

Syria Poised to Assert Itself

Dec 28, 2006



Articles & Testimony

Hafez el Assad, the father of Syrian President Bashar Assad, established Syria's primacy in the Levant and transformed a country ravaged by nearly 30 coups in 24 years into a country led by one leader for nearly 30.

The elder Assad made sure that Syria manipulated events in the Middle East, and not the other way around. Seeking greater influence outside his borders, he succeeded in bringing Lebanon under his heel and made Syria a main patron of the Palestinian cause. Intervention in the latter became so pronounced that Patrick Seale, Hafez el Assad's biographer, remarked that Mr. Assad believed "the Palestinian problem was too important to be left to the Palestinians."

Although Bashar Assad does not possess the same state-building skills as his father, the American quagmire in Iraq, Syria's strong ties to rising power Iran and Damascus' support of Palestinian terrorist groups have all recently converged to offer Mr. Assad his first real opportunity to manipulate Middle Eastern affairs on a grand scale.

With Washington and Jerusalem shutting their doors to dialogue, Mr. Assad is forging his own way ahead in Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States and Israel think Syria will be a regional "spoiler," but neither country is offering enough or threatening enough to make Syria a "helper." Instead, they continue to offer little more than tough talk.

Over the past few weeks, Syria has woken up to its two most pressing problems: the continuing deluge of Iraqi refugees and a dire economic crisis. While President Bush has refused to answer any telephone calls from the Presidential Palace in Damascus, Syria has gone ahead and reopened its embassy in Baghdad and begun a series of bilateral agreements with Iraq on migration and border control. Syria's resources to deal with its 800,000 (and growing) Iraqi refugees are stretched to the breaking point, and this problem is more important for it to address than the international community's wish that Syria stop the 150 foreign fighters who cross each month into Iraq from Syria's eastern border.

Syria is also keen on stabilizing this border in order to restart the Syrian-Iraqi oil pipeline. In the 1990s, oil discoveries in eastern Syria fueled Syria's economy, accounting for more than 50 percent of exports. No new major oil discoveries have been made in the past 10 years, but Syria has continued its dependence on oil income. From 2000 until the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria illegally imported discounted crude from Iraq for its domestic needs, while exporting its own oil on the international market. By 2009, Syria could become a net importer of oil. With oil production decreasing and an economy slow to reform, the country is headed for an economic crisis.

Saving Syria, of course, is Iran, which has invested many millions of dollars in the country. This financial assistance and Iran's growing influence in the Gulf have changed a previously balanced relationship to more of a patron-client arrangement.

Syrian-Iranian ties have also changed Syria's sphere of influence in Lebanon. While Hezbollah vies for greater influence in government, and the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri drags on, it is unclear whether Syria will regain the supreme hegemony it once had in Lebanon unless the

Lebanese government buckles under the pressure of Hezbollah, which is unlikely.

What is clear is that Syria still plays a dominant role in Palestinian politics. With Hamas leader Khaled Meshal ensconced in Damascus, Mr. Assad is a welcoming host, allowing his guest to be the main arbiter in the formation of any viable Palestinian government. This is most crucial for the future role Syria can play on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Although Syrian influence in Lebanon may never be what it once was, Damascus - with its influence over Hamas and Hezbollah - continues to be the key to the settlement of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors and the formation of a Palestinian state. Mr. Assad has indicated a willingness to conduct peace negotiations with Israel without preconditions, but the full return of the Golan Heights has been and always will be the price of Israeli-Syrian peace. At this point, such a return seems unlikely as Syria talks about both peace and war while Israel issues more construction permits in the Golan.

Like any other country, Syria does what is in its best interests. The crisis in Iraq affords Syria the opportunity to lurch forward in dealing with its economic and refugee problems, and it will use this progress as leverage against other states. While it vigorously protects key Palestinian leaders, Damascus' strong ties with Iran insulate Syria from Israeli military action. Without official Israeli or American interest in engagement, Syria continues to solidify an axis that grows increasingly impenetrable.

Mr. Assad's father would be proud.

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. His e-mail is swikas@washingtoninstitute.org. ❖

Baltimore Sun

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 \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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