

Syria's Asad:

The Approach of a Fifth Term of Office

Feb 6, 1999



Brief Analysis

On February 8, 1999, the citizens of Syria will go to the polls to approve Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's candidacy for a fifth seven-year term of office as president. The previous four terms of office -- twenty-eight years of rule since he was elected president in February 1971, after a military coup in November 1970 -- were the most important and most significant in Syria's history, but there can be no doubt that the next term -- which will probably be his last -- will be the most important of them all.

Succession: During 1998, President Asad's son Bashar bolstered his standings, with the assistance of his father, as the leading candidate for succession. In February 1998, Rif'at al-Asad, the president's brother, was dismissed from the office of Vice President for National Security Affairs -- a post he has held since 1985. Although the position itself was empty of any content, it did provide him with some status and kept him in the race for the succession. In July 1998, it was announced in Damascus that Hikmat Shihabi, who had held the post as Chief of General Staff since 1974, was pensioned off. In addition, toward the end of the year, Bashar took over the "Lebanon Portfolio," pushing aside Vice President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who had been considered the "Syrian High Commissioner" in Lebanon. A short time later, in December 1998, Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri -- a close friend to Khaddam -- resigned. Hariri's replacement, Salim al-Huss, is known to be more compliant with Bashar's wishes. Rif'at, Shihabi, and Khaddam had been mentioned in the past several years as possible candidates to succeed Asad. Now, with the three effectively out of the way or pushed aside, Bashar is the remaining leading candidate.

No less important was the considerable number of replacements in the senior echelons of the army and security apparatus -- the purpose of which was to infuse new blood into the army-security apparatus in Syria, and especially to raise a generation of commanders loyal to Bashar, who had overseen their promotion in rank. Yet, it should be kept in mind that some of the old senior commanders are still actively serving in their positions (such as 'Ali Duba, Chief of the Military Intelligence Department, or Muhammad Khuli, Commander of the Air Force); however, the intermediate level in the army, such as division commanders, has taken on an entirely new face in the past several years. Of course, all of this helped promote Bashar's status.

It should be emphasized though, that Asad has still refrained from announcing publicly and unequivocally that he has named his son to succeed him -- perhaps his son's training period has not yet ended. Thus, the coming seven years will be decisive for the future of the succession, assuming that Asad survives. In the course of these seven years, it may be expected that Bashar will, eventually, entrench himself in the Syrian senior echelons, and that there will be a series of public moves which have been mentioned frequently in the past several years, such as Bashar's appointment as vice president, or his election as a member of the Ba'th Party Regional Command, the senior political body in the country.

Foreign Policy: The problem of the succession, as urgent and pressing as it may be, is not the only problem that President Asad will have to deal with in the upcoming term of office. Over the past several years Syria has perceived itself as being in a kind of a "pincer" situation: bound on the north by Turkey and the south by Israel. The growing

alliance between the two countries is viewed in Damascus as being clearly directed against Syria. Syria's concern increased greatly following a deterioration in the situation along the Syrian-Turkish border in October 1998. The Syrians felt they were the victims, since their support of Kurdish anti-Turkish terrorism had existed for over a decade, and they found it difficult to understand why Turkey had awakened only now in demanding that Syria cease its involvement in this Kurdish terrorism. In one way or another, Turkey's threatening language proved effective, at least in the short term, and Syria was forced to capitulate and concede to Turkish security demands.

An additional concern in Damascus is that Iraq, too, might fall prey to the "imperialist plot" directed toward Syria, i.e. that the regime of Iraqi president Saddam Husayn will collapse and be replaced by a pro-Western regime that will bend itself to the desires of Washington. Thus, in Syria's view, a weakened Saddam is preferable to a pro-Western regime that would help envelop Syria on all sides. This fear, therefore, is the reason behind the warming of relations between Damascus and Baghdad, expressed in growing trade ties between the two countries since the beginning of 1997.

Syria's increasing rapprochement with Iraq has been at the expense of Syria's attempts at improving relations with the United States. A clear example of this state of affairs was the unprecedented anti-American demonstrations in Damascus and other Syrian cities in the wake of Operation Desert Fox. These demonstrations were initiated and organized by the regime, and were apparently intended to signal to the United States that it would do well to ease the pressure on Iraq and to show greater initiative and determination in promoting Syrian interests in the bogged down peace process with Israel, and also allow the Syrian public to give vent to the pressures plaguing it. Yet, the demonstrations got out of control, although it may be assumed that the demonstrators believed that they were carrying out the wishes of the Syrian authorities. Whatever the case may be, the demonstrations dealt a severe blow to Syria's efforts to improve relations with the United States.

Economics: Finally, President Asad's upcoming term of office will be in the shadow of an increasing socioeconomic crisis. Last year was a bad year for the Syrian economy. It marked the end of years of economic prosperity and oil wealth that Syria had enjoyed since the early 1990s. The decline in oil prices in the past year wiped out almost thirty percent of the country's projected income from oil, and necessitated the introduction of strict restraint and belt-tightening. A more pervading reason for this is the rapid growth of the Syrian population, giving Syria one of the highest birth rates in the world. This situation, which has brought increased unemployment and the collapse of social services, has forced the Syrian government since the early 1990s to introduce greater liberalization in the Syrian economy. Yet, the trend toward greater openness and even liberalization has been halted almost completely over the past few years. This halt was partly because of the Syrian government's dread of internal changes that would undermine its total control over Syria's economy, and the opposition by those close to the regime to the social inequalities that began to be evident in the past several years as an outgrowth of liberalization.

Conclusion: To conclude, Syria today is at a crossroads. The question of the succession is the most urgent and immediate issue on the agenda in Damascus. In the intermediate period, there is the matter of Syria's regional and international status and, finally, in the long range there is the socioeconomic crisis facing the country, which might lead to political instability that characterizes other Arab states in the region. Asad's candidacy will, without a doubt, be approved by a resounding majority, but whatever his past achievements, the present state of affairs in Syria is sad. In any event, the real challenge is still before him.

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