nationalists prioritized liberating Syria from French rule and unifying the Syrian national community, notably by attempting to integrate the powerful Alawi and Druze territorial minorities.

Syria has a long history of taking a stance on Israel. After gaining independence in 1943 (formally in 1946), Syrian nationalist leaders, particularly President Shukri al-Quwwatli, resumed their endeavors to promote pan-Arabism by word and by deed, conspicuously pioneering anti-Zionist/anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian declarations and policies. It was highly active in preparing an all-Arab war against the emerging Jewish state. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Syrian troops occupied small territories near Lake Tiberias that had been allocated to Israel in the 1947 partition under UN Resolution 181. The Syrian military offensive was short-lived, however, and ended in failure. Consequently, a precarious armistice agreement was signed between Syria and Israel in 1949. Two pragmatic Syrian dictators, Husni Za'im and Adib Shishakli (in 1949 and 1952), secretly sought peace/nonaggression agreements with Israel, offering to absorb three hundred thousand to five hundred thousand Palestinian refugees,

respectively, but demanding half of Lake Tiberias. Unwilling to endanger Israel's major water reservoir and mistrusting Syrian and Arab intentions, Israel's leader, David Ben Gurion, rejected the offer and rendered priority to absorbing Jewish refugees from Europe. Syrian-Israeli relations continued to constitute a zero-sum game for several decades, characterized by border skirmishes and major wars in 1967, 1973, and 1982.

Yet despite its anti-Israeli belligerency, pro-Palestinian policies, and pan-Arab ideological pretensions, Syria has failed to emerge as an all-Arab leader. First, the country remained militarily, economically, politically, and socially weak for decades.[2] Paradoxically, this very weakness prompted Syrian leaders to toughen pan-Arab and anti-Israeli positions. Second, rather than asserting an influence on its Arab neighbors, Syria was for many years an object of political intervention and territorial annexation by its neighboring states. For example, Iraq's King Faysal (the former king of Syria) and Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id had aimed at including Syria in their "Fertile Crescent" plan since the 1930s. Furthermore, King Abdallah of Jordan plotted since the 1940s to create a Greater Syria under his leadership (while Turkey managed to annex the strategic province or Iskanderun, now Hatay, in 1939). These threats, in addition to the French creation of a majority Christian state of Lebanon from what was historically considered Syria, acted as a catalyst for the assertive nationalistic direction of Syria's future policies.

Egypt under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952, 1954–70) initially appeared as though it would protect Syria against its hostile neighbors, and Nasser's strong and aggressive Egypt emerged in the 1950s as the leader of pan-Arabism. Threatened by pro-Western Arab neighbors and subversive U.S. plots, and induced by the influential Ba'th party, Syrian leaders appealed to Nasser to unite Syria with Egypt. The result was the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in February 1958. Ultimately, Nasser was more interested in curbing the regional ambitions of his Arab Hashemite rivals (Jordan and Iraq) while advancing his own pan-Arab ambitions than in safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity, and the UAR proved to be an avenue for stiff authoritarian domination of Syria by Egypt. The situation provoked a Syrian military coup in September 1961 and the "defection" of Syria from the UAR.

The split of the UAR ultimately contributed to the erosion of pan-Arab nationalism (*qawmiyya 'arabiyya*), leading to a uniquely Syrian nationalism

(*wataniyya*) and patriotic regard for the nation-state. These trends persisted through the rule of the pan-Arab Ba'th party (1963–present) and became particularly strong after the all-Arab military defeat by Israel in 1967.

The Ba'th and Neo-Ba'th Regimes: Qawmiyya Under Duress

The very first declaration of the new Ba'th regime, on March 8, 1963, the same day of the military coup/revolution, was decisively pan-Arab:

> In the name of God and Arabism: from the dawn of history Syria fulfilled its positive role in the struggle under the banner of Arabism and Arab unity. Arab Syria and its people have never acknowledged the boundaries of the state and recognized only the border of the great Arab homeland. Even Syria's national anthem does not include the word Syria, but glorifies Arabism and the heroic battle of all Arabs.[3]

Ideological rhetoric notwithstanding, the new Ba'thist regime in Syria was still unable to compete with Nasserist Egypt over pan-Arab predominance and influence. This was due to its continued weakness as well as the perception of its Alawi minority rule, which lacked public legitimacy in the eyes of the majority Sunni Muslim population. Furthermore, the short-lived Ba'th regime in Iraq was replaced by a pro-Nasserite rule of the Arif brothers, one following the other, and Nasser repeatedly, harshly blamed the new Syrian rulers for thwarting Arab unity.

In an attempt to counter Nasser's harsh criticism and to externalize domestic (mainly Islamist) unrest, the Syrian Ba'thists demonstrated their unequivocal support for major pan-Arab issues. The Ba'thists cultivated the Palestinian guerilla organization Fatah, which was also a reaction to the Egyptian-sponsored Palestinian Liberation Organization, and employed militant anti-Israeli actions. Damascus also attempted to foil Israeli works to divert the Jordan River waters into a Jordan-Negev water carrier in the mid-1960s. Suffering harsh Israeli retaliations, the neo-Ba'th Syrian rulers (since February 1966), Salah Jadid and Hafiz Asad, backed by Moscow, managed to drag the reluctant Nasser and Jordan's more-moderate King Hussein into a new pan-Arab confrontation with Israel: the 1967 war.

Asad's Regional Strategy

The traumatic pan-Arab defeat, including the loss of territories to Israel, was exploited by Hafiz Asad, the Syrian defense minister and air force commander, to depose Salah Jadid, his Alawi coreligionist, the Ba'th party boss, and supreme Syrian leader in November 1970. Embarking on a "reform movement," Asad managed for the first time to render Syrian political stability, mainly by autocratic rule, coercive police and secret services, as well as the Ba'th party apparatuses. He also endeavored to gain the allegiance of the people by improving socioeconomic conditions, particularly for peasants and workers, and making gestures toward the conservative Sunni Muslim population. But these measures did not prevent the eruption of a number of Muslim Brothers rebellions in the late 1970s through the early 1980s. The culmination of these uprisings was dealt with in a brutal massacre of many thousands of Muslims—including children and women—in the city of Hama on February 2, 1982.

Although the Muslim Brothers' insurrection was largely a reaction to Asad's secular policies, it was also related to his "betrayal" of pan-Arab ideology in the 1976 Lebanese civil war. Indeed, during the early stages of the war, Asad switched his political and military backing from the Lebanese Muslim left and Palestinian radical groups to the "reactionary" Western, pro-Israeli Christian Maronites. Asad actively helped the latter to fight the former, despite radical leftist Ba'thist ideology. He calculated that this policy would better serve Syrian national interests, namely to influence, if not control, the strategically important Lebanese state.

While Asad was not a pan-Arab ideologue, he presented himself as such and used this concept of *qawmiyya* to strengthen the Syrian-Arab *watan*, or nation-state. After ascending to power in November 1970, he stressed Syria's cooperation and solidarity with other Arab states, regardless of their political orientations. In October 1973 Asad joined Egypt's President Anwar Sadat in launching a military offensive against Israel, predominantly aiming to recover the Sinai and the Golan Heights, respectively. But Sadat's "misconduct" during and following the war, in conjunction with the final Israeli military victory, induced Asad to construct a new regional strategy based on the following notions. Syria would fill the pan-Arab leadership role lost by Sadat's Egypt after their 1978–79 peace with Israel. Thus Syria would seek alternative Arab allies,

while prioritizing the buildup of its own independent military power. This military power (as well as socioeconomic and cultural strength) would support the concept of "strategic balance" with Israel, which meant Syrian capability to defend itself, deter Israel from attacking it, and fight Israel under suitable circumstances. This strategic/military balance also would be used to negotiate a political settlement.[4] Finally, to gain advantageous results in such negotiations, Syria would attempt to mend fences with the United States while continuing to obtain military help from the USSR but with no ideological strings attached.

As it happened, this grand strategy was largely not implemented and Asad was induced to adopt alternative policies to serve Syrian national interests. In late 1977 Asad established the pan-Arab "Tripoli Bloc" with Ba'thist Iraq and other radical Arab regimes. In late 1978 Asad and Iraq's President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr issued a formal declaration. Depicted as a "pan-Arab historical move," the declaration called to create "full military unity, as well as economic, political and cultural unity."[5] Finally, in late 1979, Asad cooperated with Iraq's new president, Saddam Hussein, in ousting Egypt from the pan-Arab "Arab League" for breaking ranks by signing a separate peace with Israel. Nevertheless, Asad still failed to achieve pan-Arab unity or leadership. This was in large part due to his personal rivalry with Saddam for regional supremacy, ideological Ba'thist authenticity, and economic disputes over the Euphrates waters and the oil pipeline. Consequently, and coinciding with the Islamic revolution in 1979 in Iran, Ba'thist "Arab sisters" Syria and Iraq became deadly enemies for many years.

During the devastating eight-year war between Iraq and Iran (1980–88), Syria extended military, logistic, and diplomatic assistance to Iran against Iraq. Although Asad justified this bold anti–pan-Arab alliance with Tehran in pan-Arab—that is, anti-Israeli—terms, Asad embarked on this "unholy" alliance to serve Syrian national and regional interests. He sought to curb Saddam's regional ambitions, manipulate Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states to increase their donations, and finally to obtain Iranian oil under more favorable terms. In addition to gaining religious sanction for his quasi-Shia, Alawi regime, Asad considered revolutionary Iran as a strategic ally against Israel. Asad also subsequently employed pro-Iranian, Shia Hezbollah as a military instrument against the Israeli occupation of part of Lebanon (1982–2000).

Indeed, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which initially humiliated the Syrian army and air force, actually enhanced Asad's efforts to reach a

military balance with Israel in the longer term. It enabled him to employ the newly emerging Hezbollah to punish Israel (and the United States in October 1983 because of its support of the new pro-Israeli, Lebanese government) and regain his hold over Lebanon. In fact these latter objectives were the only gains of Asad's regional strategy, for they ended up forcing Israel and its proxies to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 1985 and 2000. The result was establishment of a de facto Syrian protectorate throughout Lebanon to fill the vacuum, which was approved by the Arab summit in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989.

During the mid-1980s through 2000, Damascus was unable to achieve a strategic balance with Israel and adopted more pragmatic pro-American policies. The inability to balance Israel militarily derived largely from the change of Soviet policy under Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91), who ceased its massive military support while urging Asad to reach a "balance of interests" and political settlement with Israel (which continued to enjoy U.S. military and economic assistance). Asad then attempted again to enlist U.S. diplomatic and economic backing for such a political settlement. Accordingly, Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition in overturning the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (1990–91), breaching pan-Arab ideology (though this time in ample company) in favor of its national interests.

Subsequently, in late October 1991, Syria participated in the Madrid peace conference with Israel under the auspices of George H. W. Bush and Gorbachev. During Clinton's terms of office (1993–2001), Syria directly negotiated the provisions of a peace agreement with Israel for the first time with active American mediation. Earlier in 1990–91 the United States had tacitly acknowledged Syrian consolidation of its de facto protectorate over Lebanon. Syria then moved to crush the opposition of the Lebanese self-appointed president, General Michel Aoun (in October 1990), and subsequently signed a new agreement (in May 1991) "of brotherhood, cooperation and coordination" with the new pro-Syrian President Elias Hrawi. Dominating Lebanon indirectly was surely the major regional-strategic achievement of Asad until 2005 when Syrian military presence in Lebanon was terminated.

Partially because of Syria's interest in Lebanon, Asad cultivated two main strategic options in his regional policies to enable maneuverability under the new circumstances. On the one hand, he significantly improved Syria's relations with pro-U.S. states in the region such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well

as other Arab Gulf states that renewed their financial help to Syria after the 1990–91 war. Asad also seriously negotiated peace with Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak and came close to signing a peace treaty with the Jewish state in 1999–2000.

To be sure, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations were largely encouraged by President Bill Clinton, who induced both parties to reach a peace agreement along the following lines: the return of the entire Golan to Syria, fully demilitarized and supervised, in return for Syrian recognition of and diplomatic relations with Israel. Similar to former Israeli prime ministers Rabin, Peres, and perhaps also Netanyahu, Barak agreed to Clinton's design. But it was not implemented owing to a Syrian-Israeli dispute over a small strip of shore land along the northeastern tip of the lake (see below).

Today's Syria under Bashar cannot afford to request from Israel less than the entire Golan, within a peace agreement, lest his domestic leadership be damaged (cf. Bashar's speech in the Syrian parliament on July 17, 2007). As long as Israel and the United States are hostile to him and his tactics, Bashar cannot afford to relinquish his alliance with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which his father created as an alternative option aimed inter alia at squeezing concessions from Israel. Indeed, Hafez al-Asad continued to sustain its strategic links with anti-U.S. and anti-Israel Tehran and to back such violent resistance groups as Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad in their terrorist and guerrilla attacks against Israel.

Simultaneously, Syria's relations with Iraq remained hostile until 1997, when the two foes reestablished economic links despite UN sanctions and U.S. requests. Similarly, Syrian relations with Turkey improved in the late 1990s after they had been antagonistic for years due in large part to Syrian backing of the anti-Turkish, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—which stopped in 1998 after severe Turkish threats.

When the politically experienced Hafez al-Asad died in June 2000, he left a conflicted legacy. His successor and son Bashar inherited a politically stable nation-state with authoritarian rule and a weak economy that was a quasi-regional power. Bashar's Syria would profit from dominating Lebanon and positioning itself opportunistically between the two emerging alliances in the region—on the one hand, Shia Iran and Hezbollah, and on the other, the pro-U.S. Sunni states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. At the same time, Bashar's Syria

maintained one historical constant in that it continues to challenge Israel—even in times of peace (via proxy). Truly, the Syrian government's challenge to Israel has mutated from an initially existential opposition to a more pragmatic realization that Israel is here to stay and thus readiness to make a deal on pre-1967 terms.

Bashar's Syria

When Hafez al-Asad passed away in 2000, his son Bashar was elected president with over 97 percent of the vote in what was undoubtedly a fixed election.[6] Although he intended to follow the regional strategic legacy of his father, Bashar has thus far downgraded Syria from a quasi-regional power to a fairly weak regional actor—at least in its own right—in his seven-year rule. Apart from the changing political circumstances in the region and the United States, the reduction in Damascus's regional influence has been partially related to Bashar's leadership qualities. Unlike his father, Bashar has not excelled as a strategist but tended rather to stress his ideological concepts. But unlike his father, who had employed pan-Arabism in order to consolidate his domestic and regional leadership, Bashar has reduced his adherence to pan-Arabism in favor of Syrian nationalism and nation-state. He has stressed the unique role that Syria has played not only in the development of Arabism and Islam but also in pre-Arab and pre-Islamic ancient regional civilizations. These concepts may have been influenced by similar notions in Egypt and Iraq and their nation-state tendencies, as well as by the decline of pan-Arab ideology and the advance of Islamic adherence. These ideological trends notwithstanding, Bashar's strategic (mis)calculations and constraints caused him the loss of several important assets that his father had managed to gain. Indeed, he has lost much of Syria's grip on Lebanon, alienated multiple Sunni Arab regimes, Israel, and the United States, and has strengthened his alliance with militant Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. At the same time, Bashar has dangerously become entangled in Iraqi domestic chaos.

Bashar initially demonstrated pragmatic regional inclinations. He tried to maintain good working relations with his Arab neighbors and Turkey, as well as with the United States. But since late 2000, certain crucial developments

have induced Bashar to adopt more militant positions that further complicated Syria's relations with pro-American Arab regimes, Israel, and the United States. For example, Bashar went out of his way to hail the Palestinian Al-Aqsa intifada that erupted in late September 2000. Challenging the moderate positions of Egypt and Jordan (and to some extent Saudi Arabia as well), Bashar adopted radical anti-Israel positions and called on these countries to cut their diplomatic relations with Israel and continued to criticize harshly the moderate Arab states for backing the 2002 "Quartet" initiative to settle the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Simultaneously, although attempting to avoid direct confrontation with Washington, Bashar provoked the anger of George W. Bush by backing various anti-Israeli terrorist or guerrilla groups (but not al-Qa'ida). After his ascendancy in July 2000, he enhanced Syrian economic relations with Iraq, in gross violation of UN sanctions and contrary to Washington's request and policy.

Subsequently, since early 2003, Bush has developed intense hostility to Bashar because of Damascus's vehement opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and its backing of the anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq. Bashar furiously attacked Arab leaders for siding with the American measures against Iraq, including the March 2003 invasion.[7] In fact, magnified by the spotlight of holding the "Arab" seat on the UN Security Council in 2002–3, Bashar was the only Arab leader who aggressively condemned the United States during its preparation to invade, in addition to its occupation of, Iraq. Syria extended logistic help to Saddam's loyalists and permitted Arab fighters to cross its border and join the anti-American insurgents in Iraq. If this Syrian conduct was not enough to solidify the U.S. administration's previous dislike of Bashar, other Syrian policies cultivated Bush's antagonism, including continued Syrian help to terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, Syria's lingering occupation of Lebanon until 2005, and the tyrannical rule of Bashar. Finally, as a would-be world reformer, stressing the notions of democracy and liberty, Bush considered Bashar a tyrant akin to those running the most "evil" countries, including Iran and North Korea.

Nonetheless, since late 2003, Bashar has offered several successive opportunities to engage with Bush. These endeavors were either turned down or ignored. Similarly, attempts by Bashar to gain political credit in the United States by offering peace negotiations with Israel were rejected by both American and

Israeli leaders. In fact, successive right-of-center Israeli prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert were hostile to Bashar, in response to his support of Hamas and Hezbollah and his close links with Iran, particularly in the summer 2006 war.

Syria's Regional Role

Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, which has strengthened since the U.S. occupation of Iraq, has also aggravated relations with its more pro-Western Arab neighbors, such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. These important developments have occurred because of Bashar's immaturity and miscalculations, in addition to his inexperience and perhaps his ideological inclinations. But Bashar has been also forced to react to crucial new circumstances. On the one hand, the increasingly hostile policies of Bush after 9/11, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the harsh attitudes of Israel's leaders have pushed Bashar away from his previous allies and closer to Iran. The ascendancy of Iran as a regional power with nuclear potential and the military capability of Hezbollah vis-à-vis Israel simply happened to coincide with Bashar's other interests.

Under these circumstances, we should reassess Bashar's strategic options in the region. What is the probability of Bashar bolstering Syria's alliance with the Iran and Hezbollah, thus backing or participating in their anti-Israeli and anti-American aggressive policies? This is perhaps the most likely option for the time being. Apart from the strategic depth that it provides Syria vis-à-vis Israel, Iran has been considered by Syrian leaders as the rising regional center, overshadowing old Arab regional centers such as Cairo and Riyadh. Observing the U.S. failures in Iraq and Israel's poor performance against Hezbollah and Hamas, these Syrian leaders may believe that Syria now belongs to a victorious alliance.

Another option is that Syria's leader could switch his alliance from the Shia powers to the Sunni coalition, mend fences with the United States, and make peace with Israel. Bashar would only do this, however, in return for the Golan Heights, U.S. and Arab financial help, as well as strategic influence in Lebanon. Alternatively, Bashar may use his unique position to mediate between the Iran-

Hezbollah alliance and the more pragmatic Sunni Arab states, drawing political and financial benefits and establishing himself as a regional actor/leader. In this case, Syria's leader would simply stick with the regional status quo for the time being, keeping his options open and waiting for positive changes such as a more favorable administration in Washington. Ultimately, Bashar's selection of regional strategic options will depend on more than the attitudes of the United States, Israel, the Sunni Arab regimes, and Shia Iran.

Domestic and Ideological Factors

Bashar's policies will also be influenced by his personal interests and ideological beliefs—his Alawi connection and the secular nature of his regime—as well as by the attitudes of the Sunni Muslim majority population and the position of the Syrian military and security establishment. It appears as though Bashar has been able to gain the support and allegiance of the security establishment while deposing potential rivals such as former Sunni vice president Abd al-Halim Khaddam. He relies on Alawi officers and family members like General Asef Shawkat, who is chief of intelligence and his brother-in-law. The military-security leaders, Alawi and Sunni alike, apparently believe that Bashar's type of rule will best uphold their personal and class interests, while his regional policies serve also the national interests of Syria. Bashar is fairly popular also among other sections of the population, largely owing to his attempts to improve their economic conditions.

Although he has also endeavored to co-opt conservative Sunni Muslims, the Islamic radical groups have remained a potential opposition and a serious challenge to the secular, Alawi-led regime. Among these groups, the Muslim Brothers are most likely to seize power if Bashar's rule should collapse, as it might after a massive American or Israeli onslaught. They are well organized in several cells and armed, and they are likely to use thousands of mosques all over Syria to mobilize support. More than any other Muslim group, the Muslim Brothers have been well embedded in the majority Sunni population. In this case, it is almost certain that a radical Islamic regime would fill the power vacuum in Syria, endanger American and Israeli interests, and further destabilize the region.

Against this background it is important for the United States and Israel to examine the possibilities of dealing with Bashar and exonerating Syria from the militant Iran-Hezbollah alliance while incorporating it into the Sunni Arab pragmatic coalition. Such initiatives may be partly compatible with Bashar's personal, communal, and national interests without clashing with his ideological inclinations. Bashar's prime interests are to survive and safeguard his personal rule and his minority Alawi sect while securing the loyalty of the Syrian population. He will do this by using the historically appropriate ideological tenets and by attempting social and economic reforms.

Indeed, Bashar has hailed the ideas of pan-Arabism alongside the central role of Syria in the Arab world far more than his father. Unlike his father, however, Bashar has also underlined the Islamic character of the Syrian state and society in order to please Syrian Muslims who have undergone a process of Islamization during the past decades. While trying to combat militant Sunni Islamists, Bashar has cultivated the notion of moderate pluralist Islam, which includes also Shia and Alawi Muslims. Simultaneously, he has continued his father's attempts to have the Alawis approved as Shia by Shia clerics, in order to render Islamic legitimacy to the Alawi sect, which has traditionally been considered by conservative Sunnis as heretical and socioeconomically oppressed for centuries, even worse than mainstream Shia Islam.

Significantly, Bashar has endeavored to further "Shia'ize" the Alawi sect—that is, to further tighten the Alawi minority's ties to Shia political forces by cementing his alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Unlike his father, Bashar has also been impressed and perhaps influenced for years by Hasan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah Shia leader. As it happened, the military gains of Hezbollah in its war with Israel in July–August 2006 contributed to blurring the sectarian divide among some Syrian Sunnis, although less so among conservative ones. Nonetheless, further emphasizing Syria's Shia connection with Iran and Hezbollah while Shia are killing Sunnis in Iraq is likely to alienate more Sunnis in Syria. Bashar will likely gain more popular Sunni support by continuing his Islamic pluralist policy in conjunction with improving the economic conditions of the population with financial help of the United States and Sunni Arab oil states, should sanctions be lifted on his regime.

Regional Changes

As indicated above, the core of Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah has been strategic-regional, not ideological-religious. Indeed, Syria's strategy was directed vis-à-vis Saddam's Iraq and Israel for years. But in light of the crucial transformation of Iraqi power to Shia control, and the potential threat of Iran to Arab states, Syrian leaders have likely reevaluated their aforementioned strategic options.

Indeed, further adhering to the Shia partnership may alienate more Sunni Syrians and Sunni Arab regimes alike, while, in a worst-case scenario, provoking the United States or/and Israel to attack Syria. Such an attack would cause the downfall of Bashar's regime before Iran and Hezbollah would have any chance to help. On the other hand, Syria may opt to switch its alliance to the Sunni Arab side, in order to better serve its domestic and regional interests. In that case, and in coordination with Riyadh and Cairo, Damascus would diminish relations with Iran and stop helping Hezbollah militarily, thus weakening and isolating them from both a military and ideological standpoint. In return, Damascus would demand not only substantial financial assistance from Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states but also to help achieve certain strategic goals such as the following:

1. U.S. and Israeli guarantees not to attack Syria;
2. the return of the Golan Heights within a peace agreement with Israel;
3. acknowledgement of Syrian strategic interests in Lebanon (including the prerogative to determine the level of the international inquiry regarding the assassination of Hariri); and
4. erasing Syria's name from the U.S. State Department list of countries supporting terror, thus opening Syria to economic investment from the United States and the West and overturning the Syria Accountability Act of 2003.

Unlike Egypt and Jordan, which still hold reserved positions toward Syria, Saudi Arabia has been courting Bashar lately, for example, during the Arab Summit at Riyadh in March 2007, possibly to induce him to switch his regional alliances. The Saudi King Abdallah can certainly increase his financial aid to Damascus. Abdallah may also help acknowledge Syrian strategic interests in

Lebanon, which are to prevent Lebanon from becoming a site for anti-Syrian activities, such as an Israeli invasion (via the Biqa valley), or curtail Lebanese subversive activities against Bashar's regime and secure Syrian economic interests in Lebanon in mutual commercial ventures, Lebanese banking services, and Syrian labor.

Under a new regional configuration Damascus might also share an interest with the other Sunni Arab regimes to contain the military power of Hezbollah, while balancing Lebanese Shia political power with the Sunni-Christian-Druze coalition. A new Arab-sponsored agreement between Syria and Lebanon, modeled on the 1989 Taif agreement, may determine this new balance of power and safeguard Syrian interests in Lebanon.

The Role of the United States and Israel

Ultimately, it is only the United States and Israel that can help Syria to realize its other strategic goals. Both Washington and Jerusalem should be interested in pulling Syria out from the Shia axis in order to isolate Iran, curb Hezbollah and Hamas, and help advance Arab-Israeli peace. In exchange, Damascus can contribute to U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq, at the very least by preventing the further flow of Sunni insurgents across its long border with Iraq. Syria can additionally use its ties with important Iraqi actors, such as Sunni Ba'thists, Shia leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr, and Kurdish chiefs such as Iraq's President Jalal Talabani. Syria has a vested interest in an undivided, stable Iraq, lest more Iraqi refugees (now about two million total, most of whom are in Syria and Jordan) flow into Syria and further strain its economy. Syria desperately needs additional financial assistance to absorb these refugees but would prefer to send them back to a safer Iraq. Damascus also resents the possibility of a divided Iraq, which is a rebuff to Arab ideology and can encourage its own Kurds (about two million) to develop irredentist tendencies.

These options notwithstanding, the Bush administration has refused to engage Bashar in bilateral negotiations (which he has asked for), unless he first eliminates his cards—ceasing aid to Iraqi insurgents, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Palestinian Hamas. (The previous U.S. goal of eliminating the tyrant regime

in Damascus was dropped and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice engaged Walid Mualim, Syria's foreign minister, in a brief talk in May 2007 in Sharm al-Sheikh.)

While practically pushing Bashar to tighten his ties to his Shia partners, Washington cannot produce an alternative Syrian leader or change the regime in Damascus. The U.S.-preferred alternative, Farid Ghadry, a Syrian businessman residing in Washington, D.C., is hardly known in Syria and has no Syrian military divisions supporting him. He can be installed in Damascus only following a U.S. occupation of Syria, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. In addition, Washington has not yet detected a pro-American senior Syrian officer capable of deposing Bashar and assuming power in Damascus.

Bush or Olmert or both could perhaps cause the downfall of Bashar's regime by heavy air force bombardment of the Syrian military and security commands and apparatuses. But in the case that the Syrian army and security apparatuses disintegrate, the well-organized, motivated, and armed Muslim Brothers could possibly assume power. A militant Islamic regime in Syria can be expected to be deeply hostile to the United States and certainly to Israel. Also, the Bush administration not only refuses to engage Syria but it has requested Israeli prime ministers Sharon and Olmert not to negotiate with Bashar since 2003 unless he complies with the U.S. list of preconditions. In this sense, the meeting of Secretary Rice with the Syrian foreign minister Mualim in Sharm al-Sheikh on May 4, 2007, had the potential to signify a crucial change in U.S. policy, as President Bush has since reiterated his previous uncompromising position. In their recent July 2007 meeting, however, Bush and Olmert downplayed the hope of future talks with Syria. Bush has said recently that it is Israel's prerogative to negotiate with Syria. The opportunity for policy change seems, however, to have fallen by the wayside as the two countries devote their energies to bolstering Abbas after the Hamas takeover of Gaza. Perhaps in reaction to the Bush-Olmert meeting, Bashar on July 17, 2007, signaled his willingness to conduct public peace talks with Israel, under honest, non-American auspices, apparently in Turkey. But Bashar has also insisted that Israel must first commit itself to total withdrawal from the Golan. This key precondition is anathema to Olmert as well as to his predecessor, Sharon.

Israeli Positions

To be sure, Ariel Sharon would not have been interested in any such U.S. inducement because he believed deeply that relinquishing the Golan to Syria, even in return for peace, would endanger Israeli strategic interests in security and water resources. Ehud Olmert follows the same line and is by no means likely to contradict what he calls "American interests." He also knows that he will lose the remainder of his low and waning popularity in Israel if he engages Bashar regarding the Golan. Indeed, most Israeli Jews consider Bashar a weak, untrustworthy, and dangerous anti-Semite because of his anti-Jewish remarks to Pope John Paul in 2001 (that the Jews betrayed Jesus Christ and tried to kill the Prophet Muhammad) and his help to Hezbollah in the summer 2006 war.[8] Further, most Israelis are reluctant to return the Golan Heights even in exchange for a peace agreement with Syria, a country they suspect and do not respect. Apart from the strategic reasons, these Israelis, including "leftists," are not moved to surrender the Golan because it does not pose a "demographic problem" like Gaza and the West Bank (although some seventeen thousand Arab Druze reside there and many of them prefer Syria to Israel and have refused Israeli citizenship).[9]

By contrast, past Israeli leadership, including former prime ministers Rabin, Peres, Barak, and even Netanyahu, and senior military officers, sought peace and were ready to pay the price of giving up the Golan Heights in return for security and diplomatic relations with Syria. Those who have held such positions argue that peace with Syria will serve important Israeli interests. For instance, a truce with Syria would isolate Iran and curb Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. It would also help in settling Palestinian refugees in Syria and inducing more Arab countries, and certainly Lebanon, to make peace with Israel.

In recent months, more members of the Israeli cabinet and security establishment have suggested that Israel should sound out Bashar's peace offers; among those urging cooperation are Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, Amir Peretz, the now-gone defense minister, as well as General Gabi Ashkenazi, the new chief of staff, and General Amos Yadlin, chief of military intelligence. In contrast, General (Ret.) Meir Dagan, chief of Mossad, has strongly rejected any negotiations with Syria. Ehud Barak, the newly appointed defense minister,

has not yet declared his hand on this issue. As Israel's prime minister during 1999–2000, he almost reached a peace agreement with Hafiz Asad and was ready to relinquish the Golan Heights for such an agreement.

Indeed, the ultimate blueprint of a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement already exists and was almost implemented as a result of Asad-Barak negotiations with Clinton's active mediation in late 1999 and early 2000. The agreement provided that Israel should withdraw to the 1967 line with Syria, but it did not settle the Syrian-Israeli dispute over a strip of land along the northeast tip of Lake Tiberias, some thirteen kilometers long and a few hundred meters wide, involving Syrian access to the lake's water as well as Israel's. It also included arrangements for demilitarization of the Golan Heights and a supervision mechanism for it, as well as diplomatic relations and economic links between the two countries. Similar plans were adopted in several informal Israeli-Syrian talks, such as those that were recently sponsored by the Swiss government. In those designs the disputed area along the lake (as well as other area on the Golan) will become a joint tourist/resort area for both Israelis and Syrians, possibly under special UN jurisdiction.[10]

Alas, the prospects for negotiating peace between Israel and Syria and adopting such a design now seem very slim. As mentioned, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, most of his cabinet members, the parliament, and many Israeli Jews (some 63 percent) reject the notion of relinquishing the Golan even for peace with Syria.[11] To be sure, the Israeli-Hezbollah war in the summer of 2006 has obviously not reduced Israel's antagonism toward Syria, which had backed Hezbollah and supplied it with weapons, including long-range missiles. If Israelis are convinced that peace with Syria is likely to neutralize Hezbollah, weaken Hamas, and isolate Iran, they may reconsider their position regarding the Golan (which must also be fully demilitarized and effectively supervised). In fact, these were the preconditions presented by Prime Minister Olmert in early June 2007, while publicly inviting Syria to renew peace negotiations.[12] But he was quick to blame Asad, who did not respond for a few days, for rejecting Israel's offer. It is not unlikely that Olmert used this peace offer as "spin," trying to "put the ball" in the Syrian court. Arguably, Olmert is neither willing nor capable of leading Israel toward relinquishing the Golan for peace with Syria. Perhaps Ehud Barak, the new defense minister, will change Olmert's approach.


The Syrian-Israeli Frontier
Relevant Lines: 1923, 1949, 1967
Demilitarized zone, 1949-1967
UN Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF)
1967 line
1949 line
1923 line
SYRIA
BANIAS
DAN
SHEAR
TEL AL-AZAZIAT
LEBANON
GOLAN HEIGHTS
UNDOF
QUNEITRA
Lake Hula (former)
DARDARA (ASHMURA)
Line of June 4, 1967
MISHMAR HA-YARDEN
1923 International Boundary
Armistice Demarcation Line of 1949
Jordan River
Galilee
ISRAEL
10-meter strip
Lake Tiberias (Kinneret)
UPPER AL-NUQEIB
TIBERIAS
EIN GEV
KAFR HAREB
N
0 10 mi
0 10 km
Yarmouk River
KHIRBET AL-TAWAFIQ
UPPER AL-TAWAFIQ
SHAAR HAGOLAN
AL-HAMMA (HAMAT-GADER)
JORDAN
Jordan River
Yarmouk salient
Christine Epperson/Equator Graphics, Inc.
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In any case, only Washington is uniquely capable of convincing Israel to reengage with Syria. Unfortunately the Bush administration has proven itself inflexible on this issue, perhaps even more than many Israelis who advocate at least hearing out the recent Syrian overtures to examine all possibilities in order to avoid another war with Syria, Hezbollah, and perhaps also Iran. Still, most Israelis are skeptical regarding Syria's real intentions. Olmert is skeptical as well, and Bush is still reluctant, motivated also by his own ideological convictions. Their positions were reflected in their press conference at the White House on June 19, 2007. Neither of the leaders mentioned Syria in their statements, but in response to questions from the press, Bush flatly rejected the idea of mediating between Israel and Syria. Olmert cast serious doubt on Bashar as a peace leader, arguing that the conditions were not ripe to renew peace negotiations with Syria.[13]

Yet Bashar has suggested, almost since his ascendancy, resuming peace talks with Israel without preconditions.[14] Israel's leader at that juncture, Ariel Sharon, insisted that Bashar must first stop helping Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, saying inconclusively that "it is possible then to think . . . [but] I do not think that it is possible to agree to the Syrians' demands concerning the borders and the water problems . . . it is absolutely impossible to return to what has taken place in previous negotiations . . . these negotiations . . . were certainly very dangerous to Israel."[15] Ehud Olmert has been similarly stubborn. In conjunction with the current U.S. administration's stance, this all but eliminates the possibility for a more flexible approach by Israel in the next year or two. Even if Olmert steps down as prime minister (which now seems highly unlikely after his reaction to calls to resign after the release of the Winograd report), there is no majority in the Knesset for a deal with Syria. On the contrary, during the Israeli war with Hezbollah in summer of 2006, not a few Israelis demanded to attack Syria, punishing it for its military assistance to Hezbollah.

Similarly, at the end of that war, Bashar and subsequently other Syrian personalities warned that Syria would free the Golan by force if Israel does not agree to negotiate. Senior officials, however, including Olmert, and analysts argue that Syria is unlikely to start a war with Israel. Indeed, Israeli security officials have evaluated that Syria is preparing for war in the summer of 2007 in anticipation for an *Israeli* attack and that Syria is obtaining new weapons from Russia.[16] These war alarms notwithstanding, neither Syria nor Israel wish

to engage in military confrontation that could be devastating to both countries, particularly to Syria. Also, a war between Israel and Syria is certainly futile because it is not likely to settle the conflict between them and can damage the personal interests of their leaders: it may cause the collapse of Bashar's regime and the end of Olmert's political career.

Consequently, both leaders and governments prefer the status quo and to play for time. Bashar is unable and unwilling to "sell" to his public peace with Israel without a full return of the Golan Heights, as well as obtaining generous economic help from the United States and the West. He is probably reluctant to sever relations completely with Iran and Hezbollah even in return for peace with Israel and the United States. Thus, Bashar is likely to play the role of a mediator between the Shia axis and the Sunni coalition in an attempt to gain a senior regional status and economic benefits.

Olmert is not under any pressure to reengage Syria, certainly not by Bush or the Israeli public. Some Sunni Arab leaders may have asked him to do so, but he probably said that he was preoccupied with the Palestinian issue and with the Saudi-Arab League initiative (which incidentally includes an explicit Syrian-Israeli peace).

If Olmert indeed endeavors to settle the Palestinian problem while ignoring Syria, he can push Bashar into the corner and further toward the Shia axis, while aggravating Damascus's relations with the Sunni Arab coalition. Bush has advocated such a policy but has not yet insisted on implementation, and Olmert's argument for taking his time has been that he cannot seriously negotiate with the Palestinian Authority because of the Hamas control of the Palestinian government. The recent Hamas takeover of Gaza on June 15, 2007, may enhance Israeli and American endeavors to reach a new interim agreement between Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. But if Israel chooses to besiege "Hamastan" and punish it, Hamas is likely to further strengthen its ties with Damascus and Tehran and thus contribute to the upsurge of violence and the subversion of the status quo. Indeed, the Middle East does not tolerate the status quo for too long. As evidenced by the summer 2006 war with Lebanon, a grave act of terror—miscalculated or preconceived—by Hezbollah, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad against an Israeli civilian target can provoke a harsh Israeli retaliation. In the worst case scenario, this vicious cycle of violence may deteriorate into an Israeli-Syrian military confrontation.

Conclusion

Following his ascendancy in July 2000, Syrian President Bashar Asad sought to continue his father's strategy, namely to continue the peace process with Israel while obtaining U.S. diplomatic backing and economic help. But at the same time he sought to enhance Syria's strategic ties with Shia Iran and Hezbollah. Yet the election of George W. Bush as U.S. president in 2000 and of Ariel Sharon as Israel's prime minister in 2001 marked a crucial change in this triangular relation. The mega-terror of 9/11 and American occupation of Iraq in 2003 further aggravated these relations and contributed, alongside other factors, to further enhance Syria's ties with Iran and Hezbollah. Thus, it can be argued that if the United States and Israel continue their refusal to engage Bashar because of his misconduct, he is likely to deeply integrate in the "axis of evil" and, in a worst-case scenario, may be dragged into war with Israel.

It can be concluded, however, that Bashar is interested in peace, not war, with Israel and the United States, as well as in improving relations with the Sunni Arab regimes. This is provided he achieves his strategic goals of regaining the Golan Heights, accruing American and Arab financial support, and influencing Lebanon, as well as his own personal survival as Syria's perceived legitimate ruler. To these ends, Bashar is likely to obtain domestic backing if he continues to act as an Arab-Muslim leader, not a Shia-Alawi one. In return, he will be prepared to contain Hezbollah's military power and relax—but not cut—relations with Iran.

A U.S.-Israeli strategy of "regime change" is likely to yield an Islamist regime that would be existentially rather than pragmatically hostile to Israel. Such a scenario can be realized if, under heavy bombing from Israel or the United States or both, Bashar's regime and army/security establishment disintegrate. The Muslim Brothers, the best-organized, -motivated, and -armed movement, may assume power and establish an Islamic regime in Syria. In addition to posing a new threat to Israel from the north, an Islamist government in Damascus is likely to bolster the anti-Israeli Hamas not only in the Gaza Strip but also on the West Bank. Thus the best way to deal with Bashar is to talk to him. Yet, as long as the United States and Israel refuse to engage him, Bashar is not likely to reduce his links to Iran and Hezbollah. He will continue to use these links for the time being as a geopolitical opportunist, bouncing to and fro between politically

expedient coalitions in the region. Ultimately, Bashar's potential to become a crucial element in a lasting peace should be utilized before Syria swings to an uncompromising position that is ultimately harder to reverse. Indeed, engaging Syria in a peace process can also help settle the Palestinian issue and perhaps also the Iraqi problem.

In sum, Bashar's Syria is not an aggressor now, although it had been so until 1973 and may be drawn again into a war with Israel under grim circumstances. Nor is it a peacemaker, even though it has a vested interest in peace with Israel in return for the Golan and improved relations with the United States and the Arab-Sunni regimes. It can be a mediator between the United States and the Sunni Arab regimes on the one hand, and Iran on the other, in terms of minor issues. Ultimately, Bashar is a survivor, seeking to safeguard his rule, improve the condition of his people and gain their allegiance, as well as play an influential role in regional politics, mainly in Lebanon.

Notes

1. Amir Faysal had an important Arab lineage. He was son of Hussein, the sharif of Mecca, who was a commander of the Arab rebellion against Turkish rule. Faysal became king of Syria briefly in 1920 and was king of Iraq from 1921 to 1933.

2. Such weakness prompted Syrian leaders inter alia to demonstrate tough pan-Arab and anti-Israeli positions.

3. Quoted in Eliezer Beeri, *The Officer Class in Politics and Society of the Arab East* (Hebrew; Merchavia: Sifriyyat Poalim, 1966), 111–12.

4. This concept of negotiating with Israel was adopted by the Ba'th regime for the first time after the 1973 war, by accepting UNSC Resolution 338 (October 1973). This also included the initial "land for peace" terminology stated in UNSC Resolution 242 (November 1967).

5. Text in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 82 (1979): 200–202.

6. "Ruling Syrian Party Wins Election," BBC News (online), April 26, 2007. The most recent Syrian parliamentary elections were held on April 26, 2007, and reaffirmed the majority power of the Ba'ath party. According to Syrian Interior Minister Bassam Abdel Majeed, the turnout was 56 percent. Following the elections, parliament approved the Ba'ath party nomination of Bashar, who will run in an uncontested election in June 2007. Opposition parties were said not to have participated in the election and called it "a farce."

7. *Ha'aretz*, June 1, 2007.

8. Thomas Friedman, "Foreign Affairs; Empty Deeds, Ugly Words," *New York Times*, May 11, 2001.

9. Nadav Shragai, *Ha'aretz*, June 18, 2007; Israeli Government Central Bureau of Statistics Press Release, available online at http://www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2005/01_05_91e.pdf. Of the over 113,000 Druze in Israel, 99 percent of them reside in the Golan Heights. The growth rate of the Druze population has been declining as a result of a drop in fertility. This demographic minority was estimated to constitute 1.7 percent of the total population and 8.4 percent of Israel's Arab population in 2004 and has been largely quiet politically.

10. Isabel Kerschner, "Syria Seeks Peace, Advocate Tells Israelis," *New York Times*, April 13, 2007.

11. Peace Index, The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University, June 2007, available online at http://www.tau.ac.il/peace/.

12. Fox News, June 19, 2007.

13. "US, Israel Vow to Support Abbas," BBC News (online), June 19, 2007, available online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6766551.stm.

14. For example, Bashar's interview with Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, December 1, 2003. See also *Yediot Ahronot, Haaretz*, December 17, 2006; *The Economist,* January 20, 2007: "If such talks did succeed, the president said he saw no reason that Syria could not have full normal relations with Israel."

15. *Haaretz*,. September 14, 2004.

16. *Haaretz*, April 20, 2007, quoting *al-Hayyat.*

About the Author

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