

Syria's Foreign Policy Challenges U.S. Interests

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Brief Analysis

This is the second of a two-part series marking the six months since Bashar al-Asad became president of Syria on July 17, 2000. [Read Part I. \(templateC05.php?CID=1390\)](#)

For a region used to the late Hafiz al-Asad's stodgy predictability, his son Bashar's six-month-old presidency has displayed a surprisingly active foreign policy, including a willingness to break with the past. However, on issues of greatest importance to the United States — peace with Israel, control over Lebanon, and support for Palestinian terrorist groups — Bashar's regime is mainly a carbon copy of his father's.

Downplaying Disputes Bashar apparently takes a strategic view of the easing of neighborhood tensions, allowing Syria to focus its attention on its primary concerns: Israel and Lebanon. Most notable among the changes has been Syria's improved ties with Iraq, its long-time Baathist ideological foe. Damascus and Baghdad have increased direct trade, exchanged numerous senior-level visits, and even lifted visa requirements for one another's citizens. The long-closed Iraqi-Syrian oil pipeline was reopened late last year, with potential sanctions-busting implications. Syrian-Iraqi hostility has been one of the most reliable of Middle Eastern verities. If this new effort at cooperation flourishes, the region's strategic planners might have to reckon with, for example, the combination of Iraqi resources and know-how with Syrian proximity to Israel. Although Syria and Iraq tentatively began to improve ties in the mid-1990s, reportedly in response to growing Turkish-Israeli relations, it is under Bashar that the most significant developments have taken place.

Likewise, Syrian-Turkish relations were already improving in Hafiz al-Asad's time, ever since Damascus expelled Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan in October 1998. Turkish officials say that since that time Syria has generally bottled up PKK fighters who long used Syrian territory as a base. Relations have improved further under Bashar. In September 2000, Syria's interior minister went to Turkey to sign a further security protocol. In November, Syrian vice-president Abdul-Halim Khaddam went to Ankara in the highest-level Syrian visit to Turkey ever. Ankara remains wary, but encouraged by Syria's recent behavior.

Bashar and Jordanian King Abdullah II each seem intent on putting behind them the tension that marked their fathers' relations. Abdullah attended Hafiz al-Asad's funeral in June, and Jordan is one of but three countries to which Bashar thus far has made a bilateral visit — the other two being key Syrian partners and Arab powers Egypt and Saudi Arabia. There are probably limits to Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement; Abdullah, for example, has rejected

Bashar's repeated entreaties to sever ties with Israel. As with Turkey, however, Bashar primarily seems to be sending Amman the message that Syria has no hostile intent. In building relations with Turkey and Jordan, Damascus seeks to reduce the incentive of those two states for security cooperation with Israel. Bashar also appears to lack his father's animus toward Yasir Arafat, who also attended his father's funeral and with whom Bashar spoke by phone following the outbreak of the intifada.

Israel and Lebanon Regarding Israel, however, Bashar has tried to demonstrate that one Asad can be just as tough as another. His approach to Israel consists of three basic elements:

1) No yielding on the peace process Bashar is unbending on the basic requirement for peace he inherited from his father — Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders, leaving Syria a riparian on the Sea of Galilee. Recovery of the Golan Heights, he says, "tops our national priorities." As a neophyte president trying to impress the Baathist old guard, this is probably the last area in which he would show flexibility, even if he were so inclined. But, more than his father did in his final years, Bashar also has spoken of the need to fulfill Palestinian rights — statehood with a capital in Jerusalem and return of the refugees — as a condition for achieving comprehensive peace. Like his approach to Iraq, this stance is probably popular at home, particularly as the intifada rages. Meanwhile, there is no known change in the status of radical Palestinian groups based in Damascus.

2) Support for Hizballah and the Lebanese claim to Shebaa Farms Syria not only endorsed an Arab League summit statement supporting Lebanon's claim to Shebaa farms, but Syrian U.N. ambassador Mikha'il Wahbi also wrote in an October 24 letter, "Israel . . . has not completed the withdrawal from south Lebanon to the internationally recognized borders, including the Shebaa farms." This stance, in effect, justifies ongoing Hizballah attacks on Israel, retaining for Syria a source of pressure on Israel, despite the "loss" of southern Lebanon. Syria has supported and has no doubt directed Lebanon's refusal to deploy its troops to the border following the Israeli withdrawal.

3) Rhetorical fervor, including support for the intifada, reactivation of the Arab boycott, and the severing of all Arab ties with Israel In his Arab summit speech, Bashar said Arab states should aim for the "peace of the strong" instead of the "peace of the weak," in an apparent call for the strengthening of Arab militaries.

Lebanon is perhaps Bashar's most challenging issue, since the stakes are so high. Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the death of Hafiz al-Asad, which happened nearly simultaneously, have sparked a series of unprecedented public challenges to the Syrian presence in Lebanon, led by — but not limited to — Maronites. Although Syria has publicly done little more than shrug off expressions of Lebanese dissatisfaction, these have not gone unnoticed. There are credible reports that Syria has thinned out its troops in Beirut and elsewhere outside the Bekaa. In an apparent effort to mollify the Lebanese, Syria released fifty-nine Lebanese political prisoners. Rather than earning Damascus a public relations windfall, however, the gesture seems to have stirred up Lebanese anger over the many other Lebanese still believed to be incarcerated in Syria. Syria holds a firm grip on the reins of power in Lebanon, but the Lebanese are beginning to test Bashar's limits. Meanwhile, a key pillar of Bashar's Lebanon policy remains support for Hizballah, reinforced by Iran's promptings. By all indications, Iran remains Syria's main ally, just as it was under Hafiz al-Asad.

With the Syria-Israel track moribund, senior-level U.S.-Syrian contact has been minimal. There has been only one bilateral meeting, a brief discussion during mid-October with Secretary of State Madeline Albright in Riyadh. There, Bashar reportedly rejected U.S. requests to rein in Hizballah and to cease flights to Baghdad. Nevertheless, the United States is still discussing assistance to Syria's computer education efforts.

U.S. Policy Implications Bashar has made welcome, if limited, changes in domestic policy, easing somewhat Syria's draconian restrictions on freedom of speech and private enterprise. However, Bashar's foreign policy has negatively affected U.S. interests. Notwithstanding the easing of tensions with neighbors such as Turkey and Jordan, Bashar's

foreign policies have made the region a more dangerous place.

Despite troubling aspects of Syria's foreign policy, the United States should explore options for a new relationship with Syria during the early stages of Bashar al-Asad's presidency. This should include giving support to his economic development goals with training programs and encouragement of private investment (provided Bashar moves closer to U.S. goals by loosening Syria's grip on Lebanon), ceasing to back Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist groups, taking a less provocative stance toward Israel (even if not formally modifying its peace process policies), and refusing to support Iraq's bid to ease its isolation. If Bashar moves toward these goals, the United States should be increasingly responsive. If he does not, Washington should respond with tougher policies and more sanctions. This carrot-and-stick approach toward a regime keenly aware of its economic deficiencies is Washington's best bet for helping to shape Bashar's young presidency.

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