

# Bashar al-Asad's Fateful Speech: A Policy of Inconsistency and Paranoia

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## Brief Analysis

**W**ith international pressure rising for a full and speedy Syrian troop withdrawal from Lebanon, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad responded with a speech to his nation's rubber-stamp parliament on Saturday, March 5, that was a blend of defiance and conciliation, leavened with inconsistency and paranoia. If one of Asad's tasks was to soothe fears among the Syrian elite about his strength, vision, and leadership, the young president's address almost surely fueled concern about his stewardship of the country.

### Centrality and Weakness

Like a B-movie actor convinced that there is no such thing as bad publicity, Asad opened his speech by trying to convince his audience that Syrian interests have been well-served by Damascus's centrality to current global events: "The most prominent issues that have preoccupied the world, [the issues that have] become part of the plans of great powers and [have] shaped their political objectives, go through Syria, directly or indirectly, whether it is the Middle East peace process, terrorism, the question of Iraq or the ramifications of the situation in Lebanon." The fact that Syria's problematic behavior on all fronts has produced the unique triple feat of uniting Paris and Washington, prompting a UN Security Council resolution, and triggering an unprecedented multiparty Lebanese coalition against Syria's military presence does not seem to have fazed him. But even in Asad's own description, it is unclear whether this centrality emerges from weakness or strength. During his discussion of Iraq, for example, Asad offered the stunning admission that "we have to distinguish our desire for cooperation and our capacity to cooperate. Having the desire does not mean that we have the capabilities." It is difficult to imagine his father, the late Hafiz, so openly admitting national inadequacy.

### Contradiction on Israel

Before addressing the Lebanese issue, Asad veered into a classic, Soviet-style discourse on the missing "objective criteria" for progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. "What is lacking today is the will of the Israelis; the will of the sponsor, the United States; and also the standards and criteria. So the peace process is stalled for the foreseeable future," he noted. But then he offered an explanation for the lack of progress with Israel that was itself riddled with contradiction. Israel, he said, "has been proposing that we should go back to the negotiations without any

preconditions," but in reality Israel has "put the condition of going back to square one," i.e., that the current Israeli government should not be bound by any progress, understandings, or partial agreements reached in prior talks under previous governments. For his part, Asad summed up Syria's position as follows: "We talked about resuming negotiations from the point they had stopped. They [the Israelis] want to go back to square one." However, Asad then offered this formulation, which seems to mirror the Israeli position: "We stress that we are prepared for negotiations without any preconditions in accordance with the Madrid terms of reference. In other words, we resume from the point we stopped at in the early 1990s." Asad has been quoted by various interlocutors in recent months to the effect that he was ready for negotiations with Israel without preconditions; no one listening to this speech, however, could be sure of what his policy really is.

#### Missed Opportunity on Palestinians

If Asad lost one opportunity to clarify his views on Syria-Israel peace talks, he lost another by not joining the inter-Arab consensus in support of new Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and the potential for progress toward a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Asad devoted just one, brief sentence to the Palestinian issue: "As far as the Palestinian question is concerned, we stress the importance of national unity through enabling the Palestinians to regain their national rights within a comprehensive solution." This was, in effect, a restating of traditional Baathist policy that holds progress on the Palestinian front hostage to progress on all Arab fronts, without any suggestion of support for Abbas or the latter's call for a solely peaceful effort to resolve the conflict with Israel. Indeed, Bashar did not even try to offer the traditional Syrian explanation for providing safe haven to Palestinian terrorist organizations -- i.e., that they are only media offices -- and instead endorsed fringe conspiracy theories by referring to "the assassination of [Yasser] Arafat."

#### Flip-Flopping on UNSCR 1559

Asad's position on UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559 was, like his policy on Israel, contradictory and confused. Even after spending nearly half his speech on the topic, it is difficult to tell whether he accepts UNSCR 1559 and agrees, even in principle, to implement its terms. It is clear that his proposed solution meets neither the spirit nor the letter of the resolution.

The case against UNSCR 1559, said Asad, is that it "was passed in violation of the UN Charter; and it was selective. It was not upon the request of the concerned countries. But since we live in a world without law or justice, to talk about this is a waste of time." Syria, one should recall, served as a member of the Security Council in 2001-2002 and, as such, played a central role in the "world without law or justice." Also, UNSCR 1559 passed with the acquiescence of one Arab state (Algeria) and of Syria's traditional superpower patron (Russia). Perhaps for those reasons, Asad was forced to admit that "Syria cannot, under any circumstances, oppose or confront the United Nations." Hence, after denouncing UNSCR 1559 as illegitimate and illegal, he then said, "We support 1559; and we supported withdrawal a long time ago."

Asad tried to square this circle with reference to the fifteen-year-old Taif Accord: "The difference between 1559 and the Taif Accord is that the Taif Accord has a mechanism while 1559 does not provide for a mechanism. They only said withdrawal, and every state in the world is interpreting it as it wishes. . . . So, we believe in systematic and gradual withdrawal in cooperation and coordination with Lebanese institutions." Unfortunately, Asad's terms -- "systematic and gradual" -- fall considerably short of the specific call in UNSCR 1559 for all parties to fulfill their respective responsibilities, including on withdrawal, "fully and urgently." Although Asad characterized his plan for a phased withdrawal -- first to the Beqaa Valley and then to the Syria-Lebanon border (without indicating which side of the border) -- as steps that would "implement the requirements of 1559," they do nothing of the sort.

#### Paranoia, Intimidation, Defiance

Evidently believing that he had addressed the withdrawal aspect of UNSCR 1559, Asad then turned to the major threat posed by the resolution, which was, he said, a "hidden provision in the uses of 1559." According to Asad, the Security Council resolution masked a secret plot to settle Palestinian refugees in Lebanon which, he said, was the source of some nefarious "momentum for the Palestinian track." Lest there be any doubt about the depth of his commitment to conspiracy theories, Asad went further: "The assassination of Arafat, the assassination of Prime Minister [Rafiq] Hariri, pressure on Iraq, pressure on Syria, all that creates a scene that I am sure you can understand." Few in the audience probably did.

Asad mixed this remarkable display of paranoia with a message of intimidation that no Lebanese could miss. "Syria's power and its role in Lebanon do not depend on its presence in Lebanon," he said, "because this strength has to do with the facts of geography, history, politics, culture, spiritualism, and humanity. The heart of Syria that gave Lebanon blood can't be harmed by certain wrongdoings. We, the Syrians, would continue to give Lebanon because you are the grandchildren of the Syrian Arabs." Then, in an implicit critique of Arab and international news reporting of recent events in Beirut, Asad dismissed the number of Lebanese who took to the streets as paltry, insignificant, and unrepresentative: "Notice how TV cameras usually zoom in onto a small group of people, but if they zoom out, you will discover there are not so many people supporting them."

To these two themes -- paranoia and intimidation -- Asad added a note of apocalyptic defiance. To the Lebanese, he warned that "another 17th of May is looming on the horizon," referring to the 1983 Lebanon-Israel peace accord that Syria succeeded in aborting in concert with its Lebanese allies. In a clear signal to Hizballah, he said, "I want you to be prepared to bring it [another May 17] down as you did before." (Hizballah has announced the scheduling of a mass demonstration for Tuesday. It is not clear whether this announcement reflects Asad's call, Iran's directive, Hizballah's own desire -- or perhaps all three -- to present a show of strength before the organization definitively determines its own position.)

And to the Syrian people, Asad hinted that they should prepare for confrontation with the international community, an implicit recognition that his withdrawal suggestions were unlikely to end the mounting pressure on Damascus: "Objective dialogue can solve all existing problems. All that doesn't mean that you will feel safe soon." Taking a page almost directly from the book of the once-despised, now-deposed Saddam Hussein, Bashar ended on this rousing note, combining in one sentence both the "royal we" and a magisterial third-person reference to himself: "We will tell them [Syria's critics] that we sacrifice our souls and blood for you, President Bashar. That is why, in taking such decisions, and under any condition, we base them on popular support; and when we are unified, the people and the state, we do not fear anything."

## Conclusion

No democratically elected leader could deliver the speech Asad gave and remain in power very long. He asked his people not to believe their eyes when they saw televised pictures of thousands of Lebanese demonstrators; he asked them to read "hidden" texts in a UN Security Council resolution; he asked that they accept a vast, secret conspiracy responsible for the murders of both Arafat and Hariri; and he asked that they be prepared to give up their "souls and blood" for him, after he characterized the achievement of Syria's friendless isolation as a great national triumph.

Syria, of course, is no democracy, and the country has few outlets for public disapproval of the stewardship of state -- or, for that matter, for political discontent of any sort. That such discontent exists was implicitly admitted by Asad when he specifically directed his comments to "all Syrian citizens who have feelings of frustration and disappointment towards treachery, betrayal, and lack of loyalty towards what Syria offered to Lebanon," and asked them not to believe that this reflects "the general case in Lebanon." This admission could refer to the thousands of Syrian workers reportedly streaming back to Syria from Lebanon; it could also refer to the acute embarrassment that Syrian army officers must feel as a result of recent events, including the alleged encirclement of Syrian intelligence

headquarters in Beirut by Lebanese troops. Whatever specifically prompted Asad's comments, his speech may be a turning point that prompts key constituencies inside the country -- among both rulers and the ruled -- to reconsider Syria's growing vulnerabilities and narrowing options.

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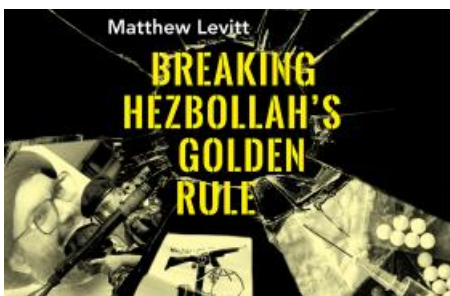
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