

A New Asad—A New Syria?

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Brief Analysis

Hafiz al-Asad was a cautious and calculating leader, but he had not completed the steps to guarantee a smooth succession to his son Bashar by the time of his death. Nevertheless, Bashar al-Asad will probably become Syria's next president. There are no significant or immediate threats to his accession. Some of the old guard have been removed from office, including former head of military intelligence Ali Duba and former chief of staff Hikmat Shihabi; others, such as vice-president Abdel Halim Khaddam, are too old or too ill to mount a serious challenge. Bashar's uncle, Rifaat, is also not a threat since he is in exile and moreover faces a consensus within the Syrian leadership against him. Furthermore, the new faces within the Syrian army are loyal to Bashar, and he has a supportive circle of friends, including his sister's husband Assef Shawkat and Bahjat Suleiman, who are both key figures in Syria's military security apparatus.

Challenges. Although the old guard supports Bashar at the moment, there may be some tension in the future because they want to hold the reigns of power behind the scenes while Bashar retains his title as president. The question is whether Bashar has the "instinct of a killer" needed to rule Syria, to use Patrick Seale's phrase. The old guard will be waiting and watching for any sign of weakness, at which point Bashar's rule will meet its end. Bashar is aware that reforms are necessary to bring Syria into the present age, but they are also risky for his hold on power. He will, therefore, spend the next few months establishing himself as a leader, and only then will he attempt domestic reform or progress on the peace front with Israel.

International Relations. To introduce reforms, and thus survive, Bashar must move Syrian policy closer to the West. In this respect, Bashar can count on support from the younger generation of leaders in the region, such as King Abdullah in Jordan and King Muhammed in Morocco. In Lebanon, Bashar will cooperate with Hizballah to maintain stability in southern Lebanon. If Bashar proves to be a weak leader, Syrian regional dominance is at risk.

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Bashar's Pre-Existing Power. Bashar has been a key player in Syrian politics for the last few years, having essentially taken over from his father six months ago. Not only has he met all the important regional leaders, but within Syria, he has played an important role in shaping the current Syrian leadership. Proving his capability for ruthlessness, Bashar played a role in purging several key players including Duba and Shihabi and appointing others such as Ali Aslan, now head of military intelligence. Any opposition figures posing a challenge to Bashar have now been either

arrested or exiled, or have kowtowed to Bashar. In short, those in power now are Bashar's men.

Challenges. The challenges facing Bashar are manageable and do not involve direct threats to his leadership. First, Bashar lacks the enforcers of his father's regime. Bashar does, however, have both his brother, Maher, and his brother-in-law, Shawkat, to play this role; and furthermore, ruling Syria today does not require the same degree of brutal enforcement as in the hey-day of Hafiz al-Asad. Second, Syria's economy is stagnant and sliding. This problem will be the initial focus of Bashar's rule, which will include efforts to catch up in areas such as schools and roads where Syria lags woefully behind. Last, political liberalization and a new power-sharing agreement is necessary for long-run stability. An indication of Bashar's intentions is his appointment of individuals not prominent in the Baath party to high government posts; he is stressing technical capability, not party affiliation. But if Bashar does not co-opt the younger generation, especially those educated in the West, then his rule will be short. Bashar has some years to deal with these issues and has been assured by both Lebanon and Jordan of support in this respect. If he fails as a leader, however, there will be chaos in Syria as a power struggle will rip the country apart.

The Peace Process. Bashar is strong enough to make an agreement with Israel but is in no rush to do so. Bashar realizes that the Golan Heights, while important to Syria, are not existential. At the same time, if Barak approaches Bashar with a generous offer, Bashar will not refuse the option for peace. With regard to the situation in southern Lebanon, Bashar will ensure that the border between Lebanon and Israel is quiet.

International Relations. Bashar will be pragmatic but will remain suspicious of the West, like his father. He will, therefore, work with the West but will not embrace it. Syria's relationship with Iran has always been a marriage of convenience and will not change.

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Who's In Charge? Bashar is less leader than figurehead for the "the Barons" of the Alawite power structure and their Sunni collaborators. Proof of this behind-the-scenes maneuvering can be seen, for example, in the speed with which parliament passed the constitutional amendment permitting Bashar's ascension at age 34 and his unrealistic ascent from the rank of colonel to lieutenant-general.

Bashar offers the old guard its best chance at weathering the challenges ahead. His image as a liberalizer and a modernizer, and his potential to "smile" at Israel, may deflect domestic opposition to and entice international support for continued Alawite rule. The Barons, however, will be threatened if Bashar exhibits true leadership in Syria. Ironically, those issues that the West expects Bashar to tackle are the same issues that will make him expendable to the Barons. These include any real attempt to reform the economy and thus empower the Sunni merchants; to truly root out corruption among regime insiders; or to exert effective control over the military and security establishment. Bashar will only survive if he acts contrary to what is expected of him.

The Peace Process. The Syrians retain an interest in maintaining the U.S. strategic umbrella that is conferred upon active participants in the peace process and are likely, therefore, to undertake their own version of a "charm offensive." Bashar can do this without crossing any of his father's red lines. Furthermore, Barak stated just hours before Hafiz al-Asad died that the extent of the withdrawal from the Golan would be dependent upon the "degree of Syria's readiness to implement viable and stable arrangements that are essential for peace in the area for which we will vacate on the Golan Heights." Therefore, with Barak's new and more accommodating position, and Bashar's likelihood to smile at Israel, renewed diplomacy is possible. An agreement, however, is still not in the cards.

U.S. Policy Directions. The United States should return to first principles with regard to Syria. U.S. objectives include domestic stability, an end to state-sponsorship of terrorism, peace with Israel, withdrawal from Lebanon, hostility toward Iraq, distance from Iran, a Syria free of unconventional weapons, and a more open and free society.

Washington will need to test Bashar, or his puppeteers, in order to induce Syria to make incremental steps toward

the aforementioned principles and to limit Syria's opportunity to "make mischief" in other areas of the Middle East. The policy should be "bigger sticks, bigger carrots." Early tests should include ensuring stability in southern Lebanon, refraining from any terrorism designed to undermine the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and curtailing cross-border smuggling to Iraq. Enticements could include, for example, encouraging U.S. oil companies to invest in Syrian exploration or relaxing economic or commercial restrictions. The United States, however, must only support Syria if it truly makes a break with Hafez al-Asad's "neanderthal" ways. If this does not happen, Washington has more interest in waiting for the "next Syria" than in assisting this "new-old Syria."

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Liat Radcliffe.

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