

Damascus Courts the West:

Syrian Politics, 1989-1991

Sep 1, 1991



In-Depth Reports

The Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad has in the past year seemed to change direction, first with tentative moves toward liberalization, then by siding with the American-led coalition that fought against Saddam Hussein and, perhaps most dramatically, by acceding to America's wish to attend a peace conference with Israel. There is no doubt that U.S.-Syrian relations have greatly improved in the process. The meaning of that shift, however, is far from certain. How should America respond to Assad's new course? Should he be accepted as a partner in U.S. regional efforts, or perhaps the U.S. should take advantage of this moment to pressure him into altering his regime? With regard to Israel, has Assad undergone a change of heart, or has he made tactical adjustments in a moment of weakness?

To answer these questions, Daniel Pipes presents a survey of Syria in the tumultuous period between the Berlin Wall's collapse in November 1989 and summer 1991. He places Assad's current actions in the context of the challenges he faced as a result losing Soviet patronage and Mikhail Gorbachev's steady disengagement from regional clients and issues. Pipes argues that Assad's new policy direction opens up new opportunities—yet generates new uncertainties for the West. Notwithstanding his present cooperativeness, Assad is still a cunning authoritarian leader and Western policymakers would do well to tread with caution in dealing with him.

- 4 pages

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