

## Can the al-Asad Regime Make Peace with Israel?

by [J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](#)

Apr 21, 2009

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](#)

J. Scott Carpenter is an adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



### Brief Analysis

U.S. and European observers believe that Israel's new government will seek peace with Damascus in an attempt to pry the Syrian regime away from Tehran. Pursuing the Syrian track would also give the Obama administration an outlet for its peacemaking energies, given the ongoing dysfunction of Palestinian politics. Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, however, poured cold water on such prospects at the Arab League Summit in Doha, calling efforts toward peace with Israel "useless." Rhetoric notwithstanding, advocates of the Syrian track hope an isolated and economically desperate Damascus will grasp the olive branch, ushering in a strategic regional realignment and a period of relative stability. Although these are laudable objectives, such a peace with Syria remains highly unlikely for a fundamental reason: without Israel as an enemy, Syria's minority regime loses its sole rationale for retaining power.

### Background

Syrian politics began its current trajectory in 1948, when Damascus, along with its Arab allies, sought to smother the newborn Israeli state in its cradle. The Syrian army's defeat led ultimately to a successful Baathist coup on March 8, 1963, and, following another stinging military loss in 1967, the consolidation of Hafiz al-Asad's power in November 1970.

From the beginning, al-Asad's struggle for power relied heavily on loyal Alawite officers scattered throughout the military and security apparatus. Even today, Alawites, who comprise only 12 percent of the population, remain the backbone of the Baathist regime. Within this minority, the al-Asad clan has benefited disproportionately, especially since the death of Hafiz. Today, a small clique around President Bashar al-Asad controls nearly all levers of political power and has outsized influence over the economy.

To maintain this minority dominance, the Baathist regime imposed a state of emergency forty-six years ago, providing the state a vast array of tools to monitor all social communication and to restrict individual freedoms of expression and association. Since its proclamation, the State of Emergency Law of 1962 has been used as the prime justification for authoritarian practices and, as a consequence, the perpetuation of the al-Asad regime. Examples abound.

### Hama

In 1982, militant members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama challenged the legitimacy of the regime and were brutally crushed. According to Amnesty International, three weeks of shelling killed between 10,000 and 25,000 people. The emergency law provided the legal fig leaf for the government's actions, which included torture, mass executions, the reported use of poison gas, and other horrendous human rights abuses. As Hafiz indicated in a radio address on March 7, 1982, "Death a thousand times to the hired Muslim Brothers, who linked themselves with the enemies of the homeland and who were employed by the imperialist, Zionist, and reactionary enemies." After the Hama massacre, anyone who dared oppose the regime was labeled a traitor to or enemy of the state -- one that remained at war with Israel.

### Damascus Spring

Shortly after the death of his father, Bashar became president in June 2000. With weaker ties to the Alawite heartland, a British education, and a Sunni wife, Bashar professed a desire to liberalize Syrian society, and for a short time, pluralism was tolerated and intellectuals and reformers dared to hope for change. This so-called Damascus Spring proved short-lived, however, coming to an end in 2001 when the Alawite-dominated security clique realized that the inexperienced president's policy of openness could imperil the regime's continued existence and their own dominance within it.

The first sign of reversal came with the arrest of dissidents and forcible closure of intellectual salons and forums. Most recently, the Atassi Forum was prohibited after a member read a statement from Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanuni, the leader of the UK Muslim Brotherhood, crossing one of the government's clear redlines. Again, the emergency law provided public justification for the crackdown.

#### Damascus Declaration

In the fall of 2005, a group of political parties and intellectuals came together to issue the Damascus Declaration. Among its demands were the suspension of the emergency law and the "adoption of democracy as a modern system." This was perceived as a threat, however meager, to Bashar's regime, which responded predictably. It moved quickly to criminalize the Damascus Declaration movement and sentenced many of its signatories, including its leader Riad Saif, to harsh prison sentences on charges of "weakening national sentiment" and "spreading false or exaggerated news that would affect the morale of the country."

#### Current Trends

Such legal tactics have justified routine human rights abuses. Today, freedom within Syria has been sharply curtailed even as Bashar's base of support has shrunk. Freedom House lists Syria as "not free" and indicates a decline in standing from 2007 "because of a renewed crackdown on members of the democratic opposition." The large Kurdish minority are barely treated as citizens and the majority Sunnis are barred from many high-level positions. Anyone who speaks out is quickly detained or imprisoned.

In defending its human rights record in 2006 before the UN Human Rights Council, the Syrian government rationalized its retention of the emergency law by pointing to "an imminent threat to the country's integrity," adding:

"...This state of affairs, namely, a real threat of war, Israel's continued occupation of part of the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, and the real threat of expansion of the occupation, all in violation of United Nations resolutions, created an exceptional situation requiring the rapid and extraordinary mobilization of Syrian forces and efforts to enable the Administration to act quickly to deal with these imminent threats in accordance with the Constitution and laws in force in the Syrian Arab Republic. It was therefore necessary to promulgate the Act and maintain it in force."

It follows that ending the "threat of war" by making peace with Israel would eliminate the need to maintain the law in force, something the regime will clearly be loath to do. Some may argue that Egypt has managed to retain its emergency law after securing a cold peace with Israel, but the legitimacy of the respective regimes cannot be compared. The Mubarak regime, whatever its source of legitimacy, is not based on the narrow support of a sectarian minority within his country. Nor does Egypt rely on surrogates like Hamas or Hizballah to carry out facets of its foreign policy. The stakes are quite different for the two countries; Bashar's Syria needs Israel as an enemy.

#### Conclusion

Since the threat from Israel has been the essential and necessary myth for retaining the authoritarian grip of the Alawite minority in Damascus, losing it would eliminate the al-Asad regime's *raison d'etre*. For this reason, in any successful U.S.-brokered negotiation with Israel, Damascus would likely require guarantees from the United States to ease its pressure on the regime and perhaps give the nod to Syria's reasserted control over Lebanon. Doing so, however, would be highly problematic in Washington and would send the worst possible message to those in the region, especially the Lebanese who are struggling to free themselves from their own autocrats. Sacrificing human rights in pursuit of a possible peace deal may seem an acceptable trade-off to some, but given the ruling clique's view that peace and regime preservation are zero-sum options, to seek a peace agreement is to chase a mirage.

J. Scott Carpenter is Keston Family fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of its [Project Fikra](#) ([/template102.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms](#))



Policy #1508

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)