

Domestic Politics and State Interests in Syria and Israel

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Brief Analysis

Syria's old power structure is giving way, and new faces are emerging. Bashar al-Asad is well on his way to becoming president. A new generation has also begun to take positions of power in the Ba'ath party hierarchy, the military, the cabinet, and the security organs. Although the old guard is still prominent in Syrian politics, and will expect recognition for facilitating Bashar's ascension to presidency, Bashar will not merely be a figurehead. There are no serious challenges to his candidacy: The threat posed by his uncle, Rifaat, is virtually nonexistent as the latter is largely discredited within Syria; moreover, Syrians are unlikely to support a coup d'état against Bashar at present because of their appreciation for the domestic stability brought to Syria by his father. Any potential rivals will lie low until a probation period of 1-2 years has passed.

Bashar's Future Endeavors

Bashar must exhibit strong leadership in order to secure his future, and there are four areas which demand his attention.

- Domestic economic reform. This is Bashar's likely priority. Pursuing economic reform would afford continuity between father and son; although few results were apparent at the time, Hafiz al-Asad did consider economic reform a priority in his later years. Also, if Bashar is successful in improving the economy, the benefits will improve the lot of all Syrians, thus affirming his popular support. The pace of reform, however, will be deliberately gradual in order to minimize any possible dislocations.
- Peace with Israel. Only by maintaining a tough stance toward Israel will Bashar inherit the respect enjoyed by his father. Peace negotiations, however, may become more efficient; Hafiz was in poor health toward the end, and this slowed down the process. Also, Bashar seems to recognize the importance of public diplomacy more than his father, and this will certainly help sooth the concerns of both Israeli and Western publics. Nevertheless, a breakthrough on the Syrian-Israeli track is unlikely until well into 2001. The delay can be attributed equally to Bashar's transition period, Israel's domestic problems, international concentration on the Palestinian negotiations, and Washington's preoccupation with its upcoming elections.
- Domestic political liberalization. Progress will be slow on this front given the role of the old guard in ensuring Bashar's succession. At most, Syria will allow a more open political dialogue with greater tolerance of dissenting

views. But organized political activity that does not toe the regime's line will be silenced.

•State corruption. It is doubtful that this endeavor will be pursued extensively, and evidence already points to dwindling efforts. Bashar cannot afford to alienate his supporters at this time; therefore, one option is to forgive past corruption while vowing to crack down in the present and future.

Lebanon

Syria's interests in Lebanon are both strategic (the Bekaa Valley is a natural passage way between Israel and Syria) and political (ensuring that Lebanon is not used to stage anti-Syrian activity). Troops are only secondary to maintaining Syrian influence in Lebanon; more important are the Syrian intelligence and security forces. Syria will act to counter Hizballah's efforts to dominate in the South, as it has generally acted to balance competing groups in Lebanon. Syria will also ensure that the Lebanese-Israeli border remains quiet in order to ensure American favor.

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Cultural Politics

The most impassioned debates in Israel today are not about territorial issues and Israel's relations with the Arabs, but rather about what face Israel will have in the future when its physical security is finally assured. The latest conflict between Shas and Meretz can be understood in this respect as a jockeying for control over a "post-peace" Israel. These two parties are seeking to establish themselves as vanguards for two disparate camps which take opposing sides on questions concerning Israel's identity: how Western will the state be in the future? how Jewish? and how Zionist? It is of no surprise, therefore, that the Ministry of Education is at the heart of the Shas-Meretz conflict, as this ministry represents both the values of the nation and its ideological direction.

But Meretz faces problems in establishing itself as the vanguard of a Westernized Israel, and it faces competition: the relatively new anti-Orthodox party Shinui emerged dramatically in the most recent election to capture six seats, demanding a harder line toward the Orthodox parties. And Meretz has to contend with more elevated expectations about how politicians should behave, also a product of Israel becoming more Western. The recent spate of scandals to hit top Israeli ministers has been unusual if only for the public attention they have drawn. This upgrading of norms in Israeli society is the reason why the funding of Shas's schools has become so controversial; even as late as the Rabin administration, no one would have questioned providing extra funding for Shas if that were necessary to grease the wheels of peace process diplomacy.

Shas also faces many political challenges. Much as Meretz faces competition for leadership of the secular camp, Shas faces competition for leadership of the religious camp. Furthermore, Eli Yishai, the current leader of Shas, must prove he is as tough as his predecessor, Aryeh Deri; in this respect, ousting Meretz from the government will placate Yishai's internal critics, at least for now. But Shas's political motivation to increase funding for its schools is driven by a broader socioeconomic reality. Since 1985, globalization has caused a widening of income gaps in Israel; those without higher education—in particular, the religious—are falling behind as Israel's economy becomes more high tech. Growing tension between religious and secular is to a large degree connected to economics, and will only be relieved if the ultra-orthodox integrate into the workforce.

A Peace Deal?

Barak does not want to fight a war on two fronts, but rather ensure that the kulturkampf is subordinated to the peace process. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that both Barak and Clinton want a tripartite summit soon, although Clinton is better at hiding his desire for a deal.

An internal Labor party poll recently revealed that if Barak managed to get three things in the peace agreements, then 60-70 percent of Israelis would support him: a united Jerusalem, a majority of settlers under Israeli

sovereignty, and an end to the conflict with a Palestinian renunciation of all further claims. At the same time, despite Palestinian pressure, Barak must also ensure that he does not veer too far from traditional Labor policies, which include territorial compromise, separation from the Palestinians, and security. Finally, Barak must carefully sequence his presentation of the deal to the Knesset, as he is likely to face an ambush involving elements from within his government. In this regard, Barak seems to get more support from some parties in the opposition: Barak can now count on twenty-five opposition parliamentarians to support his efforts in the peace process, whereas a question mark hangs over his own government—witness a recent Knesset vote on the transfer of Abu Dis in which twenty-nine parliamentarians within the coalition either abstained or voted against the motion. In a worst-case scenario, Barak may be forced to dissolve a Knesset that could pose legal obstacles to the public ratification of a peace agreement. One cannot underestimate the challenges facing Barak.

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