

When Rogues Defy Reason:

Bashar's Syria

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Articles & Testimony

Even after the extraordinary U.S.-British military display of last spring, rogue states and terrorists continue to threaten U.S. national security. While this observation may seem prosaic, the White House predicted that victory in Iraq would convince our adversaries to fall into line, i.e., moderate their ways to avoid becoming the next U.S. target.[1] It was a kind of domino theory in reverse. The original Cold War version of the domino theory held that if Vietnam went communist, the entire Asian continent would go Red. The Bush administration inverted the theory by contending that victory in Iraq would lead the rest of the Middle East to tumble in the United States' political direction.

The problem with this latest version of the domino theory is that it flatly contradicts the logic of the preemption doctrine, the cornerstone of the Bush administration's post-9/11 strategic policy.

The domino theory is at odds with the preemption doctrine on the critical question of rationality. The policy of preemption presumes that terrorist organizations and rogue states by definition frequently do not engage in logical cost-benefit calculations (and for this reason cannot be deterred by U.S. threats). The domino theory presumes the opposite: if the U.S. displays its might and resolve, its adversaries will restrain themselves and accept the pax Americana.

The war against Saddam Hussein, and the buildup that preceded it, have reinforced the logic of the preemption doctrine by highlighting that rogue states and terrorists frequently do not respond rationally to the prospect of U.S. military intervention. Saddam Hussein chose certain defeat over disarmament, even though the former also guaranteed the latter; Hizbullah and Hamas began threatening Washington in February, just as the Bush administration began to openly discuss whether these terrorist groups posed a danger to the United States.[2]

Perhaps the greatest example of irrational behavior is Syria. In marked contrast to its pro-U.S. stance during the 1991 Kuwait war, which dramatically improved its strategic position, this time Syria backed Iraq -- even after U.S. victory was a foregone conclusion. Instead of trying to distance itself from regimes like Iraq, Syria went out of its way to irk the United States by siding with Saddam. In the words of one Middle East expert, Syria chose a "seemingly suicidal policy"; it "swam toward the sinking ship." [3]

The theoretical shortcomings of the domino theory, strikingly exemplified by Syria's irrational foreign policy under President Bashar al-Assad, suggest that terrorists and rogue states will continue to be a menace. More importantly, this faulty assumption of rational enemies reminds us why the post-9/11 preemption doctrine is both a valid and indispensable policy option to thwart enemies who cannot be deterred.

A Contradictory Doctrine

During the Cold War, policy strategists and political theorists placed great store in the rationality of all the major actors in the international system, particularly the superpowers. For more than four decades, the United States and the Soviet Union deterred each other through the prospect of what became known as mutually assured destruction

(MAD). The two superpowers tacitly assumed that neither foe would launch a preemptive attack because doing so would virtually guarantee a devastating reprisal, leading to global Armageddon. Deterrence through MAD paradoxically created stability. And as former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer explained last fall, it depended on a rational enemy: "Policies of deterrence work more with a rational figure than with an irrational one. That's why the policy of deterrence worked vis-a-vis the Soviet Union." [4]

The Bush administration immediately recognized that September 11 showcased a new type of enemy that required a fresh strategic doctrine. Fleischer explained it this way: "Unlike the world we faced when we had rational enemies, when mutually assured destruction did indeed serve as a deterrent to war as a way of preserving the peace, we are now in a different era." [5] While during the Cold War, the United States "faced a generally status quo, risk-averse adversary," terrorists and rogue states are "more willing to take risks." These new enemies, inherently "unbalanced," do not make strategic calculations based on traditional realist concepts of maximizing security and power. As a result, the threat of "retaliation is less likely to work." [6] The "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" -- the blueprint for the Bush administration's post-9/11 strategic policy -- concluded that since terrorists and rogue states "are unlikely ever to be deterred," the United States must consider preemptively striking them. [7]

Operation Iraqi Freedom implemented this new doctrine for the first time. But the Bush administration was quick to insinuate that other enemies could expect a similar fate if they, too, continued to implicitly threaten the United States by supporting terrorism or pursuing weapons of mass destruction. President Bush warned, "Any outlaw regime that has ties to terrorist groups and seeks or possesses weapons of mass destruction ... will be confronted." [8] He thus left the door open to other U.S. preemptive strikes after dealing with Iraq.

But while hinting that terrorists and other rogue states might also become candidates for preemptive strikes -- because they, too, by definition have a propensity for irrational risk-taking -- the Bush administration promoted the contradictory notion that Iraqi regime change would catalyze "reforms throughout the Muslim world." [9] The mechanism for the postwar domino theory would be twofold: the United States would seek to empower moderates "who work and sacrifice for freedom," [10] and "the passing of Saddam's regime will [give] other regimes ... a clear warning" -- either renounce your ways or become the next U.S. target. [11] While committed to both prongs of this post-Saddam regional transformation strategy, the president clearly emphasized the latter.

The logic of the domino theory is flawed, however, for the very reason that the preemption doctrine makes sense: it assumes that rogue states and terrorists will now respond rationally to postwar U.S. pressure. On day one of Operation Iraqi Freedom -- the first trial of the post-9/11 preemption doctrine -- Fleischer claimed, for example, "The president believes that the use of force against Iraq will similarly send a powerful deterrent message to terrorists around the world" (emphasis added). [12] With "major military operations" winding to a close, Undersecretary of State John Bolton repeated this contradiction: "We are hoping that the elimination of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein ... would [provide] important lessons to other countries in the region, particularly Syria, Libya, and Iran." [13] The theoretical inconsistency between the preemption doctrine and the domino theory has been ignored repeatedly -- and sometimes even in the same speech. In a routine White House briefing this March, Fleischer reasoned:

"Containment works when you're dealing with more of a rational nation-state ... That's one of the reasons the president has engaged in this war on terrorism around the world and has conducted it the way he has ... [After Iraq is dealt with, terrorist organizations and other rogue states will] know that at any given moment, any of them can be, like their brethren before them, picked up and brought to justice. And that has a powerful deterrent effect." [14]

Syria: Case Study

But do rogue states -- never mind terrorist organizations -- actually have rational foreign policies?

Syria's recent foreign policy decisions are instructive for two reasons. First, Syria is precisely the type of actor that the administration hopes will reform in the day after. As Undersecretary Bolton noted during the war, "I think Syria is a good case where I hope they will conclude" that terrorism and weapons of mass destruction are "things they should give up." [15] Although omitted from the "axis of evil," Syria is frequently labeled a "rogue nation" and a "terrorist state." [16] Since 1979 Syria has been a charter member of the U.S. State Department's annual listing of states that sponsor terrorism. With Bashar al-Assad's ascendance to the presidency in June 2000, Syria strengthened its ties with the Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, and the Iranian-backed, Lebanon-based Hizbullah or "Party of God." Syria is also known to possess weapons of mass destruction. As early as 1992, the State Department ranked Syria as the sole Muslim state possessing a "chemical systems capability in all critical elements" for chemical weapons. [17] This April, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld testified that U.S. intelligence had detected "chemical weapons tests in Syria over the past twelve, fifteen months." [18] Syria has also reportedly "added biological weapons to its store," according to one expert analysis. [19]

Second, Syria is typically hailed as the premier candidate for moderating its behavior in the new post-Saddam regional environment. Indeed, of all the rogue states, Syria has historically shown the greatest pragmatism and survival instinct. During the Cold War, Hafez al-Assad skillfully courted the Soviet Union to accrue status in the Arab world and wage his war against Israel. When the Soviet Union began to expire in the late 1980s, Damascus swiftly changed gears by supporting the United States

Yet Syrian rationality may have lapsed with the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. It is striking to compare the gains Syria received for supporting the U.S.-led 1991 Kuwait war to the losses it has incurred from antagonizing the United States during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The differences in postwar payouts to Syria suggest that Damascus is no longer making rational strategic calculations. The two instances bear close comparison as a case study of how ideology and ambition can trump rational calculation. This is what happened in Saddam's Iraq. Now Bashar al-Assad's Syria seems to have embarked on the same path.

Savvy Syria, 1991

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Syria found itself in a dilemma: its primary military and economic patron -- the Soviet Union -- was imploding. With the Soviet Union on its last legs, Damascus was in search of a new superpower ally to ensure its security and provide desperately needed economic assistance. For this reason, Hafez al-Assad began courting the United States -- a rational response to Syria's emerging international predicament.

To this end, Syria fully backed the U.S.-led 1991 Kuwait war. Damascus voted in the United Nations with Washington and then dispatched 18,000 troops and 300 tanks to the Saudi desert. Once Operation Desert Storm began, Syria publicly laid the blame for the war on Saddam Hussein, accusing the Iraqi government of having shattered Arab unity. Throughout the war and its immediate aftermath, the state-run media also toned down its rhetoric, no longer accusing the United States of "imperialism." [20]

The 1991 Kuwait war provided Damascus the perfect opportunity to change its political allegiances. Its support for the U.S.-led war was followed by other pro-U.S. overtures, including a new willingness to resolve Syria's longstanding conflict with Israel. Damascus seemed more amenable to accepting an exchange of the Golan Heights for peace and agreed to attend the Madrid conference with Israel in October 1991. Hafez also waived the traditional Syrian demand that the Arab-Israeli conflict be resolved by the Arab-heavy United Nations, as opposed to a U.S. mediator.

The benefits to Syria were immediate and immense. The U.S. government lavished repeated praise on Hafez and dramatically upgraded bilateral relations. Hafez not only switched from the anti-U.S. to the pro-U.S. camp at a time

of declining Soviet power but also successfully urged Washington to apply political pressure on Jerusalem. In the war's aftermath, President George H.W. Bush doggedly pursued a comprehensive peace.

The most tangible postwar U.S. concession to Syria was over Lebanon. After fifteen years of largely futile efforts to annex the country, Syria leveraged its new Western orientation to assume a more dominant role there. The May 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood and Cooperation codified and expanded the "privileged relations" set out in the 1989 Ta'if accords, stating that the governments of Syria and Lebanon would "coordinate their economies and agricultural, industrial, commercial, transport, communications, and customs sectors." Significantly, the treaty included a formal request for Syrian troops to remain indefinitely on Lebanese soil. The United States, although critical of the treaty from the outset, turned a blind eye in exchange for continued Syrian cooperation on other fronts.[21]

Hafez's support for the 1991 Kuwait war also paid major dividends in the Arab world and western Europe, which rewarded him handsomely with much-needed economic relief. Daniel Pipes has noted that prior to the war, "Perhaps the greatest domestic problem facing the Baath regime was the economy," which suffered from socialist "senescence," over-centralization, huge military expenditures, a very high population growth of 3.8 percent a year, annual inflation of some 50 percent, and debts of some \$6 billion to the West and \$9 billion to the Soviet Union.[22] For Syria's wartime stance (even though it was entirely symbolic), Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states lavished Damascus with grants worth more than \$2.5 billion and private investments in infrastructure projects estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars.[23] During the war, the European Community (EC) also compensated Syria for its support. The foreign ministers of most of the EC countries visited Damascus and again approved 100 million (\$176 million) in economic aid that had been suspended since 1986.[24]

Although Syrians and foreign diplomats estimated that between 75 to 90 percent of the Syrian population opposed the war, the proverbial Arab street remained quiescent throughout the war. In fact, Hafez actually increased his domestic authority during the war and its immediate aftermath.[25] One compelling explanation is that this massive infusion of funds gave Assad some much-needed financial clout.[26]

Hafez's support for the war, far from marginalizing Syria's regional authority, improved its position in the Arab world. In March 1991, the GCC states took the extraordinary step of proposing what became known as the Damascus declaration, a new security agreement calling for Syria (and Egypt) to retain forces in the Persian Gulf and maintain the geopolitical status quo there. In exchange for "safeguarding the security of Arab states in the Gulf,"[27] Syria (as well as Egypt) would be able to draw from an "Arab development fund" of \$15 billion in GCC contributions. In September the Damascus declaration was abandoned because Saudi Arabia and Kuwait decided that their safety could be best ensured with the United States acting as the de facto guarantor of the Gulf.[28] Still, the fact that the Damascus declaration was proposed at all highlighted Syria's improved postwar regional position.[29]

Daniel Pipes drew this conclusion:

"In all, then, Assad's stand against Saddam Hussein won him an infusion of funds, new Arab friends, and an enhanced regional stature. It allowed him, in a single and stunningly deft maneuver, to switch from the anti-American to the pro-American camp ... For Assad, the Iraqi invasion was a providential event, easing several of his worst dilemmas and rescuing him from the cul de sac of Soviet clientship." [30]

Syria was not alone in enjoying a postwar strategic windfall. Although the specifics varied by country, those that supported the war benefited while those that opposed it lost out. The Financial Times described Egyptian president Husni Mubarak's windfall from supporting the war: "Mr. Mubarak may have gained more from the successful completion of the Gulf mission than any Western leader, including President George Bush. His prestige domestically has been enhanced." [31] Like Syria, Egypt's decision to back the war paid immediate economic dividends. In

November 1990, when Mubarak first declared his support for the war, the United States remitted Egypt's military debt of \$6.7 billion. Following the war, the U.S. Congress authorized additional military and economic grants amounting to \$2.1 billion. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates followed suit, forgiving another \$7 billion in debts and promising new loans and investments.[32] With generous creditors writing off half of Egypt's foreign debt, Cairo was awarded a long-sought agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).[33] Like Damascus, Cairo was also the recipient of heightened U.S. engagement in the Arab-Israeli peace process and party to the (short-lived) Damascus declaration.

Such benefits could be compared to the outcomes for Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which "damaged themselves considerably" by opposing the war, as Secretary of State James Baker noted at the time. Baker skipped over Jordan when he visited the region in March; Congress voted to freeze \$55 million in aid; and Saudi Arabia refused to restore full air and land links. The GCC stopped financial aid to Jordan altogether and cut back its financial support to the PLO by more than \$6 million a month. Most tangibly, Kuwait expelled 260,000 Palestinians in 1991 alone, costing the Palestinian economy billions of dollars.[34] To save face and stem these acts of reprisal, Jordan and the PLO spent the better part of the year making excuses for having sided with Saddam and ingratiating themselves to the United States.

Reckless Syria, 2003

Considering the gains Syria made from supporting the 1991 Kuwait war and the losses incurred to those that opposed it, one would have expected Syria to back Operation Iraqi Freedom. In both cases, the United States led a war against Iraq, Syria's historical rival, and the sole superpower made it clear that rewards (economic, military, etc.) awaited those who went along.

There were, of course, notable differences between the two wars, but they only reinforced the logic of supporting the United States. Even more than last time, U.S. victory was assured. U.S. forces had already demonstrated their military superiority. And whereas the Iraqi military had been systematically degraded since the 1991 cease-fire, the U.S. military had made well-known progress in the area of precision-guided munitions. Since this time there was even less doubt that the U.S. mission would succeed, supporting it made even more sense. In addition, in contrast to George H.W. Bush, who believed that international consensus was a prerequisite to fighting Saddam, his son made it clear that the "mission would define the coalition"; the United States would achieve Iraqi regime change with or without international support.

More importantly, because the U.S. public viewed Iraqi regime change in the context of post-9/11 U.S. national security, President Bush was expected to pay particular attention to those countries that supported the cause and even more to those that undermined it. The United States would compensate its wartime allies as in 1991, but now its detractors would be seen as subverting national security. The perceived consequences were now graver since the cause was not limited to the specific mission against Iraq but rather was part of a greater effort to root out hostile regimes. That meant that the conduct of nations such as Syria would come under a microscope.

Indeed, of all countries, Syria had the greatest interest in distancing itself from Iraq. Like Saddam's regime, Syria pursues weapons of mass destruction, sponsors terrorism, has a history of invading its neighbors, and is oppressed by an illegitimate Baathist dictator who maintains his authoritarian regime by appealing to a minority constituency. With the Bush administration conceiving of Iraqi regime change as part of a broader doctrine of preempting (irrational) rogue states and terrorists, any rational actor would have done everything possible to dissociate itself from Iraq.

At first it appeared that Syria recognized how to play the United States in the post-9/11 world. Following the terrorist attacks against America, Syria did provide some useful intelligence to U.S. authorities about al-Qa'ida cells operating

in Syria and Europe (though not as much as was widely reported). In response, the Bush administration rewarded Syria by excluding it from the "axis of evil" and stayed mum about its ongoing military occupation of Lebanon and election to the United Nations Security Council in October 2001. When Congress threatened to impose sanctions against Syria, the Bush team argued successfully against this punitive measure.[35] In other words, Syria had recently reaped the fruits of supporting the United States in the war on terrorism. And even greater rewards awaited those governments that supported U.S. efforts to disarm the Iraqi dictator.

Yet Bashar not only decided against distancing himself from the pariah state, he went out of his way to highlight their proximity. While Syria grudgingly voted in support of United Nations Resolution 1441, giving Saddam one "final opportunity" to disarm or face "serious consequences" (legalese for war), within a week the Syrian foreign minister Faruq ash-Shar'a abrogated this commitment. By late November, Bashar had become the face of opposition to the United States in the Arab world, regularly lambasting "American aggression" and "Zionist invaders." Bashar's anti-U.S., antiwar rhetoric was the exact opposite of that of his father during the previous clash with Saddam. And it had not been heard from Damascus since the buildup to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war -- Syria's greatest blunder in modern history.

Bashar did not reflect the Arab world so much as try to influence it, egging on moderate Arab states to join his effort to derail the impending war.[36] True, Operation Iraqi Freedom did not have the overwhelmingly broad-based international support of Operation Desert Storm. But at a time when Syria should have underlined its differences from the "axis of evil" countries, such rhetorical support for Iraq highlighted -- even bolstered -- the impression that the two Baathist regimes were fraternal twins.

Syria's prewar provocations would pale in comparison to its wartime conduct. Once Operation Iraqi Freedom began, Bashar did everything he could to place himself in the anti-U.S. camp. Prior to the war, Rumsfeld warned that interfering in the impending U.S. mission would be a "hostile act held accountable." Astonishingly, only one week into the mission, Rumsfeld reported, "We have information that shipments of military supplies are crossing the border from Syria to Iraq, including night-vision goggles ... We consider such trafficking hostile acts and will hold the Syrian government accountable." The night-vision goggles allegation attracted the most media attention, but Syria was also found guilty of supplying Saddam with antitank weapons, aircraft parts, and ammunition, which could "pose a direct threat to the lives of coalition forces," as the defense secretary warned at the time.[37]

This was just the beginning. In week two of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Assad dramatically upped the ante. He began allowing foreign jihadists to enter Iraq through Syrian territory. As a result, throughout the greater Baghdad region, thousands of "foreign irregulars" -- trained and untrained -- from Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Somalia now waged war against coalition forces.[38] The largest busloads of jihadists were of Syrian origin, ensuring that if detected, Damascus would pay the highest price. Incredibly, Assad took no actions to conceal Syria's aggressive conduct. Not only did cavalcades of buses stream into Iraq in early April, thousands of jihadists were caught in Iraq -- carrying their Syrian identification cards.[39]

As could be predicted, the detection of Syrian interference in Operation Iraqi Freedom brought relations with the United States to the breaking point. Bush's aides were clear: either stop helping the enemy or prepare to be treated like one. Despite repeated U.S. protests from Secretary of State Colin Powell, Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, as well as a visit to Damascus by Assistant Secretary of State William Burns in mid-April, Syria continued trafficking jihadists into Iraq.[40] And then, Bashar did the unthinkable: he allowed Iraqi war criminals to find refuge in Syria -- even after major military operations were largely over.

In 1991, Syria's policy had reaped it financial rewards from the West and enhanced its leadership throughout the wider Arab world. In 2003, Syria's belligerence during Operation Iraqi Freedom gained it nothing but problems. The most serious one was predictably with the United States, which during the war threatened Syria with diplomatic,

economic, and even military action.[41] Such tough talk was not limited to the Bush administration. Senator Bob Graham (Democrat of Florida), former chairman of the Intelligence Committee, advocated that the administration consider firing a "few cruise missiles" into Syria.[42] In early May, Powell met with Bashar and reportedly took immediate "military action off the table," but he demanded an end to terrorism, the occupation of Lebanon, and the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.[43] Bashar, far from separating himself from Iraq and thereby gaining temporary leeway to build up his fragile regime, had brought the remaining Baath regime into U.S. sights. Congress immediately again launched its initiative to impose punitive economic sanctions against Damascus, even though Bashar's putative top priority is economic renewal.[44] And in contrast to the 1991 Kuwait war, in this war's aftermath, Syria has intentionally been left out of the Arab-Israeli peace process, notwithstanding Bashar's protestations.

Conversely, it is hard to see how Syria's wartime conduct has made any positive contributions to Bashar's regime. Many have argued that Syria's support for Saddam was intended to preserve their unofficial oil pipeline. Yet this amount of revenue (\$500 million a year) pales in comparison to the rewards Damascus would have received from an appreciative U.S. administration.[45] Furthermore, because Bashar's wartime stance never stood a chance of scuttling the war, Syria would have lost this easy (and illegal) oil revenue anyway. In sum, after Saddam, Bashar lost more from the war than any other leader -- and any rational actor would have recognized this fact.

Indeed, Bashar's anti-U.S. conduct has been universally assailed as irrational. At the height of the war, a high-ranking Jordanian government official worried that "Syria continues to misread [the situation]" because Bashar was being "unreasonable." [46] Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon noted during the war, "Bashar Assad is dangerous; his judgment is flawed. He has shown that he is unable to draw obvious conclusions ... Anyone with eyes in his head would have known that Iraq was on the losing side." [47] Wolfowitz similarly admonished the Syrians, "What everybody has been telling them is this is a very stupid policy." [48] The more moderate criticism is that Bashar is simply prone to miscalculation. "I think what we have is a guy who basically has not calculated very well," said a veteran U.S. diplomat with extensive experience negotiating with Hafez. [49] Rumsfeld shares this common view: "The Syrian government is making a lot of bad mistakes, a lot of bad judgment calls." [50]

Preemption Validated

Syria's wartime behavior affirms the underlying assumption of the preemption doctrine: rogue states (and terrorists) often make poor cost-benefit strategic calculations and take irrational, foolhardy risks. If this is true, then the domino theory is itself irrational since it assumes that with Iraqi regime change, such actors will rationally revise their behavior in response to heightened postwar U.S. pressure.

This does not mean that the rogue enemies of the United States are incapable of ever curtailing their aggression. Already, several of its Middle Eastern antagonists have shown some signs of moderation in the post-Saddam world. The Palestinian Authority has appointed Mahmud Abbas prime minister, mollifying the United States; the Saudi government has begun reducing its support for militant Islamists; even Syria has taken several small steps in the right direction, such as withdrawing a limited number of troops from Lebanon and expressing rhetorical interest in both peace negotiations with Israel and curtailing support for terrorism. These are positive developments, but they are "limited steps" that are "totally inadequate," as Powell stated in late June. [51]

It is still too early to definitively conclude whether this postwar progress is an aberration or the beginning of a trend. In either case, the preemption doctrine remains an indispensable policy option. If the fear of U.S. invasion forces regional reform as the domino theory predicts, then it will have shown its usefulness. But if rogue states and terrorists continue to threaten U.S. national security and demonstrate an inability to make rational decisions and thereby be deterred, then preemptive strikes will be both necessary and justified. The case of Syria is not encouraging.

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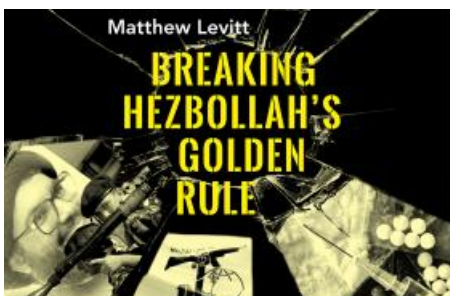
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