

## Where Is Asad?

### The Renewed Struggle for Succession in Syria

Dec 14, 1999



#### Brief Analysis

U.S. president Bill Clinton and Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak will lead their respective national delegations at this week's historic set of Syria-Israel peace talks, but Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad is sending his foreign minister in his stead. By keeping himself at one remove from the talks, Asad retains certain advantages, including time to consider Barak's position, distance from the talks themselves, and the option to play his major diplomatic card--the "confidence building-measure" of a face-to-face meeting with Barak--at some later point in the process. Among the other reasons for Asad's absence in Washington are his health and the struggle over who will succeed him.

**Asad's Health:** Despite rumors, there does not seem to have been a dramatic change in the state of Asad's health, and therefore in his ability to function, during the course of the past year. Asad is 69 years old and suffers from numerous ailments, the most serious being cancer and a heart condition.

To be sure, there have been many signs and reports from Damascus throughout the year indicating that the president is not in good health. Asad refrained from his usual practice of opening the first session of the People's Assembly in December 1998, when his absence was attributed to a severe cold. Western diplomats who met with him during 1999 noted that the president had trouble concentrating and remaining alert during their meetings with him. In March of this year, when he was sworn in for a fifth term as president, Asad, for the first time, distributed printed copies of his inaugural address rather than actually delivering it before the People's Assembly.

Since his earliest days in power, Asad has tended to close himself off inside his palace, and his public appearances have been rare. The ruling apparatus in Damascus is therefore accustomed to functioning without his daily presence, and a decline in Asad's health does not necessarily affect either the ruling apparatus or the general functioning of the Syrian political system.

**Bashar's Rise:** Since 1994, Asad has been making efforts to promote the candidacy of his son Bashar to succeed him. In the course of these years, Bashar has been steadily promoted in military rank from captain to colonel. Asad also created a firm base of support for his son within the military echelons through the appointment of young Alawite officers of Bashar's generation to key positions in the army and in the security forces. Asad has also dismissed potential rivals for succession, among them Chief of General Staff Hikmat Shehabi (pensioned off in July 1998) and Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who in late 1998 was relieved of the Lebanese portfolio in favor of Bashar. Over the past year, Bashar has become increasingly more involved in the foreign affairs arena, mainly through well-publicized visits to Arab capitals, and even to Paris.

Despite Bashar's rapid rise, however, there are many, both inside and outside Syria, who feel that he is still having trouble filling his father's shoes. He is young and lacks both practical experience and charisma. Additionally, at age 34, he is six years short of the constitutional requirement that a president be at least 40 years old. Bashar will therefore face a difficult task when his father departs the Syrian political arena, and must at least muster the support

of his family members, his tribe, and the Alawite community. In the meantime, struggles for power and prestige within the Asad family complicate efforts to demonstrate the solidarity and strength it once enjoyed.

**Family Quarrels:** In October 1999, there were reports from Damascus about a power struggle deteriorating to violence between Bashar and his father's brother Rif'at al-Asad. (Rif'at was considered to be the "no. 2 man" in Syria and commander of the strongest division of the army until he was disgraced, due to his alleged instigation of an attempted 1983 putsch. He has been out of the country since February 1998, having been dismissed by presidential decree from a basically empty vice-presidential role.) The argument centered on a formal legal issue. Rif'at had built a villa for himself as well as a private port on state land, and the legal authorities suddenly "decided" to demand his evacuation of the land, and its subsequent return to the state. Rif'at's people refused to comply with this demand, and in reaction, security personnel forcibly entered the disputed area, killing a number of Rif'at's people in the process.

Many tended to view this episode as an unequivocal statement by Bashar and his father that they would not tolerate any public, overt activity on Rif'at's part inside Syria. Although Rif'at now has no real status in Syria, he has apparently not yet surrendered his ambitions. Over the past year, he has held several meetings of a political nature--with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat at the funeral of the late King Hassan of Morocco, for example. In addition, Rif'at has mounted a comprehensive propaganda campaign against the Syrian regime through the London-based media he controls (the Arab News Net Satellite TV). This October action was basically a reminder from Asad and Bashar to Rif'at that they were still very much in power. Nevertheless, because this was essentially a family quarrel, they refrained from taking any drastic measures, and Rif'at remains active, albeit outside Syria.

At the end of November 1999, reports circulated in Paris concerning an argument that broke out inside the presidential palace between Asad's younger son Mahir and the president's son-in-law Assaf Shawqat, the husband of Asad's daughter Bushra. In the course of the argument, Mahir was said to have shot Shawqat and injured him. According to these reports, Shawqat was rushed to Paris where he received medical treatment at a local hospital. It should be noted that until recently, these two men were considered part of Bashar's camp, assisting him in bolstering his position in Syria. Mahir serves as an officer in the Presidential Guard, the elite unit charged with protecting the regime (Bashar is also a member of this unit). Shawqat serves in one of the Syrian internal security regimes (military security), and has recently been mentioned as in line to lead this body, replacing the current head, 'Ali Duba.

No proof has been found for the reports of quarrels within the Asad family, and they may be based on rumors circulated by Rif'at's people. But the very fact that the rumors are circulating at all is a bad sign for Asad. Now in the twilight of his rule, he is in a period that is, by its very nature, extremely sensitive. Instead of demonstrating unity and solidarity in such a decisive moment, the ruling family is exhibiting discord and disunity in its ranks that could prove catastrophic.

**Conclusion:** Asad appears to be in decline, a situation that may continue for quite some time. But in the meantime, Asad enjoys full control; there are no signs of a threat to the regime from inside Syria. He is still capable of making difficult decisions, though he has not done so at home recently regarding urgent socioeconomic problems, and he has also taken his time on the peace process. The Syrian regime is also now constantly taken up with the issue of succession. Bashar will continue as the "chosen one"; however, veiled expressions of criticism will persist, as will the quarrels and rivalry within the Asad family. This situation will intensify and will require increasing amounts of energy and attention.

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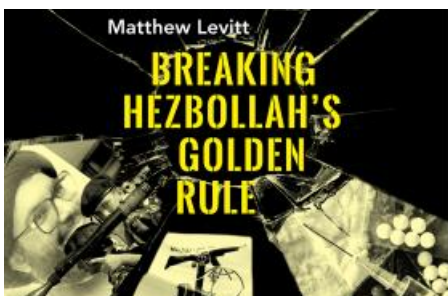
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