

The Rise of Bashar al-Asad

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Brief Analysis

March 8, 1999, marks the thirty-sixth anniversary of the Syrian "revolution" -- the coup d'etat that installed the Ba'th Party as the preeminent force in Syrian politics. This anniversary comes just one month after Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad was re-elected to his fifth seven-year term of office, which will end in 2006. If he completes his term of office, President Asad will be seventy-six years old. Not surprisingly, issues of succession loom large on the Syrian horizon.

Prior to his death in a January 1994 car accident, it was widely assumed that Asad's eldest son Basel, a major in an elite armored brigade, would be selected to succeed his father. In the aftermath of Basel's death, however, Bashar al-Asad (born in 1965), the second of five Asad children, appears to have replaced his brother as the leading candidate for the Syrian presidency. Despite protests from Asad that "there is nothing in our constitution and laws that entitles relatives to succession," recent developments in the Syrian political landscape suggest that Bashar is being groomed to inherit the mantle of Syrian leadership.

Meteoric Rise: At the time of Basel's death, Bashar was on the verge of completing his ophthalmology studies in London. At his father's request, Bashar returned to Syria to begin his political and military career. Initially, Bashar's political career entailed mainly ceremonial roles, ranging from delivering a eulogy for Basel to presenting the opening addresses at equestrian events. At the time, one foreign diplomat commented cynically that "they even create functions especially to wheel him out." Bashar's duties took on a more serious nature in November 1994 when he was promoted to the position of tank battalion commander. Syrian minister of defense Mustapha Tlass attended the promotion ceremony, and later reportedly told President Asad that Bashar "would make a good successor."

In January 1995, Bashar was made a major in the Presidential Guard. Prior to this promotion, posters in Damascus had displayed the countenances of the president and Basel. After January, however, new posters appeared picturing the president, Basel, and Bashar, with the caption: "our leader, our ideal, our hope." In July 1997, Bashar was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and named commander-in-chief of the Republican Guards -- the institution tasked with protecting the regime. In June 1998, Bashar, Tlass, and then-deputy chief of staff Ali Aslan (currently chief of staff) officiated at a major battle exercise. Then, in January 1999, Bashar was promoted to staff colonel -- positioning him for his next likely promotion, to the office of vice president for national security affairs, a

post vacant since his uncle Rif'at al-Asad's dismissal in February 1998.

Most recently, on February 25, 1999, Bashar paid a condolence call to Jordan's King Abdullah II on the death of his father King Hussein. According to accounts of the trip, Bashar's visit was treated by Jordan as an official state visit, and Bashar was greeted as a head of state. The symbolism of the meeting of the two young men was not lost on commentators, who cited this event -- perhaps prematurely -- as the dawning of a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders.

The Lebanon File: Meteoric rise in the military aside, Bashar's most important assignment and biggest challenge since his return to Syria is the Lebanon portfolio. Bashar had been involved in some capacity with Lebanon since his first official visit in May 1995. In late 1998, Bashar was assigned responsibility for the Lebanon portfolio (with the understanding that this file be administered under the direct supervision of his father). The Lebanon file, previously held by Syria's vice president, Abdel Halim Khaddam, and chief of staff, Hikmat al-Shihabi, is arguably the most important file in the administration.

About the time Bashar was taking charge of the Lebanese portfolio, elections in Lebanon brought in President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss. Following Lahoud's inauguration on November 24, Bashar traveled to Beirut to congratulate the President, who was selected for the position based on his pro-Syrian credentials. On December 24, Bashar met with Prime Minister Hoss to congratulate him on forming a government.

The transfer of responsibility over Lebanon from Khaddam to Bashar, as well as the Syrian choice of Lahoud, is indicative of a continuity of Syrian support for Hizballah. Lahoud is an outspoken supporter of Hizballah; so is Bashar, who recently commended Hizballah for "defending the honor of all Arabs." From 1995 through his assignment to the Lebanon file in 1998, Bashar met several times with Hizballah secretary general Hasan Nasrallah. Thus far, Bashar and Nasrallah seem to get along quite well. In a February 1999 interview, Nasrallah stated that he had a "fine relationship" with Bashar, and complimented him on his work in Lebanon.

Bashar's popularity in Lebanon appeared to soar following the election of Lahoud. But several incidents over the past few months have diminished Bashar's initially high standing. The February 8 Syrian referendum (i.e., elections) in Lebanon -- in which many of the estimated 1.7 million Syrians residing in Lebanon participated -- was extremely high profile. Syrian expatriates were able to cast their ballots at polling stations throughout Lebanon. Reportedly, the Lebanese were dismayed by the plastering of their country with banners of Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad. In addition, the appointment of Staff Brig. General Michele Sulayman, a longtime pro-Syrian officer, as head of the military has been unpopular with the population and the military. Scores of senior army officers in Lebanon resigned following the Sulayman appointment. Perhaps most importantly, however, Bashar's standing in Lebanon has suffered recently because of the perception that the Lahoud-Hoss Government -- closely identified with Bashar -- is mired in administrative issues, and is unable to attend to the critical economic morass facing Lebanon.

Next Steps? Since 1994, Hafiz al-Asad has taken a number of steps to strengthen Bashar -- both in terms of increasing his military and political responsibilities and by surrounding him with a cadre of loyal supporters. Yet, for Bashar to gain the presidency, or any other key position such as vice president for national security affairs, precedent suggests that he should first become a member of the Ba'th party National Command. It seems likely that Bashar will be appointed to this organization either at the next meeting of the Ba'th party congress -- which has been postponed until after the Israeli elections -- or at some other point in the near future. Likewise, the Syrian constitution stipulates that the president must be at least forty years old. A constitutional change would be required if Bashar were to assume the presidency prior to the end of his father's current term in 2006.

Other potential successors -- such as Rif'at, the well connected brother of Hafiz al-Asad who lives in de-facto exile -- wait in the wings. In less than five years, Bashar has been fast-tracked through the ranks of the Syrian military

hierarchy. The Lebanon file is perceived by many to be a test for Bashar; how he performs in Lebanon may determine whether he will receive the level of support necessary to someday succeed his father.

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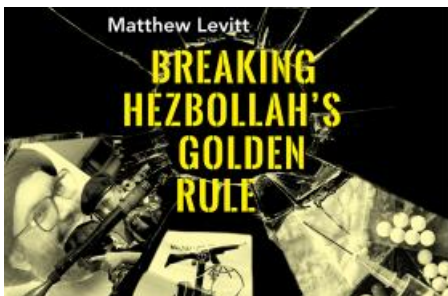
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