

Bashar's Bad Judgement

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Sep 19, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

On September 6, Israeli planes bombed a presumed North Korean-supplied Syrian nuclear weapons facility. The incident highlights an ongoing theme in regional politics in recent years: Syrian President Bashar Asad's profoundly poor judgment.

Policies pursued by the Asad regime, particularly since 2003 -- from Iraq, to Lebanon, to the Palestinian Authority -- have been highly provocative. Syria under Bashar has actively worked to undermine stability in four of five neighboring countries. And now, revelations about the Syrian nuclear program threaten to ignite a war with Israel.

The Syrian president's judgment issues are not particularly surprising. After all, Bashar was never intended to rule Syria. His father, longtime Syrian dictator Hafiz Asad, only chose him following the death of Bashar's older brother Basil. Ill-prepared for the job, Bashar was hastily trained. He joined the Syrian army in 1994 and was awarded the rank of Colonel in just 5 years -- an achievement that usually takes 20. When he eventually succeeded his father Hafiz in 2000, the title "president for life" conferred neither his father's experience nor his judgment.

In just seven years in power, Bashar has provoked the enmity of all of Syria's neighbors, save Islamist-led Turkey, as well as much of Europe and the United States. This dubious accomplishment was largely achieved due to gratuitous policies like providing Saddam with military materiel on the eve of the U.S. invasion. Bashar also managed to alienate longtime friend Saudi Arabia. Earlier this month, the Saudis evacuated their ambassador to Beirut after learning of a Syrian-directed assassination plot.

Thanks to Bashar, the Asad regime, which comfortably dominated Syria for 30 years, also faces an existential threat from the United Nations-mandated international court prosecuting the murderers of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. UN investigators have already hinted that senior officials in Bashar's regime will be implicated in the crime. This development could shake the foundations of the regime.

While Bashar and his ruling Alawite clique retain hold on power, Syria's regional and international position has declined dramatically under his leadership. This has occurred not because Bashar departed from the problematic policies of his father, but rather, because these policies have been pursued without regard to changing regional and international dynamics. Hafiz Asad was no panacea, but he was cautious. His son Bashar is reckless.

The most pronounced change concerns Syria's relationship with Iran. An Arab Nationalist, Hafiz nevertheless allied with (Persian) Tehran, but relied on the former Soviet Union as his military patron. Since assuming power, Bashar has enhanced relations with Iran, particularly in the military sphere. Not only has Tehran reportedly absorbed much of Damascus' debt to Russia, Iranian Revolutionary Guards are said to be stationed in Syria providing training. Bashar's Syria has become a client to the Iranian patron.

Under Hafiz, Syria quietly supported Hamas, providing safehaven to the Palestinian terrorist group. Bashar improved these ties, as well, discarding the longstanding fiction that Hamas' Damascus offices were merely "information" offices. In 2006, in an unprecedented development, Syria allowed Hamas leaders to claim responsibility for the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from the group's Damascus office. The next week, Israel sent planes to buzz Bashar's summer palace in Latakia.

Syria's relations with Hezbollah have transformed too. Hafiz Asad saw Hezbollah as a cudgel to wield against Israel and seldom met with Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Bashar seems to harbor a genuine admiration for the "resistance" organization, meeting with Nasrallah on nearly a dozen occasions. This shift in perception has translated to a closer operational relationship. Syria had always served as a key node for the transshipment of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah. Now, under Bashar, Syria provides its own top-shelf Russian made and locally produced weapons to the Shiite terrorist organization, inviting Israeli direct action.

And finally, there is the relationship with North Korea. Syria had been trucking with North Korea for some time, receiving technical assistance from Pyongyang on its missile and chemical weapons programs, drawing little international attention or sanction. But as with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iraq, Bashar apparently went too far.

Although an armistice was signed in 1974, Syria and Israel technically remain at war. For decades, Syria has continued the war against Israel via proxies. Despite this, the disputed territory of the Golan -- which Israel occupied in 1967 and annexed in 1981 -- continues to be Israel's quietest border. All this could change, however, if the Asad regime feels compelled to respond militarily, either out of pride or to silence its critics.

No doubt, the Israeli attack was an embarrassment to the Asad regime. Now Syrian officials are ominously warning that they will "choose the place and the hour" of their response. Should Bashar decide to retaliate, the consequences will be disastrous for Syria. Hoping to salvage North Korean talks and a moribund Middle East peace process, Washington is hoping that Damascus will shun reprisals and downplay the incident. Regrettably, given his penchant for bad judgment, odds are high that Bashar will make yet another poor choice.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. ❖

Weekly Standard Online

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 \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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