



Special Report

Derailed in Damascus, Derailed by Damascus

-Syria's Role in the New Middle East-

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There is a general tendency in the West to describe countries like Syria, and its regime in Damascus, in blanket political and (often) moral terms. Such analysis is an oversimplification in most countries but particularly so in Syria, which has an immensely complicated geopolitical position in the Middle East. To be of any use, Syria must be scrutinized.

More so than any other Arab country, Syria's government and its power brokers are inherently secular and opportunistic, driven by good-old-fashioned survival instincts. When mixed with Syria's distinctive geography, this opportunism has led the Syrian government to play a disproportionately large role in the numerous conflicts plaguing the entire region. Without question, Syria is at the physical and political center of Middle East politics.

To the southwest is Israel, the unwelcome Jewish neighbor who captured and annexed the Golan Heights after resisting Syrian invasions in 1967 and again in 1973.

To the west is Lebanon, serving as a Syrian playground and cash cow for nearly three decades, until Damascus over-played its hand and was dealt a very visible and painful defeat by reformists that still reverberates today.

To the east is Iraq, the hotbed of a failed US occupation—a failure, US officials say, thanks in large measure to Syria's refusal to monitor jihadist movement across its 605km border with Iraq.

And beyond Iraq to the east is Iran, the Islamic Republic ascending to be perhaps *the* dominant Muslim player in Middle East politics—explicitly recruiting (and buying) the support of Syria and several extremist groups dedicated to Israel's destruction.

It is often tempting (especially from an American and post-9/11 perspective) to dismiss the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a blatant sponsor of terror—a role that he even admits openly, though framed in a different context.

Unsurprisingly, 9/11 has led most westerners to view terrorism in black-and-white terms, but given

the tremendous complexity of Assad's precarious regime and very precise interests, it would be a grave mistake to use the understandable western disdain for terrorism to justify a refusal to view Syria in anything but Manichean terms.

In order to engage Syria with any substantive or symbolic diplomacy, it is crucial to understand the nuances of what is important to the ruling Assad family and the tenuous balancing act that Syria must (and usually does) maintain. Only then can the obstacles to Syrian interests provide texture to the behavior of the Syrian government, and its role in the wider Middle East.

Fundamental Interests

To begin, any analyst must recognize that the concept of "Syrian interests" is a gross inaccuracy and oversimplification of the reality in Damascus. There exist varying parties in the secular opposition and in the banned Islamist movements that challenge the supremacy of the Assad regime. So to argue that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad somehow speaks for Syria as a whole—or even has every Syrian's interests at heart—would be misguided. Bashar al-Assad is, in fact, a dictator by any definition, and in many ways resembles Saddam Hussein before his overthrow in Iraq. In fact, despite being a rival to the Baghdad regime, the Assad dynasty is entrenched in the same secular Baathist Party that Hussein operated in for decades.

Accordingly, and without a doubt, President Assad's highest priority is safeguarding his own regime and, when possible, enhancing his own power. "Syria under Bashar has been about preservation of the status quo at any price—a kind of immobility cherished by the powerbrokers," says one Syria expert.¹ Every other interest stems directly from this one, and there is very little that the Damascus regime would *refuse* to do in order to accomplish this goal.

For instance, forty years have passed since Israel conquered and annexed the Golan Heights—a strategically important strip of land between Israel and Syria

—and Syrians continue to resent Israelis and demand the Jewish state withdraw to the borders it maintained between its inception in 1948 and the 1967 war in which the land changed hands. And while Israelis are divided on a number of issues, no Israeli would happily give up the Golan in a negotiated settlement, (justifiably) fearing that Syria would have the advantage of high ground from which to launch an offensive, much as it did in the 1948 Independence War, Six-Day War of 1967, and again in the Syrian-Egyptian surprise attack on Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

The mere existence of the Jewish nation in the Middle East angers most Muslims and especially Syr-

Syria to realize this goal. Not only could Assad use Hezbollah in Lebanon to “menace Israel,” but Assad’s regime could also use an unstable Lebanon to “thwart any attempt by the United States and Israel to lure Lebanon into a peace arrangement disadvantageous to Syria.”⁴

In 1975, Syria was still recovering from a painful defeat by Israel two years earlier—a war that cost Syria more than 3000 lives and nearly all of its military infrastructure. As civil war ravaged Lebanon in the late 1970s, Hafez al-Assad began to monopolize the Lebanese economy in Syria’s favor, employing Syrian *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) and an embedded



ians who were baffled that they could fail on three separate occasions to route the Jewish invaders. As a result, this bitterness makes reclaiming the Golan an important staple to Syrian foreign policy; Syrians want it back to reclaim a certain degree of pride and self-confidence, and Assad wants it back because it will make him very popular. “He would be a hero to Muslims everywhere, but especially to Syrians,” says Aaron Miller, President Clinton’s deputy Middle East negotiator in the 1990s.² Reclaiming the Golan also has some sentimental value to President Assad, as it was something his late father, Hafez al-Assad, had sought for all three decades he was in power, until his death in June 2000.

A far more tangible interest for President Bashar al-Assad, however, is exerting Syrian influence—in Lebanon, both politically and economically. When the Arab League requested that Damascus deploy a Syrian peacekeeping force to Lebanon in 1976 to monitor the brewing Lebanese civil war, it became clear to the Hafez regime that control over Lebanon was vital both to its foreign policy and domestic interests.

Even as recently as 2001, Syrian leaders continue “to believe they cannot afford a Lebanon left to its own uncertain stewardship.”³ Fortunately for Damascus, there existed (and continue to exist) avenues for

network of Syrian businesses that ran a “parallel economy” inside of Lebanon, but actually served the Syrian economy.⁵

In a symbiotic fashion, Hafez soon enabled Hezbollah militants—deployed by the recently-Islamized Iranian regime—to traverse westward through Syria, and into southern Lebanon, where these Iranian agents further empowered Syria’s parallel economy. Together, Assad, the Islamist leadership in Iran, and Hezbollah began a foreign policy campaign to pose an overarching threat to the Israeli way of life.

In a different context, after three decades of being knocked around the Middle East like a pinball, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians found themselves in southern Lebanese refugee camps and used their strategic location to conduct amateur military attacks against northern Israel.

Exploiting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had always come rather easily to most of the Arab world, but the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in June 1982 gave Iranian and Syrian leadership a populist basis for Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel and its allies, even though Israel invaded Lebanon to destroy Palestinian—not Hezbollah’s—infrastructure. After all, Hezbollah was brand new at the time. Nevertheless, Hezbollah used the opportunity to initiate a stunning series of attacks that effectively pioneered modern suicide ter-

rorism.⁶

Encouraging and enabling Hezbollah operations against Israel—whose forces and their proxies occupied southern Lebanon until 2000—would become Assad’s primary foreign policy asset. And his son, Bashar, would continue (and even increase) this pressure on Israel, reminding the Jewish nation that having the mightiest military in the Middle East is not enough to ensure its security.

Nipping away at the confidence and perceived invincibility of Israel, Hezbollah has served as an offensive weapon in the Damascus arsenal. Yet both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad recognized the need for a larger deterrence capability. In the end, if Israel ever wanted to attack Syria, it would take a lot more than Hezbollah could muster in order to make the Israeli government reconsider. Accordingly, after the 1982 war in Lebanon, Syrian armed forces underwent “an impressive qualitative and quantitative increase. It doubled in size from about a quarter of a million to half a million men and was equipped with advanced Soviet weapons, including SA-5 surface-to-air missiles and SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles.”⁷

Yet despite these advances with Soviet assistance, Syria could never compete with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in a conventional war. So beginning in the 1990s, Syria strove to close this technological and financial gap—and thus achieve a deterrent “strategic parity” with Israel—by developing a strong chemical weapons arsenal, adding tremendous value to the roughly 60 long-range SCUD missiles procured from (and repaired by) the Soviet Union/Russia.⁸

Moreover, in theory, not only does Syria’s admitted chemical weapons program⁹ deter Israel from a committed attack, but it also serves as a potential bargaining chip in any negotiations between Israel and Syria.¹⁰

For more reasons than obtaining a successful deterrent, the 1990s were very good years for the Syrians. Starting with the US intervention in the first Gulf War, not only did Arab nations like Saudi Arabia and Jordan bribe Assad (with enormous sums of money¹¹) to endorse the expulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, but then-US Secretary of State James Baker also “implicitly promised Syria the go-ahead to routinize its hold over Lebanon. To Hafez Assad, this meant the erasure of the border between his country and Lebanon. For more than 20 years, the real capital of Lebanon was Damascus.”¹² Moreover, being on America’s good side carried benefits of its own, particularly because Hafez (rightly) believed that only the US could push Israel to give up the Golan.

Soon after the Gulf War ended, Syria also discovered oil reserves that proved to be a boon to its

economy, though not enough to affect the global oil market.¹³ But gradually, Syria’s good fortune in the early 1990s began to wane. Western nations (and as always, Israel) began condemning Syria with greater frequency for its tolerance and training of terrorists, and their chosen method of such resistance—the increasingly popular and terrifying suicide bomber. Among Syria’s other obstacles, however, western anger would prove to be only one of many.

Navigating the Gauntlet

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Syrian politics is the general audacity permeating the entire regime. Admittedly, there are a number of other countries that cause greater commotion with their brazen behavior, but given the precarious nature of Bashar al-Assad’s grasp on power, his ambitions and methods are both reckless and yet somehow paradoxically necessary. It is hard to imagine how Assad and his father’s leftover power structure—the so-called “old guard” of power brokers—have navigated the gauntlet of domestic and foreign crises and come out relatively unscathed on the other side.

Internally, the inexperienced President Assad faces a number of challenges, each of which constitutes a serious annoyance, and together comprise a threat that is just beyond the realm of his influence.¹⁴

When President Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000, Bashar inherited his father’s uniquely tailored “system of pluralist authoritarianism,”¹⁵ which any inexperienced leader would have difficulty controlling. Bashar was no different. His initial unrestrained eagerness to guide Syria down the rocky path of reform was well-received by Syrians and westerners alike. However, despite being elected by an absurd 97 percent of the Syrian populace, Bashar had to contend with the reality that the regime’s “personalistic power base”¹⁶ did not die with his father. Bashar’s modest and brave attempts to reform and westernize Syrian politics met stiff resistance from the remnants of this power base network.

The dynamics of this domestic web of allies is likely to be unfamiliar to westerners. Essentially, to compensate for belonging to a marginal minority religion in Syria (Alawite Shiism), the Assad dynasty could not survive without at least minimal political support. Specifically, after leading a coup in 1970, the late Hafez “broadened his support by providing space for old business elites and allowing small, weak parties a minor role in the Baath-dominated” coalition, the National Progressive Front.¹⁷ That is, Hafez spread his power around to those who might oppose him—Sunnis in particular—while simultaneously ensuring that “the informal ruling cadres attest to the real power and pre-dominance of the Alawis,”¹⁸ the religious sect to which

the Assads belong.

Having spread his wings in Lebanon in the late 1970s, Hafez had more to lose and so began a campaign to eliminate any political opposition—a tendency that has oscillated between (seemingly) arbitrary toleration and terrifying suppression. The most memorable massacre of Hafez' 30-year reign was in 1982 in the Sunni Islamist stronghold of Hama, one of Syria's largest northern cities. As many as 25,000 people were killed, and the city was razed ("plowed up like a cornfield") as a warning to potential dissidents around the country.¹⁹ Hafez treated Syria's separatist Kurds with less brutality, as they merely sought to secede from the regime, not usurp it. Nevertheless, the Kurdish threat to Assad was not so minimal that he ever considered reversing a 1961 law that revoked their Syrian citizenship.

Syrians who were part of an opposition group—either explicitly or by loose association—could rest assured that one of two things would happen to them, and that it would be impossible to predict which one: they would either be killed or offered a rewarding place in the Baath Party ranks. Either way, the message was clear: Hafez al-Assad controlled the fate of every Syrian.²⁰

By the end of his regime in 2000, however, Hafez "came to rely increasingly on the Alawite minority and a personal network of supporters, undermining the state institutions and the Baath Party,"²¹ which only made his son's attempts at reform that much more threatening to this 'old guard'.

Unsurprisingly, Bashar's youthful and exuberant inaugural address was replete with pledges to modernize Syria, fight corruption, and to tolerate "constructive criticism, transparency, and democratic thinking."²² Diplomats from western countries and their Middle East allies were optimistic and eager to see the young Assad try to create a new future for Syria.

A few months later, a group of leading Syrian intellectuals enthusiastic about Bashar's rhetoric drafted and signed the "Manifesto of the 99," requiring that the regime lift the state of emergency and martial law that had been imposed on Syrians ever since the Baath Party coup d'état in 1963.²³ Soon, there were widespread demands for a free press, free elections, and the dismantling of the constitutional mandate stipulating that the Baath Party have permanent control over the government. For a short while, the regime responded in kind, releasing hundreds of political (opposition) prisoners and allowing other political parties to register and publish their own literature and newsletters.

But as soon as the Baath Party Regional Command "suspected that the appetites of the reformists

knew no bounds,"²⁴ Bashar quickly felt the tug of complacency and comfort from within his father's disseminated power base. He learned the hard way that he actually needed his father's old connections—that they constituted as much of an asset as a liability to his hold on power, and even, ironically, any hope for political reform. He would need their help and cooperation as long as they maintained this control, but Bashar did not want reforms badly enough to risk being overthrown by one (or every) disgruntled ally of his father.

In February, 2001, the "old guard" clamped down hard—not only rolling back Bashar's nascent reforms but also adding more bite to the rules that were in place well before Bashar's "Damascus Spring" of political renewal. As had been the custom in the past, the diffuse power structure in Damascus coerced the Syrian parliament into passing a law that would (and did) imprison anyone who printed material that might "harm national security, unity of society, security of the army, the country's international ties, the country's dignity and prestige, the national economy and monetary security."²⁵

It would be a mistake, however, to paint Bashar as an innocent and naïve victim of a corrupt and malicious regime. On the contrary, Bashar quickly developed a taste for the power that had enthralled his father for so many years, and like most young adults, as soon as he possessed something that could be conserved, he became more conservative. Granted, unlike his father, the younger Assad does not have a flare for mass-murder, but neither is he immune to the lure of a more selective brand of assassination.²⁶ It is still unclear whether Bashar regretted his promises of reform soon after gaining power, or if he later became thankful for the old guard's insistence, once he was overexposed to the delicate balance of power within his coveted regime.

Either way, in response to establishment pressures, Bashar opted to make progress towards liberalizing the economy, while doing little to improve—and in some ways further restricting—Syrian political freedoms. It was deemed that regime stalwarts could only tolerate economic reform if it did not come at the expense of political stability.

According to the International Crisis Group, however, it is worth noting that while "regime elements have been the staunchest opponents of [political] reform, they also are likely to be the first victims of its absence," because without political reform, substantive economic reforms will, in the long run, undermine the regime's support base.²⁷ To date, the Syrian establishment has made little attempt to counteract these economic reforms, almost certainly because the short-term economic benefits of autocracy are distracting them from a potential future loss of political power.

Thus, having appeased or indulged the old guard, Bashar has been able to make some slow progress toward economic and administrative reform. And while such a transition is difficult to see, it is there nonetheless. As late as mid-2002, for instance, Bashar bluntly said, “Private banks pose a threat to the national economy.”²⁸ And a year and a half later, private banks were still far from ubiquitous. But in the last three years, Syria has seen the significant “establishment of private banks and universities, major reductions in customs duties, and the expansion of foreign investment opportunities.”²⁹

It is certainly true that economic reform can only go so far, especially when that reform seems intentionally tailored to prevent any subsequent political reform. In such an environment, there is a tendency to exaggerate any improvements, as though a change in *direction* were the same as the substantive realization of that new direction. Understandably, the regime’s power base—both Hafez’ leftover ‘old guard’ and Bashar’s new breed of scrambling opportunists—is afraid of any sudden changes in the political environment. Some of the more prescient stakeholders in the status quo are equally concerned about economic change, especially in Lebanon, where opposition to Syrian policies escalated to new heights in 2005.

Expressed opposition to Damascus inside of Syria itself, however, has not reached levels even approaching the Lebanese frustration with Bashar al-Asad. And this is no accident. Even more unrepresentative than Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Bashar’s Syria is held together by a regime whose survival is entirely predicated upon the weakness and disunity of its homegrown secular and religious opposition.

Among the various groups eager to see an end to Alawite rule, the only cohesive threat to the Syrian regime is the (local branch of the) Muslim Brotherhood, which is still recovering from the devastating destruction wreaked on their infrastructure and leadership when they tried to assassinate Bashar’s father in June 1980 and were met with Hafez’ massacre in Hama.³⁰ Afterwards, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria took a very low profile and abandoned its “strategy of direct confrontation.”³¹ In contrast to its well-funded and educated Egyptian counterpart, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has seldom resorted to violence, and is neither particularly educated nor wealthy.

However, like the Egyptian Brotherhood—which has given rise to a number of jihadist and nationalist militant groups across the globe—the Syrian Brotherhood and its support networks are becoming more religious, and this trend is likely to continue.³²

What’s more, as a secular Alawite³³ regime rep-

resenting only 15 percent of Syria’s 18 million inhabitants, Bashar is compelled to maintain power without crushing—or perceiving to crush—the 70 percent of Syrians who are Sunni Muslims. There have even been reports in recent years that Bashar has become so afraid of the Muslim Brotherhood that he will frequently give speeches ridiculing religious extremism and condemning the mixture of science and Islam.³⁴ In stark contrast to his father’s behavior, Bashar’s mere acknowledgment of any Syrian movement towards piety gives the trend even more fuel. In other words, a real tyrant would not condemn the mixing of science and Islam; he would simply torture and kill any scientists seen going into a mosque.

Likewise, the secular opposition has little ground to stand on, but not for a lack of money or education. In fact, because the Brotherhood’s primary support group is the lower middle class, the secular (i.e. elite) opposition is left to influence only the upper middle class, which is keenly interested in guarding the little prestige, money and achievements it has managed to amass. In general, the secular opposition is unable to resonate much with average Syrians—a feat made more difficult by the general absence of much of their leadership, often persuaded or threatened into exile.

Like his father before him, Bashar has had a difficult time finding a stable balance between oppressing his opposition and tolerating occasional public criticism, which often reduces the kind of tension that can lead to direct conflict.³⁵ A number of Arab analysts have noted, however, that with Islam on the rise in Syria, Bashar would be wise to support his own secular opposition, “allowing them greater freedom to act and move” in order to further divide his two potential usurpers, the pious and the secular.³⁶ That way, the various factions within the opposition would be suppressing each other, effectively alleviating the need for Bashar to do it himself. Either way, the Islamist political movement (epitomized mostly in the Brotherhood) does not seem to pose much of an organized threat to Bashar’s regime, but rather a terminal headache.³⁷ Nevertheless, there are reports that Bashar’s fear of being overthrown by Islamists is increasingly hard for him to ignore, justified or not. His former vice president recently noted that “Bashar can’t sleep at night. He is very fearful regarding the internal situation and is afraid to leave the country for fear he may not be able to return.”³⁸

Even still, internal turmoil is not the only obstacle Bashar shares with his father’s legacy. In fact, Bashar has been tasting the bitterness of “international pariah status”³⁹ in a way his father seldom did, though mostly—it is said—as a result of Bashar’s inexperience, rather than an explicit difference in policy.

What is certain, however, is that Bashar now

faces obstacles that his father had the luxury of delegating to others when formulating foreign policy. Specifically, complications in Damascus deriving from the US invasion of Iraq; Syria's support for terrorist groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hezbollah; Bashar's cavalier continuation of his father's policy to bleed Lebanon dry, figuratively and literally—all make Bashar al-Assad's Syria a perfect target for the ire of the western world.

Holding the Pariah Accountable

Even before the United States was attacked by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, Syria was a known sponsor of terrorist activities. But until that day, there were virtually no nations outside of the Middle East that felt threatened (or expressed such a feeling) by Syria's undeniable promotion of terrorist activities.

With the paradigm shift in Washington following 9/11, "members of the Bush team argued that half-measures taken by Damascus to placate the US should no longer suffice.... Positive Syrian steps in one area should not be viewed as compensating for negative steps elsewhere."⁴⁰ Much like its blossoming relationship with Pakistan, the White House had hoped Syria might take the opportunity to change teams in exchange for a clean slate and tremendous US support. And Washington painted the alternatives clearly. "From this day forward," Bush told Congress only days after 9/11, "any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."⁴¹

Initially, Damascus offered to cooperate and did so in a number of ways. US officials publicly and privately credited Syrian intelligence for sharing vital information and making moderate moves toward cutting off its connections to Palestinian extremists. Among the initial intelligence shared with the US were: information on 9/11 lead-hijacker Mohammad Atta's time spent in Aleppo in the 1990s, embedded al-Qaeda links inside of Syria, and actionable intelligence from interrogations of al-Qaeda operatives in Syria that led to the disruption of a large terrorist attack against US military forces stationed in the Gulf.⁴²

Strategically, Bashar's behavior made sense; he wanted to get carrots from the White House—again, like Pakistan—but he did not want to give up his best bargaining chip (sponsoring militant nationalists) in a potential future dialogue with Israel. In terms of public policy, the Bush Administration sees no difference between a global jihadist threat to American interests and a militant nationalist threat to local 'occupations' (i.e., Israel). But as in much of the Middle East, in Syria there is a significant difference between the two threats: Palestinian militants would never attack Syria, but al-Qaeda might.

Specifically, Bashar had and has an interest in turning over global jihadist al-Qaeda suspects and intelligence to the CIA because the *takfir* doctrine of al-Qaeda explicitly calls for attacks on regimes in which a Muslim populace is led (i.e., oppressed) by secular/Pan-Arab Muslims, as in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Saddam's Iraq.⁴³ And for that very reason was the bulk of Syria's cooperation after 9/11 tethered to the global jihadist network of al-Qaeda—not Palestinian or Lebanese militant nationalists, on which Syrian foreign policy depended.

As Bashar has hinted over the years, he could only afford to clamp down on anti-Israel nationalists if he had excellent reason to believe that the US would, in turn, push Israel extremely hard to give up the Golan Heights. With the new US focus on al-Qaeda, Assad knew he could not count on such a promise, even if one was forthcoming.

Bashar might also have cracked down on Palestinian militants if the US had repeated/renewed Secretary Baker's deal to give Assad even more control over Lebanon. But Israel's proxy soldiers in Lebanon had just withdrawn a year earlier, in 2000, putting an end to the twenty-year buffer zone between Hezbollah and Israel. In other words, Bashar did not need or even care about such a promise from the US because Hezbollah had just been given all the help it would ever need when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, leaving a void that the Iranian proxy filled with tactful discipline. The US Secretary of State had nothing to offer Assad except the Golan, and the White House had bigger fish to fry, anyway.

Another contributing factor to Damascus' initial cooperation was its status in the United Nations. Less than a month after 9/11, Syria was elected to be a two-year member of the UN Security Council by 160 of the 178 countries represented in the UN—a wide margin by any standard. Thus, Syrian intelligence thought it prudent to be as cooperative as possible with their US counterparts, to ensure a smooth sail through the UN election process.

Regardless, Syrian cooperation in the war on terror was neither particularly broad nor deep—a façade of a honeymoon that did not last.⁴⁴ Accordingly, in equal measure, US demands began to escalate.

Having been on the US State Department list of state-sponsors of terrorism since 1979, the Assad dynasty was no stranger to accusations of being evil, and Hafez' "old guard" helped Bashar cope with America's rhetorical attacks and the international attention focused on Syria after 9/11.

So it was a bit of a surprise to most optimists in the Bush Administration when it became clear that Bashar's facilitation and support for Palestinian terror actually increased in the two years following 9/11—

not even accounting for Damascus' support of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

For instance, between September 2001 and 2002 alone, Israeli authorities captured twenty Hamas militants who were recruited throughout the Middle East and deployed to rural Syria for training in "weapons, explosives, intelligence gathering, hostage taking, and suicide operations."⁴⁵

While Damascus insists that the offices in the Syrian capital operated by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas are merely "press offices," the leaders of these terrorist groups openly claim that suicide bombing operations are regularly planned and executed from their Damascus headquarters and thus "serve specifically operational functions."⁴⁶

The accusations leveled at Syria from Israel about training Palestinian militants culminated on October 5, 2003, in the first Israeli air strike on Syrian territory in thirty years, in retaliation for a PIJ suicide bombing in Haifa that killed twenty Israelis.⁴⁷ The target of the Israeli attack was a camp 25km outside of Damascus that Israel claimed was a training camp for PIJ, which Damascus naturally denied.⁴⁸ As usual, President Bush defended Israel's actions, saying "we would be doing the same thing" if the US had been attacked.⁴⁹ And as if to prove it, two months later President Bush signed into law a unilateral sanctions bill against Syria for the regime's continued obstruction of the war on terror.

Still, in the two years after 9/11, tension between Syria and its western enemies was relatively dormant. Only with a very different and far more threatening Middle East war on the horizon did Syria begin to fear what the US was able and willing to do. Initially, the US invasion of Iraq forced Syria to rethink its foreign policy, but soon thereafter, Bashar saw the opportunity to create and exert the kind of leverage he had only dreamed of holding over America.

An Angel Lands in a Bad Neighborhood

On May 1, 2003, less than six weeks after invading Iraq, President Bush declared victory on the USS Abraham Lincoln battleship in the Persian Gulf. And with little concern or anticipation of an insurgency, the US forces were riding the wave of success.

By the fall of 2003, however, US forces were beginning to realize the extent to which they had been caught, unprepared, by an increasingly hostile Sunni population, eagerly seeking to kill, maim and expel them.⁵⁰ But perhaps more alarming to the occupiers was the overwhelming sense that Iraq's neighbors felt they had a tremendous stake in the events inside Iraq, and more importantly, that these neighbors were more than eager to cement the outcome of their choice into the reinvigorated and newly dynamic Iraq.

So it should not have been a surprise when US intelligence in Iraq began picking up signals intelligence indicating that senior level Baathists from Saddam's regime were not gasping their last breaths, but actually directing the insurgency from the safety of Syria, funneling Sunni jihadists from across the Arab world into Iraq.⁵¹

To punish the Syrians for their uncooperative behavior toward the American presence in Iraq; for their import of \$1.1 billion of Iraqi oil in the years leading up to the war (despite a multilateral embargo)⁵²; for providing Saddam's Iraqi army with military weaponry and supplies prior to the US invasion⁵³; for publicly calling for a US failure in Iraq⁵⁴; for harboring senior Iraq Baathists in Syria, who then helped recruit and finance the Sunni jihad in Iraq⁵⁵—for all these reasons, the US cut off all trade with Syria, including oil, which in sum cost the Syrian economy more than 3 billion dollars in 2003.⁵⁶

Thus, when Syrians were awakened from their initial reverie of emotional wreckage wrought by the US military's "shock and awe" campaign in Iraq, both the Syrian regime and its internal opposition were indeed very frightened that the US would not stop at Iraq's borders in its evangelical mission to transform the Middle East in the West's image. As one influential neoconservative analyst noted at the time, Syrians have "concluded that once the coalition victory in Iraq is consolidated, they are next on the hit list."⁵⁷

Likewise, another Middle East expert paraphrased one of President Bush's key speeches in November 2003: "The implication was clear: if the United States is serious about unseating Middle Eastern dictators, eradicating the threat of terrorism, and installing democracy, why stop at Iraq?"⁵⁸

Yet the setbacks of a devastated economy and an awestruck population did not deter Bashar's regime for very long. When it became painfully obvious that America's own setbacks in Iraq would preclude the US from even *trying* to spread the gospel of freedom in other Arab countries, Bashar al-Assad resumed his fiery rhetoric and there was little Washington could do about it.

In the process of allocating blame for the US failures in Iraq, President Bush made no exceptions for Syria, nor was there any need to. Damascus was contributing directly to the insurgency, though how much is not clear.⁵⁹

The Syrian motivations for employing such a policy are tied directly to American vulnerabilities. Specifically, it is in Bashar's interest to entrench the US in an Iraqi quagmire for decades, if possible, to ensure flexibility in policymaking that would otherwise be unavailable to Bashar, who is often restricted (or 'bullied') by western pressure. The easiest and most ef-

fective way of obtaining this leverage is to ensure a steady supply of foreign jihadists crossing Syria's border into Iraq to fight with their Sunni brothers.

Once the seeds were planted, Assad began a contradictory (but nevertheless effective) campaign to exert this leverage over the US to secure his own interests. Both then and now, Bashar insists, on the one hand, that "guarding the border with Iraq cannot be our responsibility. The border between Syria and Iraq is exactly the same as the border between the US and Mexico and the fact is that the US, despite all its efforts, cannot exercise control all along the border to prevent the smuggling of goods and even people across it."⁶⁰

And yet on the other hand, Assad has consistently made overtures—both implicit and explicit—that he would cooperate with the US regarding Iraq if Washington can deliver the Golan back to Syria.⁶¹

In effect, Bashar is illustrating that his complicity would be useless since he could not control the border even if he wanted to. And the fact that Washington has to rely on the behavior of a regime that blatantly obstructs its efforts is a direct testament to American vulnerability in the Middle East.

As the 'old guard' in Damascus is well aware, however, a complete US failure in Iraq has never been in Assad's interest either. If sabotaging US efforts in Iraq meant that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees would pour into Syria, then without question, Bashar would prefer for the US to succeed in Iraq. No amount of Syrian joy brought on by a humiliating American failure in Iraq would offset the devastation wrought by floods of refugees into Syria. Damascus' already-precarious balance of power would completely capsize with a dramatic increase in a population, especially if that new population were Sunni (likely) and thus potentially eager to direct its energies at overthrowing the Alawite Bashar, if and when the jihadist cause in Iraq becomes passé.

Even if the White House has been perfectly aware of Syria's internal political climate, there has been little President Bush could do about it. The occupation of Iraq has spurred a civil war that has tied our hands indefinitely. There were, Bush came to believe, other means to illicit more favorable behavior from Syria. But in the end, the Syrian regime's great

est threat was its own lack of restraint.

On December 12, 2003, when the Iraqi insurgency was in full swing, President Bush signed into law the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA), which prohibited nearly all

business transactions with Syria (including mainstream exports), severely restricted the mobility of Syrian diplomats, and (in a reversal of Bush's prior policy) limited diplomatic contact with the regime.⁶²

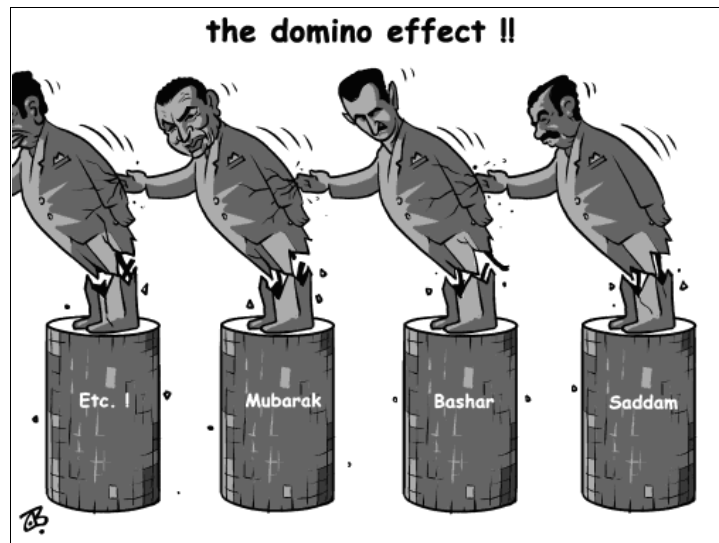
One rather toothless tenet of SALSA was its moral objection to Syria's "continued occupation of Lebanese territory and its encroachment upon

Lebanon's political independence."⁶³ The US never cared much about Lebanon in any substantive way; no objection had been made to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and only when Syrian interests were intolerably contrary to America's did western leaders condemn Damascus' policy. In fact, the US cared so little about Lebanon that US Secretary of State James Baker was content to see Lebanon strangled by Damascus, as long as Hafez al-Assad endorsed the first Gulf War in 1991.⁶⁴

Granted, a month after SALSA's passage, President Bush claimed he believed that "God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom," and that the endlessly factional Lebanese polity would likewise succumb to the "momentum of freedom in our world."⁶⁵ But more likely, President Bush was making a virtue of necessity; Damascus had to be pressured to tow the American line, grandiose or not.

Practically speaking, however, the inclusion of Lebanon in President Bush's Middle East ideology was awkward and insincere, clearly a ploy designed to isolate Syria, with little hope of having any impact on the ground.⁶⁶ Yet with the slaying of a Lebanese giant on February 14, 2005, the White House's link between freedom in Iraq and freedom in Lebanon became not just fluid, but downright seamless. Syria was soon boxed in by nations in complete upheaval, and the Bush Administration was screaming 'I told you so' to its detractors.

Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was a legendary figure in Lebanon—both for his philanthropy and political integrity. "Virtually all that is shiny and new in Lebanon, and there is much of it,



owes its existence to Mr Hariri.”⁶⁷ So with a tragic taste of irony, Hariri was killed by the biggest bomb in Lebanon since 1990—when Hariri helped broker the much-needed Taef Accord ending Lebanon’s fifteen years of civil war.⁶⁸ As if denigrating his efforts to rebuild Lebanon, Hariri’s killers chose the most destructive method it could, leaving 16 bystanders dead and a crater the size of a swimming pool.

The obvious culprit to most Lebanese was the Syrian regime in Damascus.⁶⁹ Bashar had the most to gain by the murder of Hariri; he had been a harsh critic of the 29-year Syrian occupation in Lebanon, and an equally fierce opponent to the Assad family policy to use Hezbollah’s ascendant militant and political presence in southern Lebanon to further cement Syrian control over the Levant. Besides, an attack “of this magnitude and requiring such a degree of preparation would not have been possible without, at a very minimum, the foreknowledge and acquiescence of Syrian intelligence services.”⁷⁰

A suspicion powered by hunches, however, this was not. A detailed series of reports and leaks by a UN investigation team led by Detlev Mehlis (and later by Serge Brammertz) revealed that the evidence trail for Hariri’s murder leads straight to the top of food chain in Damascus, including Bashar’s brother, Maher al-Assad (chief of Syria’s Presidential Guard) and their brother-in-law Assef Shawqat (chief of Syrian Intelligence).⁷¹

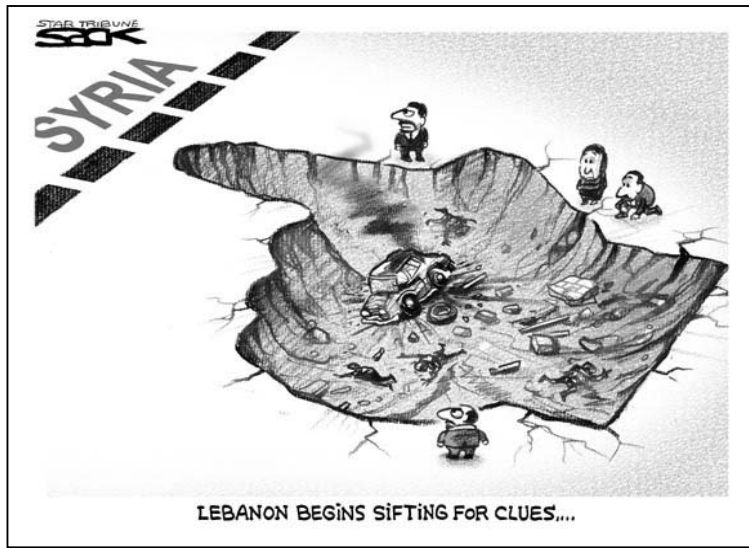
While the details of this investigation are certainly compelling, the political implications are far more relevant than any determination of guilt or innocence in Damascus. More important is that the Lebanese *believe* that the Syrian regime is responsible for Hariri’s murder, and this belief was all that was required to ignite a brushfire in Lebanon whose embers are still glowing. In fact, months before any international commission was established to investigate the murder, over a million Lebanese men and women crowded the streets of Beirut to protest Hariri’s murder—screaming for the end of Syria’s occupation and its endless meddling in Lebanon’s affairs. Within three months, the tremendous pressure on Damascus from Lebanese demonstrations and international outrage over the as-

sassination had pushed Syria into a very uncomfortable corner.

Manipulating the soured relationships between western countries (like the US and France) was once the bread and butter of Syrian foreign policy; but Hariri’s murder changed the dynamics of these relationships, pitting everyone against the Assad regime. In fact, Syria’s Sunni Arab sponsors like Saudi Arabia and Egypt went so far as to end their financial and political support of the Syrian regime and publicly called

for action in Damascus.⁷² Turkey’s leadership likewise paid scolding visits to the Syrian capital after Hariri’s assassination.

Undoubtedly, it was this unanticipated end of Syria’s Arab sponsorship that held the greatest influence on Bashar’s decision to withdraw his 15,000 troops from Lebanon and control the damage of his overreach.⁷³



Dubbed by the US State Department as the “Cedar Revolution,” Syria’s troop withdrawal at the behest of street protesters gave the Bush Administration the impetus to frame the Lebanese demands within its own foreign policy. In other words, Washington could now implicitly site Lebanon as unequivocal evidence that President Bush’s campaign to transform the Middle East not only resonated in the minds and hearts of the region’s oppressed people, but also that such a transformation would have been impossible without the precedent of the US invasion of Iraq. Though reluctant to tempt fate with premature assessments, President Bush felt confident enough two weeks after Hariri’s assassination to claim that a “thaw has begun” in the broader Middle East, and that the “status quo of despotism cannot be ignored or appeased, kept in a box or cut off.”⁷⁴

Taking advantage of the momentum, Secretary Rice noted in mid-2005 that “now is the time for Syria to realize that it is clearly out of step with where the region is going.”⁷⁵ Less than a month after President Bush pledged in his second inaugural address to “end tyranny”⁷⁶ as we knew it, the street protests in Beirut compelled even the liberal pundits to give credit to the White House.

Accurate or not, President Bush’s claims were certainly echoed in Beirut in the weeks after Hariri’s assassination. Walid Jumblatt, the beloved leader of

the Lebanese Druze, described a bizarre change in the atmosphere of the Arab world, and was himself surprised by it. “It’s strange for me to say it, but this process of change has started because of the American invasion of Iraq,” explained Jumblatt, a vehement opponent to President Assad. “I was cynical about Iraq. But when I saw the Iraqi people voting three weeks ago, 8 million of them, it was the start of a new Arab world.... The Syrian people, the Egyptian people, all say that something is changing. [Our] Berlin Wall has fallen. We can see it.”⁷⁷

Scavenging for Allies

By the summer of 2005, there existed a very limited number of ways that President Bashar al-Assad could react to the collapse of his own Berlin Wall—the stable pillar supporting three decades of Syrian foreign policy. Having withdrawn from Lebanon broken and demoralized, Damascus faced daunting reminders of its current predicament. First, the Syrian regime’s fundamental stability depended on the political and financial support of Sunni Arab countries. Second, the Syrian powerbase could not achieve any of its goals as long as the Hariri investigation threatened to put a wedge between Bashar and his closest advisors and family members.⁷⁸ Third, it was likely that the Syrian economy would wither absent its customary control of the Lebanese market⁷⁹—to say little of its waning oil reserves back home.⁸⁰ And finally, Bashar’s foreign policy interests were utterly contingent on his ability to threaten Israel by enabling and influencing Hezbollah from southern Lebanon; and it was unclear if these ties could be maintained—especially if he had to withdraw his extensive *mukhabarat* intelligence apparatus from Lebanon, in addition to his troops.

In the year after the Cedar Revolution, these dependencies were stretched to the break point and Bashar could have expected nothing less. In the end, there was really only one place he could turn: his reliable (though not particularly trusted) friend, Tehran.

In 1979, when the Islamist Iranian revolution overthrew the pro-western Shah, Tehran strived to give violent birth to Hezbollah in Lebanon—a feat

that naturally became easier with guarantees of safe passage through Syria. In return for the favor, Hafez al-Assad (and later his son) obtained a safety net that would protect Syria if and when it was pressured into a corner.

And like a rebellious teenager, Syria has been prodding and testing its environment ever since the early 1990s, when the Bush (41) Administration gave it free reign in Lebanon, and the Sunni Arab states started pouring money into the coffers of Syria’s elite. More importantly, Hafez al-Assad and his ‘old guard’ power base came to adore and depend on siphoning money and influence in Lebanon—a cause, product and side-effect of a strengthening alliance with Tehran. Wielding almost complete control of the Levant was quickly taken for granted in Damascus, especially after 1990, when Syria had both American and Iranian blessings to do so.

It was likely inevitable, then, that President Bashar Assad lashed out when he was expelled from Lebanon despite the ostracism of his Arab allies. In the year following the Cedar Revolution, Bashar sought tremendous solace from his relationship with Tehran; such an alliance, he undoubtedly figured, could provide Syria with either the tangible stability/support it desperately needed, or it could be used as a bargaining chip if the West ever courted Syria’s loyalty. Regardless, it became a core interest of Syrian foreign policy to piggyback on Iran’s shoulders, as the Persian giant moved towards regional dominance.

The most significant move aligning

Syria and Iran was a bilateral defense pact signed on June 15, 2006—aimed at strengthening the “strategic” relationship between Iran and Syria in an effort to “mobilize movements and forces against America and Israel.”⁸¹ Not only would Syria and Iran come to each other’s defense, but they would not even bother concealing their offensive support for the violent resistance of Palestinian and Hezbollah militants.

As if hinting at an ominous horizon, less than a month would pass before this defense pact bore tangible fruit and made the sirens in northern Israel that much more alarming.



Raising the Stakes

It is widely known and understood that Israelis—perhaps more so than others—have a very difficult time reconciling their determination to protect their population *now* with their equally compelling devotion to preventing attacks *in the future*.

In a daring raid on June 25, 2006, Hamas militants from the Gaza Strip killed two soldiers in the IDF and kidnapped another, Gilad Shalit—reinforcing the Israeli concern that Jews in the Middle East might be doomed to eternal vulnerability.

Within a few weeks, Israelis endured another militant attack on their young, conscripted soldiers on Israel's northern soil, this time by Hezbollah, which also killed two soldiers and kidnapped another two—Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. Panic in Jerusalem quickly turned to aggression and a near-instantaneous mobilization for a month-long war with Hezbollah foot soldiers in southern Lebanon.⁸²

The Israeli Air Force initiated an intense air campaign, to which Hezbollah—led by a charismatic Hassan Nasrallah—responded with thousands of Katyusha rockets fired from southern Lebanon into Israel. The Israeli air campaign was eventually supplemented by a ground invasion into Lebanon, intended to completely eliminate the Hezbollah threat to Israel. After 34 days of war, more than a thousand Lebanese civilians, 500 Hezbollah militants,⁸³ 119 Israeli soldiers, and 43 Israeli civilians were dead. More than a million Israelis fled south from their homes in northern Israel, desperate to evade Hezbollah's rocket range.

The UN was able to broker a ceasefire on August 14, 2006, but Goldwasser and Regev remain in captivity, amidst rumors that one or even both of them were already dead.⁸⁴

Any understanding of the intricate and ambitious foreign policies of countries like Syria and, in particular, Iran need not be based on vital intelligence privy only to Israeli defense analysts. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad make no secret of their support for Hezbollah and any and every armed movement resisting Israel's occupation (or even pres-

ence) in the Middle East.⁸⁵ The two leaders continue announcing strengthened alliances and often issue joint anti-Israeli statements, decrying “the evil aims by the U.S. and Zionists.”⁸⁶

That said, in the aftermath of Israel's latest war, Syria has been put front and center in the geopolitics of the Middle East conflict and further emphasized for its continued role as an instigator of the Iraqi insurgency. Ariel Sharon, Israel's Prime Minister from 2001 to 2005, could never afford (politically) to disrupt or destroy Hezbollah's infrastructure in southern Lebanon because he was preoccupied with the second Palestinian *intifada*.

Likewise, ever since 2000, when Israel withdrew its “buffer” of proxy forces from southern Lebanon, most Israelis all but forgot about the Hezbollah threat because a Palestinian suicide-bombing their neighborhood market was more likely and, therefore, more worthy of their attention. Yet having been reminded of the damage that Hezbollah—and by extension, Syria and Iran—can still inflict on their country, most Israelis emerged from the “Second Lebanon War” desperate to see a settlement to the generations of conflict between Israel and Hezbollah's enabler, Syria.

For their part, Syrians are as eager as ever to put their feet in the Sea of Galilee—the quintessential celebration of the Golan's return to Syrian sovereignty. Unlike Israel, however, most Syrians see the Golan as a symbol of national pride, but might prefer higher standards of living if they were given a choice between the two. Having a rather bizarre finger on the pulse of

the Syrian people, both Bashar and Hafez al-Assad have understood this subtle preference, which has exemplified the need—in their eyes—to retain and exert significant influence in Lebanon.

Yet now that “Lebanon is a huge headache for Syria and Assad knows he can't control it like he did before,” he will likely settle for “influence but not control in Lebanon and focus on getting

the Golan back.”⁸⁷ Israeli offers, however, are hard to come by, leaving Assad in the awkward position of offering unconditioned negotiations in the same breath that he threatens Israel with imminent war.⁸⁸



In the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution, many believed Syria's loneliness would 'allow' Israel to ignore Assad's overtures for negotiations and perhaps peace, but after its more recent war with Hezbollah, Israel has been experiencing its own crisis of confidence, and as a result, it has become clear that Israel's behavior is equally dependent on US foreign policy, primarily regarding Iraq. When pressed about Assad's recent offers to sit down to negotiate, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert implied that he would like to do so, if only Washington would allow it.⁸⁹

More recently, senior Israeli sources have reported that Secretary Rice has explicitly forbade Olmert and his Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni from engaging Syria, especially with negotiations. "Don't even think about it," Rice reportedly told Israeli officials asking permission to explore the seriousness of Syria's offers.⁹⁰ A few days earlier, Rice insisted that no country obstructively stoking the fires of conflict in neighboring Iraq should be rewarded for its behavior, especially not Syria, which has "decided to be Iran's sidecar in all of these activities," she added.⁹¹

In what can only be described as a textbook stalemate, the US and Israel have painfully discovered—each in their own way—that they cannot accomplish their goals with the use of force. They will both have to make serious concessions, either publicly or privately. The Iranian leadership has its own decisions to make, complicated by its own internal problems. In contrast to Syria, however, the US, Israel and Iran all have significant control over their fates. Without question, Washington and Jerusalem do not like their choices, but they are choices nevertheless. And they are both likely to lose in the long run, no matter what path they take.

Pressure-Points and Equilibrium

With so many factors to consider, the motivations and intentions in Damascus are hard to predict. Worse still, the lack of control in Damascus over regional events essentially paralyzes the Syrian regime, but in a peculiar way. What makes the Syrian government unique lies in a startling paradox—the impotent power of adaptation.

Despite having tremendous leverage and assets at its disposal, the Syrian regime is still somehow exceptionally vulnerable to nearly every possible threat. Among its arsenal of bargaining chips: it has tremendous influence in Iraq; it is the primary viaduct for Hezbollah supply lines, which have already replenished Hezbollah with more than 10,000 short-range rockets.⁹² In fact, as an underrepresented group in the Lebanese parliament, Hezbollah and its Shiite allies are even promoting a coup d'état in Beirut.⁹³ What's more, Damascus is riding Iran's coattails as the Per-

sian regime ascends the Middle East chain of command. And yet none of this changes the overwhelming sense of vulnerability in Damascus.

Damascus is out-gunned and out-funded by Israel; Assad's increasingly religious "constituency" loathes him; Iran will almost certainly discard its alliance with Syria as soon as Damascus outlives its usefulness; the regime is sandwiched between the world's greatest superpower and its Zionist ally, both of whom will be in the region for generations more, antagonizing Sunni jihadists who are eternally prowling for infidels; there seems to be no hope for reclaiming the Golan, not while the world is distracted by Iraq, and not while Israel's hands are tied by the US; much of the stagnant Syrian economy is declining further; and worst of all—most humiliating of all—Syria's oppressive strongman was thrown out of Lebanon, the piggy bank and playground of Damascus, and thrown out by *peaceful protesters*, no less.

So how can the Syrian regime be so powerful—how can it be the axis on which the entire Middle East pivots—if it feels an incessant sense of insecurity?

The answer, regrettably, lies in geopolitical necessity. If it wants to survive, the Assad regime has to overreach on a consistent basis, despite the occasional and inevitable backfire, like the Cedar Revolution. Bashar faces more challenges than his father did, yet he also has more opportunities. Accordingly, his hold on power will be more tenuous but could also deliver greater benefits. However, unlike every other player in the region, Syria can only *react* to its environment; it can only pursue its interests by constantly adjusting to the decisions of those around it. Damascus lacks the power to determine outcome, but effectively uses the decisions of others to its own advantage. And within this limited scope, Damascus is actually well positioned to employ such a tactic because it is already accustomed to making numerous smaller bets. For instance, public allegiances with Iran, funds for Palestinian militants, access for Hezbollah, threats against Israel, and open borders into Iraq each constitute critical pressure-points serving Damascus. Assad cannot rely on only one of these assets; when he gets burned on one front (which, in this volatile region, will happen often), he cautiously shifts focus to another front, deliberately reassessing his position within the regional climate.

Like a steamboat engineer, Assad is running from one steam compressor to the other, constantly making minor adjustments to the pressure gauges to keep the boat moving, though careful to avoid an explosion. By making tiny adjustments and building pressure slowly, Assad is able to isolate his opposition, antagonize his enemies (but not too much), and ensure his own security. Recognizing the constant frailty of his regime,

Assad and his advisors find comfort in equilibrium, not adventurism.

Specifically, the equilibrium is a cause and effect of Syria's bizarre deterrence capabilities: when Damascus puts pressure on, say, Israel, the Jewish leadership knows that Damascus will not cave if Israel pushes back because Assad can merely shift his reliance to another source of support, like Hezbollah, its Arab allies, or Iran. In an all-out war, Israel would hardly be deterred by this dynamic, but when deciding whether to order a small retaliation for a PIJ suicide bombing in Haifa, Syria's flexibility is an invaluable weapon.

Specifically, if Damascus is unafraid of Israeli retaliation, then retaliating will only give Israelis a false hope and expectation that Damascus will, in fact, change its behavior. Otherwise, the thinking goes, the IDF would not retaliate. This leaves IDF leadership asking, "Aside from making us feel a little better, what good would retaliating with a small attack on a Syrian PIJ training camp really do?" This is the power of adaptation, and in the world of quagmires and sound bites, it is a powerful deterrent. For better or worse, it is extremely rare for Syrian behavior to justify—in the eyes of the international community—more than a slap on the wrist from anyone it may anger, including Israel, because of the nature of its pressure-points. And Damascus ensures that this dynamic continues.

The assassination of Rafik Hariri stands out as a clear overreach and exception to the rule in Damascus of small adjustments. And Assad has paid for it dearly, no matter his regime's involvement in or foreknowledge of the plan. It is unclear whether Assad has been able to sufficiently douse the brushfire spread by Hariri's murder, but more importantly, he has adapted to the political climate by aligning with Tehran, and by cementing his influence over the Lebanese parliament speaker—Nabih Berri—who has stymied every effort to initiate a trial for Hariri's killers. With any luck, a booming alliance between Damascus and Tehran will put Syria in the position of playing the proverbial good cop, cowering in Iran's ambitious shadow, waiting to exploit the fallout.

On the other hand, Tehran is well aware of the opportunism in Damascus and will account for it by ensuring that Secretary Rice continues to make unequivocal associations between Iran and Syria. So long as the partnership between Syria and Iran is *perceived* to be invulnerable, Damascus will become more isolated and thus have little choice but to grow even more dependent on Iran. The balance of small pressure-points certainly continues, but lacking Arab

support and a Lebanese cash cow, Assad has been forced by circumstance to put most of his political and economic eggs in the Persian basket.

For the US or Israel to take advantage of Assad's strategy, they must first understand it, and then play with it. It is hardly news that Damascus is primarily opportunistic, but it is paramount that the power centers in Jerusalem and Washington recognize that the core basis for this opportunism is necessity, not greed. For the reasons discussed above, President Bashar al-Assad—much like his father—does not have the luxury of acting 'greedy' or 'evil.' He is certainly an unsavory character, but the young Assad is simply too preoccupied with survival to indulge raw greed or malicious and reckless abandon. Fortunately, Syrian opportunism is the most promising basis for driving a wedge between Damascus and Tehran—or better still, pitting the two against one another.

The trick, then, is to convince President Assad that putting all his eggs in Iran's basket is dangerous. He is currently benefiting from this tactic, but Assad and even his 'old guard' know this will not last, and the Syrian leadership will feel compelled to return to its comfortable strategy of balancing and mitigating smaller pressure-points, assets and liabilities. If and when Assad loses his Persian tether, Damascus will quickly shift focus to its last promising pressure-point—Palestinian terror, in the hope of reclaiming the Golan Heights.

When this happens, it is likely that Jerusalem and Washington will view any ambiguous emphasis on this pressure-point as just another indication of Syrian deceit. Ostensibly, much like times past, Damascus will offer war and peace simultaneously, all the while continuing its steadfast support for Palestinian militants. In contrast, however, lacking every other pressure-point and safety net that Assad has had in the past, his offers of peace will actually be sincere for the first time, if only because he has grudgingly accepted that peace is his best option.

Damascus, then, would cease to serve as the powerful glue holding the region together, but ironically, abandoning such a role will actually give Bashar *more* power to realize his regime's goals of security, stability, and perhaps even a little prosperity. But we are not at that point yet. Despite the precarious nature of the Syrian/Iranian alliance, Damascus is savoring the moment.

And when the moment passes, Jerusalem and Washington must read between the lines and recognize the subtlety required to navigate Middle East politics. Only then could the West mold a new geopolitical balance of power in the region.

- 1 Eyal Zisser, "[Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?](#)" *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2003.
- 2 IPF interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- 3 Kessler, Martha. "Lebanon and Syria," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.8.3, September 2001, p.3.
- 4 Ibid, p.5.
- 5 International Crisis Group, "[Syria after Lebanon: Lebanon after Syria](#)," *Middle East Report*, April 2005, p.8. Between 1990 and 1995, an estimated one million Syrians had regular work in Lebanon. And as recently as April, 2005, Syrian businessmen had more than \$7 billion in assets in Lebanese banks—all of which generated large profits from high interest rates, typical in corrupt and war-torn regions.
- 6 Between April 1983 and November 1986, there were 36 Hezbollah suicide bombings, mostly targeting Israel and its Southern Lebanon Army; see Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, 2005, p. 129-39 and Appendix I.
- 7 Eyal Zisser, "[Syria and the Question of WMD](#)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.8.3, September 2004.
- 8 Ibid; see also *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 13, 2007.
- 9 See *Yedioth Ahronot*, September 15, 2002; and *as-Safir*, February 17, 2002. "We know that Israel has superiority in several military areas, but we have the capacity for firm resistance...and he should know that the damage we can cause the enemy is greater than the damage he can cause us."
- 10 Whether true or false, Bashar has indicated that he would happily give up his WMD program if all his neighbors did the same. See *Economist*, "So Lonely," January 8, 2004.
- 11 Estimates of Syrian aid from Gulf countries following the Gulf War fall between \$2-3 billion per year. See Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*, London Books, 2001, p.190-91.
- 12 Martin Peretz, "Syria," *The New Republic*, December 5, 2006; see also, Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2004, p.48-9.
- 13 Syrian oil exports peaked in 1996 at 590,000 barrels per day, and now produce closer to 450,000 bpd. By 2000, oil accounted for 70 percent of Syria's exports and half of government revenue. See Alexander's Gas & Oil Connection, <http://www.gasandoil.com/GOC/news/ntm54514.htm>. See also, "Syria's Economy: Prospects for Peace, Aid and Market Reform," Washington Institute, *Special Report*, January 31, 2000.
- 14 The quintessentially understated *Economist* went so far as to call him a "remarkably inept dictator," See "Converting Damascus", October 27, 2005.
- 15 International Crisis Group, "[Syria under Bashar \(II\): Domestic Policy Challenges](#)," *Middle East Report*, February 11, 2004, p.5.
- 16 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "[Reform in Syria: Steering between the Chinese Model and Regime Change](#)," Carnegie Papers: Middle East Series, p.4.
- 17 Ibid, p.4.
- 18 Eyal Zisser, "[Appearance and Reality: Syria's Decision-Making Structure](#)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.2.2, May, 1998.
- 19 For an articulate and moving account of this massacre, see Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Doubleday, 1989, p.76-105.
- 20 In an honest and frightening fashion, Hafez once assured Dennis Ross, President Clinton's chief Middle East negotiator, that Syria's opposition would never undermine any hint of a deal brokered between Syria and Israel because doing so "would hurt Syria's national interest, and all Syrians know what the consequences are for hurting Syria's national interest." *The Missing Peace*, p.113.
- 21 "Reform in Syria," Carnegie Endowment, p.4.
- 22 Bashar's Inaugural Address, *Al-Thawra*, July 17, 2000.
- 23 "The Search for Syrian Liberals," *The New Republic*, May 5, 2003; *As-Safir*, September 27, 2000.
- 24 Zisser, "Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?" See fn 1.
- 25 Abdel Halim Khaddam, Syria's then-Vice President, colorfully justified the law and scolded its critics: "Freedom is a relative concept. No citizen anywhere has the right to endanger the foundations of his society. Do the intellectuals really want people to fight one another? We will not allow you to turn Syria into another Algeria," a reference to the Algerian revolution in which more than a million Muslims died fighting for Algerian independence from French colonizers and their Algerian supporters. The rhetorical foundation for this revolt was Islam, and this law was aimed directly at Syria's Sunni population; see *al-Hayat*, February 19, 2001; quoted from www.memri.org.
- 26 See "Converting Damascus," *Economist*, October 27, 2005.
- 27 ICG, "Syria under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges," p.5.
- 28 *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 25, 2002.
- 29 "Reform in Syria," Carnegie Endowment, p.7.
- 30 This assassination attempt was the primary catalyst for Hafez' campaign to permanently debilitate the Muslim Brotherhood, beginning with the passage of a law making membership in the Brotherhood a capital offense (still in place today), and culminating with the massacre at Hama in 1982. See fn 19.
- 31 Michael Jacobson, "[An Islamist Syria is Not Very Probable](#)," *Daily Star*, April 29, 2005.
- 32 See *New York Times*, October 23, 2003; *al-Hayat*, January 13, 2006.
- 33 Allawite Islam is technically a sect of Shiism (most prevalent in Iran), but in many ways, the actual practice of Alawite Islam resembles traditional Shiite and Sunni Islam—which puts the Assad dynasty in the peculiar position of being the enemy and ally of both Shiites and Sunnis, depending on the context. Remarkably, this balance is rather fitting for Bashar (and his father before him), who have learned to appreciate their position for its indulgence of raw opportunism.

34 “The Search for Syrian Liberals,” *The New Republic*, May 5, 2003.

35 For an excellent analysis of the ‘safety-valve theory,’ which suggests that minor conflict serves as a harmless outlet for aggression that would otherwise explode after prolonged periods of repression, see Lewis Cozer, [The Functions of Social Conflict](#), Free Press: New York, 1956, p.39-48

36 *an-Nahar*, September 18, 2006.

37 Michael Jacobson, “An Islamist Syria is Not Very Probable,” *Daily Star*, April 29, 2005.

38 Former Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam, quoted in *Ynet News*, September 9, 2006. It is important to note a potential for bias, however, as Khaddam has fallen out of favor with Bashar, despite their shared penchant for inflammatory statements.

39 “Reform in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment, p.4.

40 International Crisis Group, “[Syria Under Bashar \(I\): Foreign Policy Challenges](#),” *Middle East Report*, p.3.

41 “[Freedom at War with Fear](#)” Speech, September 20, 2001.

42 See Seymour Hersh, “The Syrian Bet,” *New Yorker*, July 28, 2003; also *Washington Post*, July 25, 2002.

43 Lawrence Wright, [The Looming Tower: al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11](#), Alfred Knopf, 2006, p.123-5.

44 While Washington complained that Syrian intelligence on al-Qaeda was “drying up,” Damascus insisted that its intelligence services had provided all the leads it possessed. In light of the above analysis of al-Qaeda targets, there seems little reason to think that Syria would withhold information about jihadists that are almost as threatening to Syria as to the US. See ICG, “Syria Under Bashar (Foreign Policy),” p.8.

45 See Matthew Levitt, “Syria and the War on Terrorism,” [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), Washington Institute, *Policy Watch*, #595.

46 Matthew Levitt, “[World Should Confront Terrorist Haven of Syria](#),” *Baltimore Sun*, November 25, 2002. Numerous phone calls and emails were traced between PIJ leadership in Damascus, for instance, and PIJ recruits, even in the midst of gun battles in Jenin.

47 *Economist*, October 10, 2003.

48 *Daily Star*, October 6, 2003.

49 *Associated Press*, October 7, 2003.

50 Thomas Ricks, [Fiasco](#), Penguin Press, 2006, p.149-202; in the fall of 2003, Pentagon estimates put the number of daily attacks against coalition forces between 35-40. For more similar statistics, see www.defenselink.mil.

51 [Fiasco](#), p.170

52 Eyal Zisser, “[Syria, the United States, and Iraq: two years after the downfall of Saddam Hussein](#),” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.9.3, September 2005.

53 Among the supplies and weaponry were night vision goggles, tank engines, anti-aircraft cannons, MiG 29 engines, and spare parts for other jets, trucks and radar systems. See *Haaretz*, July 15, 2002; see also Claude Salhani, “The Syria Accountability Act,” *Cato Policy Analysis*.

54 ICG, “Syria Under Bashar (Foreign Policy),” p.17.

55 *as-Safir*, July 19, 2004; *al-Hayat*, July 26, 2004; *AFP*, January 27, 2004; [Fiasco](#), p.191

56 Zisser, “Syria, the United States and Iraq.”

57 Michael Ledeen, “Political Attack can remove Terror Masters in Syria and Iran,” *On the Issues*, American Enterprise Institute, May 2003.

58 Claude Salhani, “[The Syria Accountability Act and the Wrong Road to Damascus](#),” *CATO Policy Analysis*, March 2004.

59 In part, the answer to this question remains murky because US forces never made a serious attempt to monitor Iraq’s borders during the first year of the insurgency, at which point much of the damage had already been done. See [Fiasco](#), p.147.

60 Interview with Assad, *al-Jazeera TV*, January 2005, quoted in Zisser, “Syria, the US and Iraq.”

61 See, for instance, *Associated Press*, November 19, 2006.

62 Stephen Zunes, “US Policy Towards Syria,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol.11.1, Spring 2004, p.52. Syrian trade with the US prior to SALSAs was virtually negligible, which makes SALSAs more symbolic than anything else. But the real financial leverage that Washington could (and did) hold over Damascus rested with the total end of trade between Syria and Iraq (run by the American Coalition Provision Authority in Iraq). Strangely, however, trading between Iraq and Syria resumed at full force in December 2003, the same time that SALSAs was signed into law. It was argued by the occupying leadership in Iraq that the CPA could not afford to further isolate Iraqis and Syrians by using their livelihoods as bargaining chips with Syria.

63 [Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act](#). Section 4 (Paragraph 5),

64 See fn 12.

65 [State of the Union Address](#), January 20, 2004.

66 There was a similar attempt by the UN on September 2, 2004 to compel “foreign forces” (i.e., Damascus and Hezbollah) to withdraw from Lebanon, which at the time carried even less weight in Damascus than SALSAs. See [UNSCR 1559](#). Notably, this resolution was co-sponsored by the US and France.

67 “Death of a Statesman,” *Economist*, February 17, 2005.

68 Hariri sponsored and even paid for the summit meeting that resulted in the signing of the Taef Accord, which called for an end to the fighting, the disarming of Hezbollah, and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory. For reasons cited earlier, Damascus knew it could not afford abandoning its most reliable source of income, and so ignored the request to withdraw its forces.

69 Michel Young, “[Was Rafik Hariri’s assassination a Syrian hit?](#)” *Slate*, February 15, 2005.

70 International Crisis Group, “Syria after Lebanon; Lebanon after Syria,” *Middle East Report*, April 2005, p.9.

71 United Nations International Independent [Investigation Commission pursuant to UNSCR 1595](#).

72 The aggressive Arab sponsorship of the Syrian regime had lasted nearly fifteen years—dating back to the Arab purchase of Syrian

acquiescence in the first Gulf War—in large part to counter the burgeoning Shiite Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon. It was, therefore, a shock in Damascus (and a testament to the Arabs’ seriousness) that these Sunni countries would risk an empowered Iran just to punish Assad and curry favor with the West. See *AFP*, May 5, 2005; *BBC*, May 12, 2005.

73 Assuming that Damascus had a hand—or big hand—in Hariri’s murder, Bashar’s inability to anticipate such a strong global reaction is, according to countless western diplomats, a prime testament to his inexperienced and cavalier leadership.

74 [Speech to the National Defense University](#), quoted in the *New York Times*, March 9, 2005.

75 *AFP*, May 20, 2005

76 January 20, 2005; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>

77 *Washington Post*, February 24, 2005

78 See Dennis Ross, “[A Moment of Truth for Syria](#),” *USA Today*, November 9, 2005.

79 Various estimates put Syria’s yearly take in Lebanon at more than \$1 billion from heavy-handed investment in “cellphone companies, factories, hotels and even private schools” and “regime holdings in Lebanese utilities, cuts on customs duties and a purported interest in a casino.” Only weeks after Syria’s withdrawal, more than a quarter of Syria’s estimated 400,000 migrant workers in Lebanon had already returned home, preferring saturated unemployment to harassment by embittered Lebanese. *Economist*, “Sitting Tight,” April 21, 2005.

80 Ibid; by one estimate, Syria will be a net importer of oil by 2012.

81 *RFE/RL*, Iran Report, June 19, 2006; *Iranian Labor News Agency*, June 15, 2006. Further examples of this cemented Damascus-Tehran alliance are abundant: now active in Syria are hundreds of very diverse Iranian companies, where women who agree to wear Khomeini-like hijabs and men who grow Khomeini-like beards receive cash gifts and preferential treatment in getting jobs; Syria has agreed to raise the number of Iranian pilgrims visiting the Zeynabiah Shiite holy shrine near Damascus from 150 to 1,000 per day; Iranian television and radio networks, broadcasting in Arabic, are now available in every Syrian home, even though other non-Syrian Arabic-language media is banned; Syria has also lifted the ban on Shiite proselytizing, allowing hundreds of Iranian mullahs to convert Syrian Sunnis to Shiism. See Amir Taheri, “[The ‘Iranization’ of Syria](#),” *Jerusalem Post*, November 1, 2006.

82 For an outstanding and thorough analysis of the events and aftermath of this war, see “[Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizbollah War: A Preliminary Assessment](#),” by David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, *Washington Institute*, October 2006.

83 The Hezbollah death toll is contested: Hezbollah leadership claims the number is closer to 250, while the UN estimates 500, and the IDF believes that more than 700 Hezbollah fighters were killed.

84 Both soldiers were injured—perhaps severely—in their kidnapping. *Telegraph* (UK), August 12, 2006.

85 *Reuters*, February 8, 2007; *Iranian Student’s News Agency* (ISNA), August 8, 2006 and October 13, 2006; “The Islamic Republic of Iran has no limitations in transferring its experiences in all fields to the people’s government of Palestine,” Ahmadinejad said.

86 Bashar al-Assad, quoted by *ISNA*, February 17, 2007.

87 Rami Khouri, prominent Lebanese political analyst, IPF interview with author, February 10, 2007.

88 International Crisis Group, “[Arab Israeli Conflict: To Reach a Lasting Conflict](#),” *Middle East Report*, October 2006, p.11.

89 *Haaretz*, December 17-18, 2006.

90 *Haaretz*, February 23, 2007.

91 *Haaretz*, February 19, 2007.

92 *Haaretz*, February 23, 2007. The UNIFIL forces lack a mandate to monitor Syria’s border with Lebanon, and because they are relegated to the south of Lebanon—where most of last summer’s war took place—Hezbollah has been resupplying unhindered in the area just north of the UN’s buffer zone, and is still able to target Israel with Iranian rockets that could merely fly over the UN forces.

93 For excellent reporting on the Shiite attempts to ouster the current Sunni, American-supported minority leadership in Lebanon, see Anthony Shadid’s coverage in the *Washington Post*, especially in January 2007.