

Understanding Syria:

Decisionmaking in the Assad Regime

Jul 2, 1996



Brief Analysis

Hafez al-Assad's decision to join the peace process in 1991 was perhaps one of the most difficult decisions of his entire political career. Many analysts do not see this as a strategic decision, however it does reflect a major change in Assad's policy toward Israel. The mere fact that Assad finally accepted talks indicated his willingness to consider the option of peace with Israel not necessarily to make peace, but to consider the idea of peace.

Regardless of the benefits to Syria's national interest of participating at Madrid, heavy U.S. pressure was necessary to persuade Assad to join the process. Secretary of State James Baker, who was the key actor in compelling Assad to take this decision, noted in his memoirs Assad's concern for domestic public opinion, but he dismissed it as posturing by an all-powerful, authoritarian leader. In contrast, when Henry Kissinger negotiated with Assad twenty years earlier, he recognized and appreciated the important role domestic constraints played for the Syrian regime. Although Kissinger met a younger and less experienced Assad than did Baker, it remains true that even a dictator is constrained by his domestic politics. Assad's Regime It is undeniable that Assad runs a brutal, dictatorial regime. Yet Assad's rule is far more complex: it is a familial regime, given the role Assad's family members have played; a sectarian regime, with its Alawite roots; a military regime, because of its rise to power as a result of a military coup; and an ideological regime, with its strong commitment to Ba'thist ideology as a source of inspiration and legitimacy.

Most importantly, Assad controls a representative regime, one that has always reflected the majority of the Syrian population. Specifically, Assad's regime draws on the active and passive support of 70 percent of the population: the Alawite community (12 percent of the population); the other Christian, Druze, and Kurdish minorities (28 percent); and rural Sunnis (30 percent), all of whom were denied access to power by the dominant urban Sunni elite during the period before 1970.

The social order of the Syrian population is reflected in both the formal institutions of the Syrian regime (the state government and People's Assembly), as well as the informal ruling systems (the security and military forces). In the formal system, the sectors are represented according to their actual percentage in the population in other words, 60 percent of the population is Sunni, thus 60 percent of the People's Assembly is Sunni. Yet informally, Assad's security and military leaders represent the real balance of power, in which the Alawites form the strongest element and therefore monopolize these positions of power.

The Syrian Elite Assad's inner circle, where strategic decisions are made, has four components: the Assad family, his intimate friends, the Alawite barons, and technocratic/administrative advisers, including Muhammad Da'bul and Asa'd Kamil Elyas. The Assad family is divided into three generations: his brothers, his other relatives, and his three sons, Basil, Bashar, and Mahir. The brothers were most influential until 1985; the relatives until 1990; and the sons in the period since 1990, when Assad has actively been grooming his successor. After the death of his eldest son, Basil, in 1994, Assad has focused his efforts on grooming Bashar. Like Basil, Bashar is more open to the West and may have some influence on his father in this area, yet for the most part his development will be a slow and gradual

process.

Assad's intimate friends (notably Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Mustafa Talas, Hikmat Shihabi, Muhammad al-Zu'bi, Rau'f al-Kasm, and Abdallah al-Ahmar) have been his political partners for the past thirty or more years. With the exception of Shihabi, a native of Aleppo, they are all rural Sunnis and thus represent the non-elite and other minorities that support Assad's rule. Trained as either army commanders or leaders of the Ba'th party, the members of the inner circle all have a similar political orientation and ideological commitment. With such similarities in background, this circle does not conduct debates or discussions. Rather, it provides Assad with a certain legitimacy and support.

The traditionally divided Alawite community supports the Assad regime because he has been able to forge an Alawite coalition over which he maintains authority. Although this community has not had a significant impact on actual decision-making under Assad, it will have a say on the future leader of the regime. **The Decision-Making Process** The actual process of decision-making in Syria reflects Assad's nature as a passive leader. Throughout his political career, he has refrained from taking bold initiatives. He feels that delaying a decision for as long as possible, or until forced to make it, is the best policy. (Ironically, this is reminiscent of Yitzhak Shamir who once said that not making a decision was actually a decision in itself.) Assad's indecision is perhaps the result of his difficulty understanding and processing the implications of regional and global events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Although Assad is pragmatic, his ideological inclinations do not allow him to cross certain red lines. For example, before 1991, Assad's policy toward Israel was a combination of caution, which required him to keep the Israel-Syria border quiet, and ideology, specifically "Arabism," which precluded any negotiations with Jerusalem. In 1991, after finally grasping the momentous changes in the international system, Assad agreed to engage the Israelis. Yet despite four and a half years of talks, Assad seems unable to move beyond his long-held ideological convictions and conclude a peace treaty with Israel.

The Arab Summit Many pundits are claiming Assad as the big winner of the recent Arab summit. In fact, however, Assad paid a lot for his diplomatic gains in Cairo. By attending the summit, Assad provided Yasser Arafat and King Hussein with legitimacy for their own relations with Israel. His presence could even be interpreted as a concession to the peace process. Traveling to Cairo for the summit resulted from Assad's insecurity with the current situation, including the recent bombings in Syria and the State Department warnings regarding these bombs, as well as the results of the Israeli elections. Syrian enthusiasm for the summit reflects Damascus' bid to mobilize support for the regime and ensure Syria's security, yet the effort fell short of Assad's goals. The final communiqué relates mostly to the Palestinian track with scant attention to the Israel-Syria negotiations.

Relations with Israel Most likely, Assad will be happy to resume negotiations with Israel and the Netanyahu government. For years Assad has seen no real difference between Labor and Likud, and with Netanyahu he need not fear the development of a "new Middle East," a Labor concept which Assad perceived as a threat. Also, when Damascus is involved in a dialogue, Assad considers himself protected from any Israeli or American military pressures. And if the negotiations collapse, Assad believes Israel will likely be blamed for this failure.

From the perspective of the new government in Israel, however, dialogue with Syria is not possible while Israel faces terrorist attacks from the Syrian and Iranian backed Hezbollah. Assad likely believes that this change in Israel's position may lead to an escalation of activity in Southern Lebanon.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Rossman.

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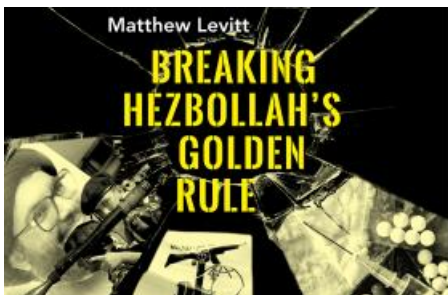
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