

The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria

Najib Ghadbian

The death of Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and the passing of power to his son Bashar ushered in a new phase not only for Syria but also for the Middle East. Although Asad meant to assure the continuity and legacy of his rule by bequeathing the presidency to his son, we have witnessed both continuity and change under Bashar: continuity in foreign policy, new dynamics in domestic politics. In foreign policy, Bashar has both the benefit and the burden of following a parent considered to have been highly skilled in foreign relations strategy. The domestic scene is another matter, and almost any change there will make good marks for Bashar. The economy and the political system are riddled with problems, and Bashar came in sounding like a reformer. However, there are contending forces complicating the initiative for liberalizing political change within Syria, and even Bashar may be ambivalent toward such change. His turnaround on political liberalization in the middle of his first year shows that while economic reform may be forthcoming in Syria, the new regime is reluctant to take a path of political reform. The question Syria will face is, can the two be separated?

During Bashar al-Asad's first year as Syria's President, following the smooth power transition in Damascus in 2000, three major tests confronted the new Asad. The first is the collapse of the peace process and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*, which shattered any

Najib Ghadbian is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, and the author of *Democratization and the Islamist Challenge in the Arab World*, (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

prospect for regaining the Golan Heights in the short run. The second is the mounting demand from Syrian citizens to reform the economy and open up the political system, and the third is rising pressure from Lebanon for Syrian military forces to pull out of that country. So far, the young leader has managed to juggle these challenges without really addressing them. Bashar faces a classic dilemma: he must reform the political system in order for him to survive; yet a serious *perestroika* is likely to undermine the very forces that engineered his rise to power. Bashar's survival depends on how he resolves this predicament.

BACKGROUND: TRANSITION TO BASHAR

Asad's first choice of successor had been his younger brother, Rif'at, who headed the Defense Companies, an elite unit of about 50,000 men, before its integration into the Syrian Army in the mid-1980s. Rif'at was heir apparent from the mid-1970s till 1984, when he openly conspired to replace his brother during Asad's coma.¹ Asad recovered and began to demote his brother, a process ending with the dismissal of Rif'at from his official position as Vice President for National Security Affairs in 1998.² Although this decision was described by a close aide of the late President as one of the most difficult he ever took,³ by then Asad had made up his mind about who was going to succeed him. Asad's new favorite was his elder son Basil. In the early 1990s, Asad worked overtime to prepare Basil for becoming the next president of Syria. A car accident took Basil's life in 1994. The heir was lavishly lamented in the official media with a train of epithets: he was Basil the doctor, Basil the engineer, the major, the knight, and the parachutist—referring respectively to the fact that he had written a doctoral thesis in military sciences, had completed a degree in engineering, died as a ranking officer in the military, had been an accomplished equestrian, and had trained in parachute-jumping.⁴ What better qualifications could a people have hoped for in a leader? But it was not to be.

When Basil died, Bashar was in London pursuing his studies in ophthalmology. Official discourse during the Basil funeral made repeated pointed references to Bashar. Bashar's elevation to power had begun.⁵ Bashar was assigned increased responsibilities from that moment, his first assignment being to assume his brother's position as officer in the Republican Guard. After 1998 he was entrusted with responsibility for Syria's Lebanese policy and leading a highly publicized campaign against corruption. Meanwhile, Asad carefully replaced members of the old guard army and security chiefs who might

1. For Rif'at's challenge, see the "Brothers' War," in Patrick Seale. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

2. *Al-Wasat*, (London) February 16, 1998, p. 22.

3. Reported by Riyad Na'san Agha, an official in the Political Office of the President. An interview with the *Al-Jazeera* TV Station, on June 16, 2000.

4. After his death, the "Martyr" was added to the title.

5. For an early account of the ascendance of Bashar, see Ibrahim Hamidi, "Al-Ra'id Bashar al-Asad Yaqtahim al-'Amal al-Siyasi" (Major Bashar Enters the Political Arena), *Al-Wasat*, (London), No. 170, May 1, 1995, p. 24.

have objected to his grooming of Bashar for the presidency.⁶ The most prominent to be removed was Hikmat al-Shihabi, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces.

What made the transition from the father to son in the summer of 2000 so smooth and effective was not so much the steps taken by institutions such as the People's Council and the Ba'th Party, as support from the chiefs of the army and security forces, most of whom belong to the same 'Alawi sect as the President. However, the value of coloring the process of succession with some legitimacy was acknowledged in steps that involved Syria's political institutions. These included amending Article 83 of the constitution to lower the minimum age requirement for the President to 34 years, selecting Bashar as the Secretary General of the Ba'th Party, promoting him to the rank of Lieutenant General, and appointing him Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.⁷ Five figures who played an instrumental role in securing the smooth transfer of power were Defense Minister Lt. General Mustafa Tlas, Chief-of-Staff of the Armed Forces Lt. General 'Ali Aslan, Major General 'Asif Shawkat, the strong man in military intelligence and Bashar's brother-in-law, Major-General Bahjat Sulayman, head of Internal Security, and Mahir al-Asad, a Major in the Republican Guard who happens to be a younger brother of Bashar as well.⁸ Tlas is the only non-'Alawi officer who has maintained his position since the rise of the late Hafiz al-Asad to power. The high profile Tlas maintained throughout the transition period was an indication of what was expected of him by his former boss. The Defense Minister owed his survival to his absolute loyalty to Asad, his nominal status in the armed forces and his sycophantic character.

CONTINUITY

How does the new Asad differ from the old one? In analyzing the performance of the son so far, it is possible to identify certain areas of continuity and areas where he has begun to depart from his father's track. The son is likely to stick to those policies, both domestic and foreign, that have proven successful and effective. Thus we are likely to see continuity in the area that earned the father most respect at home and in the Arab World: Syrian foreign policy. On the other hand, most of the change is likely to take place in the realm of domestic politics. Bashar's own political track record before and after his assumption of the presidency, such as his involvement in the anti-corruption campaign in the last years of the old millennium, offers some indication of his direction.

Urgent among the foreign policy issues which the new President must address are the stalled Arab-Israeli peace process, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and the relationship between Syria and the rest of the world. When and how will talks with Israel over the withdrawal from the Golan Heights be resumed? One factor working against

6. All purges which took place in the military and security agencies, during this period, were believed to be linked to the ascendancy of Bashar.

7. Najib Ghadbian, "Bashar al Asad min al-Wiratha ila al-Shar'iyya: Khamsa Iqtiraha" (Bashar al-Asad From Bequest to Legitimacy: Five Suggestions), *Al-Hayat*, (London) June 23, 2000, p. 10.

8. These names were mentioned by journalists close to the regime, see the coverage of Asad's death and aftermath in *Al-Hayat*, June 10–30, 2000.

immediate resumption of the talks is the unwillingness of Israel to accept *full* withdrawal from the Syrian-occupied territories to the pre-1967 lines and its total engagement with putting down the Al-Aqsa intifada. On the other hand, the fact that Syria and Israel were not far from a deal may motivate both sides to resume negotiations sooner than many expect, but not before the Palestinian uprising is suppressed. Achieving a peace agreement with Israel on Syrian terms would provide the son with the standing and the legitimacy he needs to consolidate his position.

Bashar could easily market this achievement as a fulfillment of what his father worked for throughout his career, and as a prelude to dealing with the more pressing issues at home. One should not anticipate that the new leader will change the position so adamantly maintained by his father vis-à-vis Israel.⁹ What Syrians and Arabs at large admired most about the late Asad was his insistence on recovering every inch of Syrian territory occupied by Israel. They appreciated his difference from former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Jordan's King Husayn, and PLO President Yasir 'Arafat. While these leaders were lauded in the West for signing peace agreements with Israel, they were received less enthusiastically by the Arab masses, which felt humiliated by Israel in peace and in war. Images of these other Arab leaders hugging and kissing Israeli leaders in public before legitimate Arab rights had been restored lowered their standing in Arab public opinion. Asad's refusal to allow even his Foreign Minister to shake hands with the Israeli Prime Minister before Syrian lands were restored touched a sensitive nerve with the Arab public.¹⁰

The son will feel compelled to observe such rituals of steadfastness, and at the same time to show more flexibility at secret talks on the return of the Golan Heights. The flexibility is a likely outcome of Bashar's background, youth, and more extensive contact with the rest of the world. Asad the father was highly critical of the other Arab leaders whom he berated for signing separate peace treaties with Israel. When he came near, at the end of his life, to cutting a separate peace himself in a similar fashion, he found himself constrained by the position that had become his byword. Asad hesitated to rush into a peace that appeared similar to what he had been refusing all along, ever since Sadat made his historic visit to Israel in 1977. "The ailing Asad wants his steadfastness to be his legacy," wrote Henry Siegman shortly before the death of the Syrian President.¹¹ The father painted himself into a corner — but not Bashar. Bashar has more to gain by the return of the Golan Heights. It would be an achievement that would supply proof of leadership qualities not yet established by Bashar.

The eruption of the second intifada following Ariel Sharon's visit to the al-Aqsa mosque in September 2000 has validated the official Syrian concept of how to conduct peace with Israel. This concept is based on the assumption that the frame of reference of

9. Bashar articulated this stance in his inaugural speech on July 17, 2000. See *Tishrin* (Damascus) July 18, 2000, p. 1.

10. Editorials and commentaries in the Arab media, in the aftermath of Asad's death, reflected these sentiments.

11. "Being Hafiz al-Assad: Syria's Chilly but Consistent Peace Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (May-June 2000), p. 3.

the peace process is the formula of peace for land, included in UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338; that the sequence in the peace process should be withdrawal first and normalization to follow; and that any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict must be comprehensive. The late Asad's criticism of Husayn and 'Arafat had stemmed mostly from their deviations from these principles. The explosion of violence in 2000–2001 after almost seven years of negotiations between the two sides speaks to the flaws in the piecemeal approach preferred by Israel and forced on 'Arafat. Moreover, the failure of the peace process together with the excessive use of force by the Sharon government against the Palestinians has temporarily evaporated the accusation of intransigency leveled at the Syrian government.

The second intifada has posed a serious challenge for Bashar. At one level, Syria, like the rest of the Arab countries, came under pressure to lend assistance to the Palestinians. This pressure compelled the Syrian regime to soften its criticism of 'Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. At another level, the persistence of violent clashes between Israeli forces and the Palestinians, together with the insistence of Hizbullah on continuing its military attacks in the disputed Shab'a farms claimed by Lebanon, carries the potential of military escalation with Israel. Since Syria is certainly not interested in a conventional military confrontation, any such escalation is likely to come from the Israeli side. Syria and Israel came close to a military conflict twice since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada. The first time was when Hizbullah captured three Israeli soldiers on October 7, 2000. The Ehud Barak government threatened to retaliate against Syria. International intervention, mostly American, diffused that crisis. However, when Hizbullah carried out another military operation, Israel retaliated immediately on April 14, 2001 by attacking a Syrian military radar unit in Lebanon, killing one soldier and injuring several others. The attack was an embarrassment to Bashar because he could not strike back in kind. The Syrian response came in several ways. First, Asad escalated his rhetoric against Israel, maintaining that Syria reserved its right to retaliate. His frustration with his inability to confront the Sharon government directly were also reflected in his comments during the Pope's visit to Damascus, when he reiterated the fanatic Christian line that the Jews were the betrayers of Jesus.¹² Syria also used the Israeli attack to silence increasing criticism about the continued Syrian military presence in Lebanon.

Syria and Israel had come very close on numerous occasions to reaching a peace treaty before the second intifada. Both sides know exactly where they left off in the negotiations and what the contentious issues are. Right after Asad's death, there were many indications of willingness to resume peace talks as soon as the other side was ready to show similar resolve. But one cannot expect flexibility from the new leader when there is no peace and no process.

A paramount foreign policy issue looming ahead for the new Syrian leader is Lebanon. The father seemed to have a vision when he transferred responsibility for Lebanese policy from Vice President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam to his son in 1998.

12. His comments generated furious responses not only from the Israelis, but also from the French and US governments. *Al-Hayat*, May 9, 2001, pp. 1 & 6.

Lebanon is already familiar territory to Bashar. He is reported to have played a major role in the selection of current Lebanese President Emile Lahud. The good news for the new leader is that most major political forces in power in Lebanon are on good terms with Syria now. The bad news is that the voices demanding the withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon have become louder as a result of the Israeli military's withdrawal from south Lebanon and the departure of the formidable Asad from the scene.¹³

Although Syria's *raison d'être* for remaining in Lebanon is security, over the years the Syrian presence in Lebanon has become economically beneficial to the Syrians. Three sectors in Syria derive benefits from Syrian control over Lebanon: military and security officers engaged in smuggling, businessmen who take advantage of liberal Lebanese banks and financial institutions, and over half a million Syrian laborers who are currently working in Lebanon.¹⁴ There are also those in Lebanon who benefit from Syrian military presence there. First among them is the Hizbullah movement, which derived substantial support from Syria and Iran during its fight against Israel.¹⁵ The idea that Syria might turn against Hizbullah in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal remains an unlikely hypothesis. Furthermore, Hizbullah has been transforming itself into a political movement working from within the system, advocating the causes of underdogs in Lebanese society. Hizbullah has succeeded so far in capitalizing on its role in the "victory" over the Israeli forces.

The expectation, in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, was that Hizbullah would put down its weapons and complete its transformation into a political party. That has not happened. For one, Hizbullah and Syria were not in favor of that scenario. The leaders of the Hizbullah articulated two further conditions for the peace, first, Israel must withdraw from the Shab'a farms, an area that Israel captured in the 1967 War; and Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails, some of whom are Hizbullah activists, must be released. For Syria, the disarmament of Hizbullah would mean losing an important bargaining chip. Syria has invested in the military support of Hizbullah to guarantee the inseparability of the Syrian and Lebanese tracks in the peace process; that is, Lebanon cannot sign a peace treaty with Israel before Syria and vice versa. Israel's departure from Lebanon was a strategic calculation where the cost of staying grew to be higher than pulling out. By withdrawing, Israel wanted also to deepen the rift between Syria and Lebanon over the notion of "the inseparability of tracks."

While more Lebanese voices, including the Christian leaders, began to point out that the national interests of Syria and Lebanon are not the same, Hizbullah adopted the pro-Syria position and strongly opposed any attempt by Lebanon to go its own way. In addition to Hizbullah, the Shi'i group *Amal* as well as Sunni politicians are in favor of continued Syrian military presence in their country. In the last few years, a small but

13. It was interesting that Lebanese journalist, Gibran Tuayni, published an open letter to Bashar calling on Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon, before the parliamentary elections, *Al-Nahar*, (Beirut) March 23, 2000, p. 1.

14. While thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon cast their votes for Bashar, two Lebanese Maronite parties objected to the opening of polling stations throughout Lebanese. *Al-Jazeera*, July 10, 2000.

15. Jim Quilty, "Destiny and Dependence," *Middle East International*, No. 627, June 16, 2000, pp. 7–8.

important segment of the Lebanese Christian community came to accept the Syrian role in their country, and their political survival became dependent upon Syrian military presence.

At the same time, Bashar in his first year in office has faced rising pressures to withdraw Syrian forces from Lebanon. The campaign, first articulated in a letter to Bashar in the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar*, gained momentum in Fall 2000 when the Maronite Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfayr demanded the Syrian “redeployment,” a catchword for the pullout of the Syrian military from Lebanon. Other demands included the release of Lebanese political prisoners, detained in Syria, and the development of truly “equal” relations between the two countries. After the Lebanese parliamentary election, which brought back former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri to head the new government, more Christian voices joined the campaign against the continued Syrian presence. Prominent among them were former president Amin Jumayyil, back in Lebanon after ten years of exile, and former commander of the army Michel ‘Awn.¹⁶ The movement against the Syrian military presence took a popular form when thousands of students organized sit-ins and demonstrations during the Spring of 2001. Around the same time, the Druze leader Walid Jumblat demanded an end to Syrian intervention in Lebanese politics.

There were reports that Prime Minister Hariri was also in favor of a reduction of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Hariri, whose priority is to revitalize the Lebanese economy, is not thrilled about Hizbullah’s military activities. The party embarrassed Hariri when it carried out an attack against the Israeli forces in February, one day after he pledged—while visiting France—not to provoke Israel. The second time Hizbullah carried out a military operation in mid-April, Hariri’s newspaper, *Al-Mustaqbal*, described the operation as unwise.¹⁷

For almost six months, the Syrian government showed relative tolerance toward the Lebanese protesters, but then decided that it had had enough. The clampdown took numerous forms. Demonstrators were dispersed by the Lebanese army and pro-Syrian activists, leaders were warned and threatened behind the scenes, Syria mobilized its supporters, especially Hizbullah, to speak out against the opposition. Shortly before the first anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizbullah leader Hasan Nasrallah made several speeches attacking the anti-Syrian camp and made a case against Syrian withdrawal.¹⁸ These countermoves from Syria and its supporters implied that military withdrawal was out of the question. Yet, on June 14, several thousand Syrian troops evacuated positions around Beirut and handed over their barricades to the Lebanese army. While the official word was that this “redeployment” was arranged between the two presidents, several factors were behind this move. First, such a move had been expected for over a year, but the death of Asad senior and the early Israeli retreat from southern Lebanon delayed it. Second, protests against Syrian influence in Lebanon and new violence in the Occupied Territories put a hold on the process. Thus, the new Asad didn’t

16. ‘Awn still lives in exile in Paris.

17. *Al-Hayat*, April 16, 2001, p. 4.

18. “Special Interview with Sheikh Hassan Nassrallah,” *Al-Jazeera*, May 19, 2001.

want to show that he was yielding to the pressure, and wanted to credit himself and Lebanese President Lahud for the decision. As Jim Quilty wrote from Beirut, “whether out of insecurity or intransigence, Damascus prefers to be seen as benevolently bestowing gifts than caving in to opposition hounding.”¹⁹ Syrian redeployment has not ended the debate in Lebanon about the Syrian presence there. In August 2001, the Lebanese army arrested over a hundred protesters and opposition figures from the banned Lebanese Forces, as well as aides of General ‘Awn. This crackdown caused a serious political crisis, since it took place without the prior knowledge of the Prime Minister, and was followed by condemnation from politicians and members of the lawyers’ union. While most protesters were released immediately or received light sentences, the arrests were a reminder from Syria’s friends in the Lebanese army of the dangers of opposition to the “brotherly Syrian forces.”

While full Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon is inevitable, those in both countries who benefit from Syrian involvement in that country will oppose such a move as long as they feel it might threaten their interests and privileges. One lesson of the Lebanese Civil War has been that Syria and Lebanon cannot afford to ignore each other. The leadership in both countries continues to grapple with the unique and unequal relationship they have had since Syrian forces entered Lebanon in 1976.

The third foreign policy issue facing the Syrian leader is his country’s relations with regional and international powers. In this area, father gave son a good head start. After a long period of Syrian isolation that lasted to the late 1980s, Asad made a strategic reassessment and decided Syria needed an entry visa to the post-Cold War world. He understood that the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria’s main backer in the Cold War, was a setback to his country’s ability to reach strategic parity with Israel. To recover from losing a major ally, but also to grab a seat in the new world order, Asad made two skillful moves. First, he joined the American-led coalition against Iraq during the Gulf War in 1990–91, contributing to the coalition’s credibility in Arab public opinion, even though this clearly violated the Ba’th creed, which his regime shares with Iraq. The second strategic move was to attend the Madrid peace conference in October 1991. These moves together allowed Asad to gain credit and financial support from the Arab Gulf States, weaken his rival Saddam Husayn, enter a process which would allow him to regain the Golan Heights, begin to relieve his country of the heavy burden of military spending, and lift Syria’s isolation and changed its image as a pariah state. There is no reason not to expect the son to capitalize on the legacy of his father, and to try to improve Syria’s relations with those countries where his father failed. Today, Syria enjoys good relations with the Arab Gulf States, Iran, Egypt, and Jordan since the death of King Husayn. During the first year of Bahsar’s rule, Jordan and Syria have enhanced bilateral economic relations, and both leaders have expressed their intention to go further in that direction.²⁰ Politically, the two governments have intensified their contacts and reduced their criticisms of each other’s position toward Israel. Jordan has expressed more support for

19. “Syria Repositions,” *Middle East International*, June 29, 2001, p. 22.

20. See the interview with King ‘Abdullah, in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, (London) July 19, 2000, p. 1.

Syria's efforts to regain its occupied land. Syria has released Jordanian prisoners, while leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brothers, living in exile in Amman, have been asked to leave Jordan. Improved relations between the two countries since the departure of Husayn and Asad the father can be attributed partly to the change in leadership and similarity of pragmatic outlooks of the new young leaders in Damascus and Amman.

Another example of how Asad's departure provided an opportunity to improve relations is Syria's relations with Yasir 'Arafat. 'Arafat had vigorously resisted the senior Asad's attempts to control the PLO. For years, 'Arafat had been *persona non grata* in Damascus. Each side blamed the other for the lack of coordination in the negotiations with Israel, which enabled various Israeli governments to play one side against the other. 'Arafat took the first step when he attended the funeral of Asad. The steadfastness 'Arafat showed at the Camp David Summit and the eruption of violence in Palestine brought the two closer. At the same time, the legacy of betrayal and bitterness shared by the Syrian regime and 'Arafat have not been overcome. While it is doubtful they could reach the level of trust enjoyed between 'Arafat and Jordanian leaders or 'Arafat and the Egyptian leadership, there is definitely room for a better relationship between the two sides.²¹ The recent visit of the second man in the PLO, Mahmud 'Abbas (Abu Mazin), engineer of the 1993 Oslo Agreements, to Damascus²² attests to a real desire from both sides to come together in order to withstand whatever Sharon might unleash.

Syrian flirting with Iraq had begun even before the death of Asad. Several high level Iraqi officials visited the Syrian capital during the last year of the father's rule. This has continued under Bashar. Common enemies and domestic pressures on both regimes have helped this *rapprochement*. Iraq desperately needs Syria's cooperation in its fight to undermine the sanctions, both in its "dumber" and "smarter" forms. As with other countries that do business with Iraq, economic advantages are the main motives for Syria. Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad Mustafa Miro's visit to Baghdad on August 11–13, 2001, the first in twenty years, reveals the new approach taken by both leaders to transcend ideological differences and concentrate on economic cooperation. The two sides signed agreements on economic, trade, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation. They also established a joint Syrian- Iraqi higher committee to oversee the implementation of these agreements.²³

Two forces stand in the way of further economic and political coordination between the two countries: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and Syria's eagerness to improve relations with Washington. Mistrust between the two Ba'athist regimes is likely to continue to daunt their relationship, especially as long as Saddam is in power. Nonetheless, the collapse of the peace process, the continued unequivocal US backing of Israel, as well as the perceived double standards in America's Mideast policy—all constitute good reason for Bashar to court an outlaw Iraqi regime. Finally, Syria's relations with its northern neighbor Turkey continue to improve under the new Asad.

21. For a pessimistic view of Syrian-Palestinian relations, see Lamis Andoni, "Asad and the Palestinians," *Middle East International*, no. 627, June 16, 2000, pp. 20–22.

22. Abu Mazin has not officially visited Damascus since 1983. *Al-Hayat*, August 6, 2001, p. 4.

23. *Al-Hayat*, August 14, 2001, pp. 1 & 6.

Bashar has already expressed eagerness to reach better relations with the European Union through the French gate. Bashar was received by French President Jacques Chirac in November 1999, even before the transition of power, and Chirac was the only Western president to attend Asad's funeral. The recently polished French-Syrian relations carry much potential for Syria. The European Union is perceived by Syria to be a more balanced mediator in the peace process than the US.²⁴ Syria sees the EU as more likely to invest in its economy than the Americans would be, in the projected aftermath of a peace with Israel.²⁵

Bashar is pursuing his father's legacy in foreign relations. Top foreign policy priorities will continue to be recovering the Golan Heights, preserving the "special" relationship with Lebanon, and improving relations with powers within the region and outside it.

CHANGE

Areas begging for change in Syria are the economy, the political system, and the bureaucracy. The Bashar regime has circulated *infitah* (openness) in politics and *islah* (reform) of the economy as buzzwords. It is in these two areas where the new leader expects to muster support and cement his legitimacy.

Even before the death of his father, the son championed the campaign against corruption. An early scapegoat of the corruption campaign was General Muhammad Bashir al-Najjar, the General Intelligence Chief. Al-Najjar was sacked from his position and sentenced to a twelve-year prison term for corruption in 1998.²⁶ The campaign reached its peak with the dismissal of the cabinet and the formation of a new one in March 2000. It was widely believed that Bashar selected the Prime Minister and several other ministers. Shortly after, the Syrian media began accusing the former Prime Minister, Mahmud Zu'bi, and several of his cabinet members of corruption. It was then announced that Zu'bi's assets would be confiscated, and Zu'bi was expelled from the Regional Command of the Ba'th Party. Days before he was to appear before the economic security court, Zu'bi committed suicide.²⁷ One week before the death of Asad, another high-level former official, Hikmat Shihabi was charged with corruption. Shihabi had been dismissed from his post in 1998, ostensibly because he had reached "retirement" age. Shihabi's case was more significant than Zu'bi's; Shihabi was a serious contender for succession. Many observers of Syrian politics believed that Shihabi's forced retirement, capped two years later by the corruption charge, were a way of clearing the path for Bashar. Shihabi, who spent the months following his "retirement" in the US, was allowed back and received by Bashar, dispelling rumors that the former army chief would be tried in absentia.

24. As of August 2001, Bashar has visited Spain, France and Germany.

25. This expectation is due partly to Washington's cold shoulder toward Syria, the former is believed to be under the heavy influence of the pro-Israel lobby.

26. *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, July 3, 1998, p. 1.

27. *Al-Hayat*, May 22, 2000, p.1.

Bashar's involvement in the campaign against corruption is an indication that the new Asad bodes well for domestic affairs. The father's successes in foreign policy were at the expense of domestic issues. The Syrian economy Asad left behind is beset with the typical problems of command economies: inefficiency, corruption, and redundant employment. *Per capita* income in Syria is estimated around \$1000, compared with \$3000 and \$17,000 for Lebanon and Israel respectively.²⁸ Unemployment is estimated at 22%, and the country still spends more than 7% of its GNP and about 50% of its budget on the military and the security forces.²⁹ Syria's economic woes come from limited resources, an oversized military, dwindling external aid, corrupt managers, and high population growth rate — one of the highest in the world at 3.15%.

It is no wonder that young Syrians have been willing to support any person or policy that would improve the economy. So far, the young Asad has chosen to fix the economy by tackling institutional incompetence. It is doubtful that such policy will prove sufficient. The economy requires structural changes along the lines adopted by the formerly socialist states of Eastern Europe. The late President Asad's half-hearted economic liberalizing, which included strengthening the private sector and encouraging foreign investment, fell short of its intended results.³⁰ The rising business community in Syria is, therefore, likely to be the strongest supporter of the son's efforts to take further liberalizing measures, moving the Syrian economy in the direction of free market.

It is also doubtful that the economy can be revitalized without some reform of the political system. The political system Bashar inherits is a distorted one-party system, dominated by military and security chiefs who come mostly from the 'Alawite minority.³¹ This system has two parallel but unequal power structures: the official or outer one, and the real one, hidden from view. In the official system, there are institutions familiar to political scientists, such as the Cabinet, Parliament, the ruling Ba'th party, and several small parties that are allowed to exist. Real decisions are made behind that official façade, in a tiny circle comprising the chiefs of the army and of various security forces created to preserve the regime. Hanna Batatu found that 61% of these came from the 'Alawite community.³² This select group answers to the president, whose word is absolute. Asad's sympathetic biographer Patrick Seale notes that all Syrians "outside these privileged circles soon learned they could go about their business without undue fear or constraint so long as they accepted that politics was not their domain. In such circumstances the only course of his opponents was silence or, in the case of last-ditch enemies like the Muslim Brothers, riot, revolt, and assassination."³³

28. For recent figures on the Syrian economy, see "Bashar's World," *The Economist*, June 17, 2000, p.24–26.

29. Military spending has been cut back from the early 1990s levels, which was over 10% of the country's GNP.

30. The criticism of the performance of the economy by the new regime attests to the mismanagement during the father's era.

31. Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996).

32. *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 215–225.

33. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p.179.

Looking at the privileged stratum in Syria from a political economy perspective reveals a system dominated by three groups: the top managers of the public sector, the small entrepreneurial class, and their protectors in the security and the military elite. According to one study, “officers control various aspects of the economy and demand bribes before authorizing the delivery of goods or services. The Syrian officer corps has, since the Lebanese civil war, managed a sprawling business in smuggled merchandise in Syria and Lebanon.”³⁴ Those who work in the security apparatus are untouchable, accumulate great wealth, and are not accountable to anyone. Those who have observed the late Asad’s austere lifestyle were puzzled by why he tolerated the corruption and abuses of power by these individuals. These liberties were the President’s reward for absolute loyalty, which meant carrying out the dirty work that was often necessary to preserve the security and stability of the regime.³⁵ The most extreme application of force to preserve the regime was in 1982 when the Defense Companies and the elite units of the army bombarded the city of Hama, killing thousands of citizens. A serious threat to Asad’s regime was eliminated — and the President could always distance himself from the unfortunate excesses of his security chiefs. Surely when men who had taken such heat for the President took liberties to enrich themselves, the Syrian justice system could look the other way. At the same time, any associates of Asad who were involved in corruption and illegal self-enrichment knew they were always vulnerable before their boss. Should one of them no longer be in favor, their illegal activities could become the subject of official investigations very quickly. Every few years, the Syrian regime announces a campaign to uproot corruption.³⁶ Targeting the former Prime Minister and some of Rif’at’s men were exceptions to the rule of going after only the small fish.

In the first year of Bashar’s rule, the official line of the new man in Damascus was that corruption will not be tolerated. His men stressed that any leader who could stare down Rif’at, the one-time feared strongman of Syria whom Bashar has banned from the country, is very serious about cleansing the country of the corruption epidemic. Those less optimistic about Bashar’s will to carry on this anti-corruption mission argue that targeting his uncle Rif’at was merely the last step in removing potential contenders for the presidency from the arena. Actually destroying the center of corruption in Syria would undermine the very power base upon which the regime rests. Skeptics would argue that the fight against corruption has turned mostly rhetorical throughout Bashar’s first year in office.

After assuming the presidency, the young leader has had to prove himself a viable and legitimate leader and not just daddy’s boy. This led him to the daunting question of how to reform the political and economic system. There were a number of scenarios before Bashar. The first is that the new leader could chart a course of marked

34. James A. Bill & Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), p.187.

35. The question of corruption among Asad’s top aides is discussed in Seale, *Asad*, and Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*.

36. For a cynical view of these campaigns, see Subhi al-Hadidi, “Mahmud al-Zu’bi wa Harb d-Qitat al-Siman Did al-Dhi’ab al-Siman” (Mahmoud al-Zu’bi and the War of the Fat Cats against the Fat Wolves) *Al-Quds al-‘Arabi*, May 12, 2000, p. 19.

transformation addressing the political and economic problems simultaneously. The young leader's need to gain legitimacy from distinctive achievements and the high expectations of the Syrian people could serve as the motivation for this course. At the opposite pole, there is scenario two: Bashar would only make cosmetic changes and maintain the status quo. This track is safer, particularly in order not to threaten the status of the military and security forces chiefs who are likely to strike back against anyone who might imperil their privileges, including Bashar. In the third scenario a middle course is adopted. The new leader would introduce certain reforms, especially in the economic realm, while attempting to preserve the political structure. This does not preclude widening the freedom of expression, liberalizing the official media, and allowing the formation of new political parties within the framework of the National Progressive Front, the umbrella forum for officially tolerated parties. This option was articulated first during the Ba'ath Party Ninth Regional Congress, which rubberstamped the leadership of Bashar. Several participants referred to the Chinese example — reforming the economy while maintaining one-party rule — as a model.³⁷

Bashar's first year record reflects the third option. The new leader has opted for reforming the country while preserving the political structure. What he learned soon was that he is not the only player, and the process of reform is anything but neat and manageable. After the death of Asad senior, most Syrians felt that a new era had begun, and Bashar's inaugural speech raised their expectations and emboldened the opposition to press for genuine reforms. Demands for openness came from two sources: from intellectuals inside Syria and from the opposition movements, particularly from the Muslim Brothers outside the country.

Sensing a new political climate, a group of 99 prominent intellectuals and writers issued an open letter in which they called for ending the state of emergency and martial law, in effect since 1963, releasing all political prisoners and allowing exiled Syrians to go back, and granting political freedoms, including the freedom of expression and the press.³⁸ A parallel movement calling itself "Friends of Civil Society," circulated a similar petition—which came to be known as Manifesto of the 1000 — reiterated the same demands in the first letter and adding a reference to civil society and political pluralism in Syria. A prominent figure in this movement, independent Parliamentarian Riyadh Sayf, went a further step when he announced that he would form a new political party, "Movement for Social Peace." The new party endorses the principles of free market and democracy.³⁹ The first six months of Bashar's rule witnessed also a proliferation of literary salons and other private forums held in the houses of prominent Syrians to discuss topics such as civil society, pluralism, and human rights.

The second source of demands for further openness came from the outlawed Muslim Brothers. The Brothers' leaders did not object to Bashar's rise to power, hoping to open

37. *Al-Hayat*, July 20, 2000, pp.1,6. This line was reasserted in the inaugural speech of the new President.

38. *Al-Hayat*, September 26, 2000, p.1.

39. Ibrahim Hamidi, "Na'ib Suri Yu'lin Ta'sis Hizb Libirali" (Syrian Parliamentarian Announces the Establishment of a New Liberal Party), *Al-Hayat*, January 26, 2001, pp. 3,6.

a new chapter with the new leader. The themes advanced by the Brothers throughout last year were similar to those in the statement of the intellectuals and the Friends of Civil Society, plus allowing the movement to have legal status inside the country, membership in the Muslim Brothers being a crime punishable by death in Syria.⁴⁰

During the first six months of Bashar's tenure, the Syrian government took two positive steps in the direction of liberalization. On November 16, 2000, the government released 600 political prisoners of Islamist, Iraqi Ba'athist and Communist background.⁴¹ In another response, the Syrian government authorized the establishment of the first privately owned newspaper permitted in the country in four decades. Eager readers snapped up the first 75,000-copy edition of *al-Dumari (The Lamplighter)* as soon as it appeared.⁴² The authorities allowed the wing of the Communist Party that is loyal to the Ba'athist regime to publish its newspaper, "The Voice of the People." These measures were cheered by most Syrian citizens, but intellectuals and opposition figures pressed for more. 'Arif Dalila, a spokesman for the Civil Society movement, demanded the total abolishment of martial law.

Obviously, not everyone in the regime was thrilled about these developments. What surprised most observers, however, was Bashar's turn-about vis-à-vis the democratic reforms. Almost six months after his inaugural speech, which was deemed a clear sign of commitment to economic and social change, Bashar seemed to have a change of mind. In an interview with *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, he lashed out against the dissidents, warning them of the consequences if they were ever to threaten the stability of the country.⁴³ Bashar's comments were shocking because he had presented himself as a reformer. Other comments by senior officials reinforced the intention of the regime to halt the reform process. Several high officials, including the two vice presidents, visited major cities and institutions to offer the official responses to the "accusations" in the discourse of the civil society advocates. This was clearly a reversion to the pre-Bashar era. The tour was followed by legal restrictions on the holding of meetings in private salons and open forums. Internal security agencies circulated a memorandum requiring anyone who wants to hold such a forum to acquire permission a week ahead of time, and to furnish information about the topic, the speaker, the attendees, and the content of the lecture.⁴⁴ Ryad Sayf was reported to have said, "Damascus' spring has come to an end."⁴⁵

The decision to squash the intellectuals' activities can be attributed to two factors.

40. See for instance, "Risala Min al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin: Da'wa li Daf' al-'Amal al-Watani ila al-Amam" (A Statement from the Syrian Muslim Brothers: A Call to Further the National Action), January 15, 2001. This statement as well as all other recent statements by the Brothers can be found on their website, www.ikhwan-muslimoon-syria.org.

41. *Al-Hayat*, November 18, 2000, pp. 1,6.

42. Issam Hamza, "Syria's first private newspaper is sell-out," *Reuters*, February 27, 2001.

43. "Muqabala Ma' al-Ra'is Bashar Al-Asad" (Interview with President Bashar al-Asad), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London) February 8, 2001, p. 1.

44. Ibrahim Hamidi, "Suriyya: Tajmid Nashat al-Muntadayyat ba'da Talab al-Sulta Muwaffaqa Musbaqa", (Syrian Government Freezes Forums After Requiring that They Seek Permits in Advance) *Al-Hayat*, February 17, 2001, p. 1.

45. "Riyyah Barida Tahub ala Rabi' Dimashq" (Cold Winds Blow through Damascus' Spring) on www.middle-east-online.com, February 18, 2001.

First is the regime's old guard who perceived the aggressive criticism of the dissenters to be escalating and potentially threatening. Vice President Khaddam stated in his meeting with the faculty of Damascus University that behind the dialogue initiated by the intellectuals and the civil society advocates is an attempt to "criminalize the regime." The argument of the old guard is not without validity. Other references, reported by Arab media, to the impact of widening the margin of public deliberation include analogies with Algeria and Yugoslavia.⁴⁶ The old guard may be out of touch with new political reality, but they are not unaware of *glasnost* and its catastrophic effects on the political power of the man who initiated it. The second reason for silencing the intellectuals has to do with the mentality of reformers, e.g. Bashar, who are bred in the womb of authoritarian structures. The standard operating procedure of such mentality is to deprive others from any credit for the forthcoming reforms. When political prisoners are freed or a new newspaper is allowed to publish, it is because of the blessing and wisdom of the leader, not the pressure from below.

What Bashar and his supporters, the old guard and reform-minded alike, may realize is that once the phantasm of fear is shaken off by people, it can't be reconstituted. One incidence of public dissent tends to encourage others and dissent becomes a less terrifying prospect each time. Riyad al-Turk, the head of Communist Party-the Political Bureau (the branch of the Communist Party in Syria that is not pro-regime), wrote an article after the death of Asad entitled, "It is Impossible For Syria to Remain the Kingdom of Silence," in which he denounced the record of the Asad regime and pleaded for an end to the *mukhabarat* (secret police) state in Syria.⁴⁷ Intellectuals and activists maintained their defiance of state authority, right after the implicit and explicit warnings of the government officials. On April 16, 2001, the Civil Society Committees that were behind the issuance of the Manifesto of 99, published a new "Social Pact," in which they presented nine common denominators for equal citizenship. Democracy was emphasized several times and was listed as a condition for economic reform, as well as the liberation of occupied land, democracy being defined as including "transparency, political and media pluralism, civil society, rule of law, separation of powers, and free elections under independent monitoring."⁴⁸ Shortly after, the Muslim Brothers issued a similar preliminary "Pact," in which they committed to working through the democratic means, denouncing the use of violence, and calling on government and other political forces to open a dialogue.⁴⁹ Human rights activists distributed, for the first time in thirty years, a report about the state of human rights inside Syria. They also published the eleventh issue of their newsletter under a new name, "*Lamarji*," a 3800 year old Sumerian word, meaning "freedom."⁵⁰ Another case is that of Nizar Nayyuf, a journalist and human rights activist, who was

46. It was Vice President Khaddam who referred to these two examples in his meeting with university professors.

47. *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, July 20, 2000, p. 19.

48. "*Nahw 'Aqd Ijtima'i watani Fi Suriyya: Tawafuqat Wataniyya 'Amma*," Toward a New National Societal Pact in Syria, *Al-Hayat*, April 16, 2001, p. 4.

49. "*Mashru' Mithaq Sharaf Watani li-l 'Amal al-Siyassi*," A Proposal for an Honorable National Pact for Political Action. It was issued on May 4, 2001.

50. *Al-Hayat*, May 5, 2001, p. 4.

released because the Pope carried a personal letter from the organization of Journalists Without Borders on his visit to Damascus in spring 2001. Nayyuf gave a chilling interview to the Arabic voice of the BBC, describing in graphic detail his torture during his ten years imprisonment.⁵¹ Nayyuf's outspokenness caused serious embarrassment to the regime. A unit of the military secret intelligence kidnapped him and then was forced to release him after the French government raised the issue two days before Bashar's visit to Paris. After his release he was allowed to travel to France so he could be treated for Hodgkin's disease. Nayyuf has held press conferences in which he blasts the regime's human rights record. He announced his intent to sue several chiefs of the military and *mukhabarat* in European courts, including Rif'at Asad, former Military Intelligence Chief 'Ali Duba and Hasan Khalil, a General in the Military Intelligence.⁵²

Another example of the new dynamics under Bashar as indicative of the shattering fear among Syrians is Parliamentarian Ma'mun al-Homsi. Encouraged by the examples of Nayyuf and al-Turk, al-Homsi decided to go on a hunger strike in his office in Damascus to protest what he called the arbitrary practices of the authorities and the government's campaign to defame him. He circulated a statement demanding the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, a curtailment of the role of the *mukhabarat*, and the formation of a human rights committee in the parliament.⁵³ Al-Homsi was arrested the next day and charged with evading taxes, undermining the constitution and national unity, and defaming the state. While the rapid arrest of al-Homsi is consistent with the crack down on dissident voices, the media coverage and signs of supports by other independent Syrian MPs as well as human right activists is likely to complicate the authority's efforts to silence him which would have been standard operating procedures under Asad senior.

In light of such new political dynamics, what are the prospects of democratic reform in Syria? There is no doubt that the process has begun with the departure of senior Asad from the scene. Second, there is some evidence that Bashar is reform-minded. When analysts set to review the domestic achievements of Hafiz Asad, they mention political stability. Stability was achieved at a very high price of human rights violations, political suppression, corruption, sectarian animosity, a ruined economy, an outdated political system, and educational and technological backwardness. All these areas require urgent tackling, and any course of improvement by the son will mean enhanced legitimacy.

Change in Syria is inevitable. The debate will be over the pace and course. What strategy will be adopted depends on the outcome of the dialectical conflict between the old guard and the Syrian people, particularly the young, intellectuals, and civil society activists; on the leaning of Bashar toward democratic reform or against it; on the resolution of the conflict with Israel over the Golan Heights; and finally, on the policies of major powers, especially the US and the European Union.

51. The interview aired May 7, 2001.

52. Interview with *Al-Jazeera*, August 15, 2001. He was introduced as spokesman of a newly formed organization, "The National Council for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation."

53. Ibrahim al-Hamidi, "Na'ib Suri Yudrib 'an al-Ta'am" (A Syrian Parliamentarian Stages a Hunger Strike), *Al-Hayat*, August 7, 2001, pp. 1 & 6.

WHITHER US POLICY ON SYRIA?

The US is in a position to influence the direction of change in Syria. Relations between the two countries have been steadily improving since 1990. Former President Bill Clinton praised Asad upon receiving news of the Syrian leader's death, although the praise was cast through the prism of Israel: Asad was someone who made peace with Israel a strategic choice. Then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's attendance at Asad's funeral reflected the progress of bilateral relations in the last few years, and it was also a tacit recognition and approval of the transition of power in Damascus.

It is unfortunate for Syria as well as for the whole Middle East that US President George W. Bush has not shown the same commitment to the peace process as his predecessor. Moreover, his administration's interest in tightening the sanctions on Iraq has already clashed with many Arab countries, including Syria. The suggested policy of "smart sanctions" requires first and foremost the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors. Since Syria has been expanding its economic relations with Baghdad, it will require a higher degree of US involvement and incentives, to get the Syrian government to give up the Iraqi card.

What else is at stake for the US in Syria? On the peace front, the Clinton Administration had invested a great deal of time and energy in reaching a settlement to all aspects of the conflict. Outcomes have not matched efforts. Ten years after the Madrid talks began, Syria and Lebanon have not reached peace with Israel, although the Israeli occupying force has been forced to withdraw from South Lebanon. The withdrawal was in response to armed struggle by the Lebanese resistance, especially by Hizbullah, not because of peace negotiations.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the eruption of violence in Palestine has jeopardized what's been achieved between the Palestinians and Israel. Some of this failure to achieve a comprehensive peace is due to lack of political will on the part of the US to apply any pressure on Israel to fulfill its commitments and to abide by UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Realizing its military superiority and US commitment to its security, Israel has refused to honor these UN edicts. A more balanced US involvement could yield peace in the Middle East and improved US relations with all the Arab countries, removing the remaining obstacles to greater US-Arab relations.

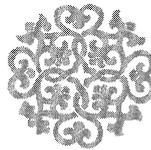
The change in leadership in Damascus provides an opportunity to improve US-Syrian relations in ways that could benefit both countries. On the US side, it has been established since Henry Kissinger's day in the 1970s that there cannot be lasting peace in the region without Syria. Any US president who gains the Syrian trump card will be able to make historical strides in negotiating Mideast peace. On the Syrian side, Bashar will be eager for assistance from the US to modernize his country. In fact, one of the motives behind Syrian willingness to enter into peace with Israel is to harvest the peace dividend. Although the US may not be in a position to offer the same generous package once it offered to Egypt, let alone even a portion of the four billion dollars Israel collects annually,

54. Syria's role in the resistance against the Israeli forces has been repeatedly acknowledged by Hizbullah's leaders.

US help to Syria could take two forms: technical assistance and economic investment. Encouraging American businesses to invest in Syria and Lebanon could become an alternative to direct economic assistance, which is increasingly unpopular, especially in Congress.⁵⁵ A promising sign to the new leader would be to remove Syria from the State Department's list of countries that support terrorism.⁵⁶

Arab public opinion perceives the US as having no concern for democracy and human rights when it comes to the Arab world. When Bashar took the reins, Arab political commentators in respected dailies such as *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Ahram*, and *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* noted that US officials did not raise a single concern about the passing of power from father to son in a country that is not a monarchy but supposedly a republic, and a leftist republic at that. The US's primary concern is for stability and preservation of the status quo, and these principles guided the way the American Administration responded to the transition of power from father to son. Still, Arab commentators found it odd that there was not even token admonition about the need for free elections and democracy in the official American response to the transition of power in Syria. The new leader in Syria expects to benefit from signing a peace agreement with Israel and from further restoring Syria's place in the international community, and the current US administration can make those benefits contingent on Bashar addressing Syria's human rights abuses and taking serious steps toward pluralism and democracy.

The buzzword with the political elite in Damascus since Asad's death is "change within continuity." The country badly needs to reform its political system and transform its economy. Because the late president left no constructive legacy in domestic policy, one would hope that the "continuity" domestically will be confined to the new president's last name. The new leader's urgent need to gain legitimacy from achievement, and the need for a peace with Israel that would return all Syrian territory, together could motivate Bashar to forge a better Syria for its people as well as for its neighbors.



55. See also Leonard B. Zuza, "Price of Peace: Funding Arab-Israeli Peace Agreements," *Middle East Insight* Vol.15, No. 3, (May-June 2000), pp.5-11.

56. This list hasn't changed since 1993. During this period, Syria has taken major strides to distance itself from "terrorist" organizations and activities.