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**DAMASCUS COURTS THE WEST:  
SYRIAN POLITICS, 1989-1991**

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## PREFACE

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The past year has witnessed a series of extraordinary events in the Middle East. One of the most significant, and perhaps the most intriguing, has been Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad's turn towards the West, and his eagerness to accommodate the United States after years of leading the anti-West rejectionist camp of Arab politics. This new direction in Syrian policy has led to Syria siding with the U.S. led coalition against Iraq and its willingness to engage in the peace process being fostered by the United States. At the same time it has enabled Syria to consolidate its presence in Lebanon without criticism from the West and to generally be accepted as a more respectable member of the family of nations.

Syria's political and strategic importance in the Middle East, and its key role in the unfolding peace process, lend special interest and salience to Daniel Pipes' study of the recent shifts in Syrian policy. In this paper he places Assad's current actions in the context of his career, his regime, and the challenges he faces as a result of the loss of Soviet patronage in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's steady disengagement from regional clients and issues. This, more than anything, Daniel Pipes argues, has stimulated Assad's new policy direction, opening up new opportunities—yet generating new uncertainties as well. Notwithstanding his present cooperativeness, Assad is still a cunning, if often brilliant, authoritarian leader, and Western policymakers would do well to tread with caution in dealing with him. After analyzing Assad's past successes and current predicaments,

Dr. Pipes offers a series of policy suggestions that should be of great help to Western nations in assessing how they should best avail themselves of this new moment in Syrian politics for the good of the people of the Middle East—Syrian and non-Syrian alike.

This study's depth, timeliness and literary grace should make it a valuable addition to current policy debates, and a crucial document for assisting American policymakers in setting the U.S. compass for the next round of Mideast diplomacy.

Barbi Weinberg  
President  
August 1991

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad has in the past year seemed to change direction, first with tentative moves toward liberalization, then by siding with the American-led coalition that fought against Saddam Hussein and, perhaps most dramatically, by acceding to America's wish that it attend a peace conference with Israel. There is no doubt that U.S.-Syrian relations have greatly improved in the process. The meaning of that shift, however, is far from certain. How should America respond to Assad's new course? Should he be accepted as a partner in U.S. regional efforts, or perhaps the U.S. should take advantage of this moment to pressure him into altering his regime? Is this a new face that Syria is presenting to the West, and if so, does it call for caution or hope or perhaps both?

Brutal totalitarian though Assad may be, he is a subtle and highly sophisticated politician. Unlike Saddam Hussein, his perennial rival for the mantle of Ba'athist leadership, Assad is shrewd, nimble, patient, and measured (though by no means squeamish) in his use of violence. Since assuming power in 1969 he has skillfully pursued his chief goals: consolidating his minority-based 'Alawi regime, extending the reach of Syria's regional influence and assuming the lead in the Arab military confrontation with Israel. The latter goal, which has taken the form of an attempt to attain strategic parity with the Zionist foe, has remained elusive, not for strictly military reasons, but because the police state that Assad has imposed on Syria has not been able to match the social and economic development of the Jewish State. The Syrian economy in

particular has been nearly run into the ground by two decades of Assad's rule.

Throughout, Assad has depended on his superpower patron, the Soviet Union. The disengagement from regional entanglements initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev was an unexpected and potentially threatening development for Assad, auguring the loss of his patron and of a wide network of military and political relationships throughout the Soviet bloc, at a time when his economy could ill afford this. By mid-1990, the writing was on the wall. It is this development more than any other that accounts for Assad's courtship of the United States.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait provided Assad with an unexpected solution to his problems and he played this opportunity masterfully. By allying himself with the United States, Assad was able to finally best his Ba'athist rival, Saddam, secure his grip on Lebanon, win economic assistance and enter the good graces of the United States. While the Kuwait crisis strengthened Assad's hand vis-a-vis the PLO, Iraq and Lebanon, it grew weaker in relation to Jordan, Turkey and Israel.

Having moved Syria's government closer to the United States, can Assad now end Syria's longstanding hostility towards Israel? Assad's need to prove his *bona fides* to his non-'Alawi countrymen have long made the chances of his concluding peace with Israel remote. Since Egypt concluded a separate peace with Israel in 1978, Syria has been the linchpin of the state-to-state confrontation that, notwithstanding the drama of the Palestinian uprising, is the heart of the Arab-Israel conflict. Syria's people have long been unalterably opposed to peace with Israel. Generally, Assad has overridden the popular will when it comes to the crucial domestic issues at the heart of his regime and done his best to heed it on the comparatively less-crucial questions of foreign policy.

At the same time, there has long been a wide consensus across the Israeli political spectrum against ceding the Golan Heights, which Syria lost in its offensive against Israel in 1967. Yet Assad could reach some sort of peace if the right incentives—avoiding a major war or improving relations with the West—were in place. The defeat of Iraq has tipped the military balance against Syria on Israel's eastern front; at the same time, Assad has given no sign of curtailing any of his

current military capabilities. His current entry into the peace process seems more a change of tactics than a change of heart, more along the lines of Arafat's declaration of late 1988 than Anwar Sadat's journey to Jerusalem.

Assad does respond to incentives and his behavior could be changed by the United States if it undertakes its policies towards Syria with sufficient care and circumspection. Major changes in Syria are unlikely until Sunnis attain power, something which cannot be expected, if at all, for some time to come. Meanwhile, as the price of its friendship, continued co-operation and support, America can demand that Assad take a number of steps, some far-reaching and some symbolic, bearing in mind Assad's extraordinary agility and the moral unacceptability of the regime he represents. Specific moves that America could undertake would include urging Assad to improve his human rights record, make good on his financial obligations to Western countries, and stop supporting terrorism and drug-trafficking.

Most likely, Assad will try to induce Washington to pay him for allowing himself to be helped. Rather than allow this to happen, the United States can take advantage of Assad's relative weakness at this time to effect positive change, through policies that synthesize caution for today with hope for the future.



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## INTRODUCTION: ASSAD, THE ODD MAN IN

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After thirty-five years of grim relations, Damascus and Washington suddenly find themselves agreeing on a few things. First, some 18,000 troops and 300 tanks from Syria stood side-by-side for several months with their American counterparts in the deserts of Arabia, facing down Saddam Hussein. When war came, American and Syrian soldiers stood together and called themselves allies.

Second, the Syrian media toned down their habitually vicious anti-American rhetoric; no longer did the United States stand accused of heinous imperialism. At the same time, diplomatic contacts increased steadily, from the assistant secretary of state for Middle East affairs visiting Damascus in August 1990, to the secretary of state in September, to President Bush meeting Hafez al-Assad in Geneva in November (the first such summit in thirteen years).

Finally, President Hafez al-Assad agreed in July, apparently without preconditions, to participate in an American-sponsored peace conference. Terming President Bush's initiative "an acceptable basis" for conducting peace talks with Israel, the Syrian leader may have opened a new era in Syrian foreign policy.

These changes, some of them quite abrupt, raise several questions: Have the Syrians been riding out foul weather, waiting for circumstances to improve? Or is a more fundamental shift underway? With regard to Israel, has Assad undergone a change of heart, or has he made tactical adjustments in a moment of weakness? Should the U.S. government respond by attempting to build on a new and still

raw quasi-alliance, or should it again distance itself from a brutal tyrant?

Some answers came soon after the war with Iraq ended and Secretary of State James A. Baker III began his rounds of shuttle diplomacy, casting Syria in a lead role. His efforts soon made it clear that while the Syrians were unlikely to make rapid or deep changes in their relations with Israel, they were willing to countenance tactical shifts of genuine significance. But what of matters lying beyond the Arab-Israel peace process—Syria's internal circumstances, relations with other neighbors and the outside world?

I attempt to answer these questions by presenting a *tour d'horizon* of Syria in the tumultuous period between the Berlin Wall's collapse in November 1989 and the summer of 1991. We begin with an analysis of Assad's political character and a survey of recent developments both inside Syria and outside it (with special attention to the decline of Soviet power and the Kuwait crisis). We then bring under close scrutiny what is probably Syria's key bilateral relationship, the one with Israel. After some thoughts on Assad's freedom of maneuver and an assessment of his position today, we focus on U.S.-Syrian ties and conclude with recommendations for American policymakers.

A methodological note: Before 1970, there was a profusion of information about Syria—insiders' rumors, documents, and memoirs that reached print. Syrians had a deserved reputation for gregariousness and the study of their country was relatively simple. But Syria is now a land of near-silence, and little except officially-sanctioned information gets out. Survey research barely exists, or if it does, it is not made public. Foreign press coverage is considerably more restricted than in the USSR; and the domestic media have yet to discover *glasnost*. Freedom of expression is so limited that even novels and other forms of fiction offer little insight into the mood of Syrians.

Therefore, just as with other closed countries, generalizations about Syrian public opinion must be derived from such inadequate sources as Syrian opposition groups and *emigres*, as well as foreigners in Syria, especially diplomats and journalists.

D.P.  
July 1991

Washington and  
Philadelphia



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## I POLITICS IN SYRIA

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“Assad is Syria and Syria is Assad.”<sup>1</sup> As in all one-man dictatorships, politics in Syria is dominated by the ruler, his goals, and foibles. Hafez al-Assad unilaterally issues the country’s laws and makes most of the life-and-death decisions affecting the twelve million Syrians he rules. To understand Syrian politics, it is therefore crucial to begin with the personality and aspirations of its ruler. One way to approach Assad’s character is by comparing him with Saddam Hussein.

### ASSAD VS. SADDAM

The two men have much in common. They are about the same age (Saddam was born in 1937, Assad in 1930) and come from minority backgrounds. Both grew up in an impoverished countryside with a twentieth century tradition of exporting people to the cities. Both experienced Egyptian prisons and have effectively ruled their countries since about the same year (1972 for Saddam, 1969 for Assad). Both imposed an extreme centralization, to create a stable order where turmoil had previously prevailed. Both are far more interested in building their militaries than their countries. Each of them looked to Moscow for primary support, but on occasion wooed the U.S. government. Both rely extensively on the terrorist

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<sup>1</sup>Amos Gilboa, a former Israeli intelligence officer, quoted in Alan Cowell, “Trouble in Damascus,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 1990.

instrument. They have claimed to represent the Palestinians and sought to control weak neighbors.

In personality, they share vaulting ambitions, a passion for secrecy, and a Manichean outlook that divides the world into agents and enemies. Both tend toward brinkmanship and a readiness to sacrifice the interests of their countries for personal and ethnic interests. Their political systems rely to a strikingly parallel degree on Ba'ath Party control, the pervasive use of informants, and brutality. (Middle East Watch found torture in Iraq to be "used routinely"; Amnesty International has termed the Syrian jails "almost a research center for torture.") Though life in Syria is an iota better,<sup>2</sup> the two dictatorships in the Fertile Crescent are about as similar as any pair of governments on the planet.

The two men also differ profoundly. Where Saddam revels in brutality for its own sake, Assad resorts to it as an instrument of power. The one kills with his own hands, the other keeps his distance from such unpleasanties. Saddam's ambitions know no limit: he seeks to become both the greatest leader in Iraqi history and a giant on the world stage; his dreams of glory distort practical decisionmaking. In contrast, Assad knows his limitations and acts within their parameters: the conquest of Lebanon and the perpetuation of 'Alawi rule are quite enough for him for now, thank you. Saddam's overt aggression makes him enemies everywhere; Assad's is cloaked in an ambiguity which allows hostile states the luxury of ignoring his trespasses. Both leaders follow policies which the outside world often finds difficult to understand, but while Saddam confuses observers through stupidity, Assad does so through subtlety.

While Saddam and Assad both engage in international brinkmanship, only Assad can reliably locate the brink. Saddam displays an increasingly uncontrollable streak of impatience<sup>3</sup> and has a terrible sense of timing (the invasion of

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<sup>2</sup>But not much more. Robert Fisk exaggerates terribly when he writes that in comparison to Iraq, Syria is "indeed a 'liberal democracy.'" See *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup>Saddam Hussein did not get to where he is today by making the sort of wrong-headed decisions that have so consistently been the case during the past year. Indeed, two of his biographers, Efraim Karsh and Inari

Kuwait could not have occurred at a worse moment from the Iraqi point of view); Assad is infinitely deliberate and has a most refined timing (the seizure of Beirut in October 1990, fifteen years after Syrian military involvement in Lebanon began, was a political masterpiece). More broadly, Saddam Hussein showed in 1990-91 that he may be one of the worst strategists and tacticians of history;<sup>4</sup> in contrast, Assad rightly prides himself on his skills as a military planner. Like his adopted namesake, the lion, Assad is a patient operator. He probes his opponents' weaknesses, waits for the right moment, chooses the most advantageous field of battle, and strikes. In this way, Assad has defeated one enemy after another—the Muslim Brethren, Lebanese militias, American troops in Beirut, Israelis in south Lebanon, and Iraqi armed forces. Observers are in agreement as to his impressive skills. Thus, Annie Laurent and Antoine Basbous see his main characteristics as “patience and a taste for secrecy.”<sup>5</sup> Dov Tamari concludes that “the Syrian regime has demonstrated patience and restraint on the one hand, persistence and stubbornness on the other.”<sup>6</sup>

Imagine—to take this comparison one step further—that Assad ruled in Baghdad, and that he wanted to bring Kuwait, with all its wealth and coastline, under his control. What would he have done differently from Saddam? Everything.

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Rautsi, repeatedly stress his being a “fundamentally cautious man.” *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography*, (London: Brassey's [UK], 1991), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>The remarks of Mustafa Tallas, Syria's defense minister, are to the point: “Saddam Hussein could not defeat Iran, so how is he going to defeat twenty-eight states headed by the United States? This is a very simple matter of arithmetic that he should have considered, but he thinks like an Australian mule. He thought that by putting a marshal's insignia on his shoulder he would be able to defeat the United States in battle” (*Akhbar al-Yawm*, January 26, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Annie Laurent and Antoine Basbous, *Guerres secrètes au Liban* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 78.

<sup>6</sup>Dov Tamari, “The Syrian-Israeli Balance of Forces and Strategic Parity,” *The Middle East Military Balance, 1989-90*, edited by Joseph Alpher (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990), p. 95.

He would have prepared the way years ahead of time by hosting Kuwaiti dissident movements in Baghdad and laying repeated but elliptical claims to Kuwait. When the time was right, he would have solicited an invitation from *bona fide* Kuwaiti leaders to send Iraqi troops into Kuwait. Rather than seize the whole country, he would have taken only some slices of it (the Rumayla oil field, Bubiyan and Warba Islands) and worked to get his allies and agents into power. The outside world would surely have protested, but Assad's salami tactics would have allowed him to take Kuwait without sustained armed opposition. In the end, just as everyone acquiesced to his seizure of Lebanon, so they would have gone along with his control over Kuwait.

In short, Assad is the virtuoso politician of the Middle East.

## ASSAD'S GOALS

Understanding Assad's motives is no easy task, for he is a subtle and highly sophisticated politician whose words only vaguely point to what he thinks, and whose actions only suggest what he actually intends.<sup>7</sup> Even the most basic matters are in question. Does Assad pragmatically exploit anti-Zionism as a means to an end or does he feel, as some argue, an "intense hatred of Israel"?<sup>8</sup>

Part of the mystery results from his readiness to shift policies, quickly, dramatically, and with a nimbleness that never ceases to impress Middle East analysts. On occasion this has led to stunning reversals of course. He dropped the Palestinian-Muslim-Leftist coalition in the Lebanese civil war in June 1976 in favor of the Maronite-Rightist side. He condemned the Egyptian government for its March 1979 peace

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<sup>7</sup>Two biographies of Assad have recently appeared in English: Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad, The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988) and Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). While Seale's book contains much new information about Asad and Syria, its apologetic quality renders it less than trustworthy.

<sup>8</sup>Margaret G. Hermann, "Syria's Hafez al-Assad," in *Leadership and Negotiation in the Middle East*, edited by Barbara Kellerman and Jeffrey Z. Rubin (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 73.

treaty with Israel, repeated that condemnation regularly for a decade, then suddenly made up with Cairo in December 1989. Still, it is possible to point to several constant goals. Three stand out. Going from greater to lesser, they are: continued rule by Assad and the 'Alawis; the achievement of Greater Syria; and the desire for strategic parity with Israel.

The single most important goal of the Assad regime is to retain Syria in the hands of Hafez al-Assad, his kinsmen, and the 'Alawi people. 'Alawis, who constitute about 12 percent of Syria's population, are a mystery to most of their countrymen. Though sometimes portrayed as a sect of Islam, 'Alawism is in fact a wholly distinct religion. It rejects the sacred law of Islam (the Shari'a), it maintains an elaborate but secret theology, and its rites are alien to Islam. As the impoverished residents of an isolated region, 'Alawis have a long history of being feared and despised by mainstream Muslims. Accordingly, the notion of an 'Alawi ruler in Damascus is repugnant to most Syrian citizens; and this animosity has shadowed Assad and the 'Alawis since completing their ascent to power in February 1966. In turn, Muslim hostility has compelled the regime to recruit heavily among its own community, thereby causing it to take on a distinctly sectarian cast. The years have intensified these resentments, to the point that Assad's overthrow would almost certainly lead to communal violence against 'Alawis. To protect themselves, then, the 'Alawis must stay in power.<sup>9</sup> The result is a vicious cycle of hostility and repression.

Still, the government makes efforts to reach out to the majority Sunni Muslim population. Like many other unpopular regimes, it does so by avoiding the contentions of the domestic arena and stressing issues of foreign policy instead. Foremost among these, at least since 1974, has been the dream of a Greater Syria—a notional territory including the territories of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the occupied territories, Jordan, and a portion of Turkey. Greater Syria is a new term for what until the fall of the Ottoman Empire was just called "Syria." It is the Levant, a discrete cultural and ecological area east of the Mediterranean Sea. Greater Syria is hardly Assad's invention; quite the contrary,

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<sup>9</sup>They have also developed a militia, headed by Hafez al-Assad's brother Jamil, made up only of 'Alawis. Should the regime fall, this militia will probably protect the 'Alawis' home region of Latakia.

many others—including Antun Sa'ada and King 'Abdullah of Jordan—have sought since 1920 to piece the units together. But Assad, who has made this goal a centerpiece of his foreign policy since about 1974, has had more success at it than any of his predecessors.

Israel is the most prominent of Greater Syria's several regions, and for several reasons. Anti-Zionism permits Assad to atone for the 'Alawi community's (and indeed, Assad's own grandfather's) past friendliness to Zionism.<sup>10</sup> It allows Assad to tap the Sunni Muslims' hostility toward the Jewish state, binding his regime to the disenfranchised majority. (My instinct—and it's not much more—tells me that after Palestinians, Syrians are the Arabic-speakers most reluctant to accept Israel's existence.) The effort to destroy Israel appeals to the Sunnis, giving these disenfranchised elements something in common with the regime. Assad's ambitions toward Palestine take both direct form (he claims Palestine as Southern Syria) and indirect (he stands up for Palestinian rights and tries effectively to control Palestinian organizations).<sup>11</sup> Behind his flexibility of form lies a consistent claim; the future of the region west of the Jordan River should be subject to Damascus.

Since 1978, this goal has taken the form of a doctrine of strategic parity, or the ability to confront Israel from a position of strength. Assad defines parity in the broadest terms: "It does not mean that we should have a tank for each Israeli tank . . . Strategic parity is composed of many elements. Before parity in weapons, it is parity in the cultural, economic, and political

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<sup>10</sup>For example, a June 1936 letter to the French prime minister signed by six 'Alawi notables, possibly including Assad's grandfather, expressed solidarity with the Zionists in Palestine: "Those good Jews brought civilization and peace to the Arab Muslims, and they dispersed gold and prosperity over Palestine without damage to anyone or taking anything by force." Abu Musa al-Hariri, *Al-'Alawiyun— an-Nusayriyun* (Beirut: n.p., 1400/1980), pp. 228-31.

<sup>11</sup>Proof that Assad's interest in the Palestinians has nothing to do with humanitarian impulses and everything to do with his ambition to control an Arab regime in Jerusalem lies in the execrable treatment of Palestinians living in Syria. For details, see Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990), pp. 94-99.

fields.”<sup>12</sup> In theory, parity is as much offensive as defensive; in fact, it appears to be a holding posture until Syria’s alliances (with Arab and Muslim states, the Soviet bloc) come out of the doldrums and its allies take a more active role versus Israel.

## PARTY RULE

Ironically, while Assad has more than achieved a strict military balance (see Appendix I), strategic parity has completely eluded him, precisely because the cultural, economic, and political development of Syria has languished under his rule. Assad has imposed a Soviet-style police state on the Syrian population, with all the poverty and repression such a system entails. The Ba’ath party openly runs the government apparatus, which in turn runs the country for the benefit of a small *nomenklatura*. So heavily is the press censored that one Syrian writer defined its fundamental task being “to prevent information from reaching the people rather than provide it.”<sup>13</sup> As a report from mid-1990 made clear, secrecy abounds:

The official inflation rate has not been announced for a year, supposedly because of “computer problems.” The last five-year economic plan, due out in 1986, has never been published. There are no telephone books published in Syria—if you don’t know the number already, don’t try to call. The national budget is published but it’s calculated with four totally different exchange rates so no one can make heads or tails of it. When Syrian clocks spring forward and fall back with the seasons, the official change is announced only the day before.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Radio Damascus, May 7, 1990. References to radio and television broadcasts derive from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report*, as do some news agency and newspaper reports. I have amended *FBIS* translations for purposes of style.

<sup>13</sup>Adib Sadiq (pseud.), “The Road to Damascus is Plagued with Censors,” *Index on Censorship*, February 1990, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>Carol Morello, “Only Mystery Lives in Syria’s Presidential Palace,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 8, 1990.

As usual, official secrecy also implies intrusion into every aspect of the citizen's private life. Government agents and informants are ubiquitous, to the point that anyone who would drive a taxi or serve tables in Syria must agree in advance to pass information to the security agencies. Intimacy is eroded and privacy is an almost unknown privilege.

Human rights abuses are legion, and have generally grown worse with time. No less than fifteen security agencies, almost all independent of each other and all reporting to Assad himself, keep order in the country. Consider the judiciary system: hardly a political prisoner arrested in the past decade has had a trial; judges under Assad went from a modicum of independence to utter subservience; and the system as a whole moved from at least some respect for legal forms to none whatsoever. Summing up these problems, Middle East Watch called Assad regime practices "repugnant" and went on to explain why:

Having killed at least ten thousand of its citizens during the past two decades, it continues to kill through summary executions and violent treatment in prison. It tortures on a routine basis and arrests and holds thousands without charge or trial. It persecutes some of its minorities. It denies freedom of expression and association to its citizens and denies them their right to democratic participation in government. It has imposed extremely harsh conditions in its occupation of Lebanon, where its actions are even more violent than those in Syria itself.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, thousands of Syrians have fled their country; and there is good reason to think that, were the gates opened, many more would follow them.

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<sup>15</sup>Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Syria*, p. 134. This report considers human rights in their widest definition, and contains a very impressive, systematic, up-to-date, and accurate survey of domestic circumstances in Syria.



## ECONOMIC TROUBLES

Perhaps the greatest domestic problem facing the Ba'ath regime is the economy, which has been stalled for years in the grip of socialist senescence, over-centralization, huge military expenditures, cronyist corruption, and a very high population growth of 3.8 percent a year. Inept government policies have resulted in an annual inflation rate of some 50 percent, a grossly overvalued Syrian lira, officially four times higher than the black-market rate, and debts of some \$6 billion to the West and \$9 billion to the USSR. It gets worse: although 30 percent of the work force is engaged in agriculture, grain has to be imported.<sup>16</sup> Cities routinely experience electricity shortfalls. Computing with the "neighboring country" rate,<sup>17</sup> ordinary civil servants make less than \$50 a month. The economic crisis is at times so severe that even Syrian agents in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights have seen their pay cut by up to one-half its former levels.

These problems create a vicious circle: a shortage of foreign exchange leads to missing spare parts, and this in turn leads to factories working at a fraction of capacity; the effect, of course, is less foreign exchange. Foreign currency reserves have at times been down to a mere 20 days' worth. Such ordinary items as toilet paper are missing for long stretches at a time.

Oil is the one bright spot on Syria's economic horizon. The country now produces around 480,000 barrels a day, of which some 220,000 barrels are exported. But, as the Middle East experience of the twentieth century makes abundantly clear, while oil revenues can bring sudden wealth, they do not translate into modernization. Rather, they offer a temporary fix which usually eventually harms the economy in the long term by creating dependent attitudes and distorted institutions.

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<sup>16</sup>As with other command economies, some reforms are simple to make. For example, by paying the market price for wheat, the government contributed to a 22 percent increase in the 1991 crop.

<sup>17</sup>Syria has three legal exchange rates: official (11 Syrian pounds to the dollar); promotional (20 pounds to the dollar); and neighboring country (42 pounds to the dollar). The third of these equals the old black-market rate.

The Soviet bloc's poor economic record has stimulated increasing eagerness in Damascus for forms of privatization and foreign investment. Privatization has taken the form of mixed (i.e., public and private) joint stock companies in such domains as agriculture and tourism. Foreign investment has been made more welcome, especially with the passage of Law 10 in early May 1991, which allows non-Syrians freely to import and export, to maintain hard currency accounts, and to repatriate profits.

Assad himself takes notoriously little interest in economic issues, with the single exception of oil production. Partially as a result, the regime does not acknowledge the dire state of affairs. In early 1990, for example, Prime Minister Mahmud Zu'bi told an interviewer that "We have never been more satisfied with our economic situation than we are today"<sup>18</sup>—a statement bespeaking indifference mixed with arrogance. Not surprisingly, the Syrian opposition seeks to win support by painting an extremely dire picture of deprivation, even starvation. 'Adnan Sa'd ad-Din, a Muslim Brethren leader in Syria, captured this sentiment in 1990 when he asserted that "Syria has been looted and there is no more to be taken."<sup>19</sup>

Despite these problems, things seemed to be going Assad's way until about 1987. Defying expectations, he turned the Syrian Arab Republic—with its small population, its meager economy of \$18 billion, its social tensions and communal conflicts—into a leading player in the Middle East. Indeed, Syria's government is arguably less influenced by economic considerations than any other in the world today. In masterly fashion Assad had by the late 1980's developed a weak base into a state capable of upsetting great power initiatives in Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict, of intimidating the rich oil-exporting states, and of fielding a formidable military force.

Then came Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika, and the decline of Soviet bloc ambitions in the Middle East.

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<sup>18</sup>*Al-Hayat* (London), February 12, 1990. Quoted in *Middle East Economic Digest*, February 23, 1990. Zu'bi's satisfaction presumably reflects the improvement in current account deficits that Syria achieved as a result of its increasing oil exports.

<sup>19</sup>*Al-Yawm as-Sabi'*, March 5, 1990.

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## II SOVIET RETREAT AND THE KUWAIT CRISIS

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### NO MORE SOVIET BLOC

The old guard in Eastern Europe and the USSR was a mainstay for Assad.<sup>1</sup> It provided him with a great deal of practical help, including financial aid, military training, intelligence, weapons, safe pouches and scholarships; in addition, it enthusiastically took up his causes. When Assad came under attack at international fora the old guard stuck with him; its representatives took the time to attend his special occasions and sit through his parades.

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<sup>1</sup>Soviet-Syrian relations are the subject of a surprisingly large and varied body of scholarship. In English alone, at least one book a year on this subject has been published since 1987: International Security Council, *The Soviet-Syrian Alliance and Security of the Middle East* (New York: International Security Council, 1987); Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Assad Years* (London: Routledge, 1988); John P. Hannah, *At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era* (Washington, D.C. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989); Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955: A Troubled Alliance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990); and Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy towards Syria since 1970* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991).

Only the International Security Council volume points to the closeness of the two states' ties; the other studies stress tensions. As a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on a previous occasion, I wrote an article ("Syria: The Cuba of the Middle East?" *Commentary*, July 1986) making the case for the minority point of view.

Central Europe's new rulers are not only inclined to renounce ties with the friends of the old regime, but (in the words of Israel's then-foreign minister) they were "waiting in line" to renew relations with Israel.<sup>2</sup> Adding insult to injury, new governments in Central Europe have atoned for past sins by turning confidential files over to Israeli intelligence. Assad himself admitted how badly recent events had gone, telling a country-wide audience in early 1990 that Israel "has become the main beneficiary among all world nations from the international changes which have taken place."<sup>3</sup> And if things are going well for Israel, that is automatically bad news for the Assad regime.

To make matters worse, changes in Eastern Europe have inspired Arab journalists, intellectuals, and others to ask provocative questions about political legitimacy in their own countries. Why should Arabs be endlessly subject to police regimes? What about democracy, civil rights, and the rule of law? As a much-quoted Kuwaiti editorial put it at the very end of 1989, the "people have woken up and punishment will follow."<sup>4</sup> *Al-Hayat* of London put the matter even more sharply: "The Arab Ceausescu—of which there are many examples—have outdone their mentor."<sup>5</sup> These questions are known to have been widely, though only privately, echoed within Syria. In response, the regime tried to deflect attention from Eastern Europe; Syrian television, for example, conspicuously did not show Nicolae Ceausescu's execution on Syrian television.

Changes in the USSR itself presented even more worrisome problems for Assad. Gorbachev himself condoned, and possibly instigated, the toppling of the old guard in Eastern Europe; might he not do the same in Syria? In a private interview with American visitors, Aleksandr Zotov, the Soviet ambassador in Damascus, acknowledged describing Assad to Gorbachev as "the Brezhnev of Syria"—precisely the kind of

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<sup>2</sup>Moshe Arens on *Kol Yisrael*, December 28, 1989.

<sup>3</sup>Damascus Television, March 8, 1990.

<sup>4</sup>*As-Siyasa* and *Arab Times*, December 26, 1989.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Alan Cowell, "Trouble in Damascus," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 1990.

portrayal Assad most fears, suggesting as it does a political distancing and diminished support.

Gorbachev distanced the Soviet Union from the Syrian stance toward Israel. In April 1987 he publicly told a stony-faced Assad that the absence of relations between the USSR and Israel "cannot be considered normal."<sup>6</sup> Already a few months later, according to an unnamed Western diplomat quoted in *The Washington Post*, the flow of Soviet arms to Syria was "down to a trickle."<sup>7</sup> More cautiously, John P. Hannah estimated in late 1989 that arms shipments to Syria had dropped by more than 50 percent during Gorbachev's tenure.<sup>8</sup> In part too, this change resulted from the Soviets' ever-increasing demand for cash on the barrel.

The Soviet opening to Israel rubbed salt in the wound. The Kremlin understood that full relations with Jerusalem were the prerequisite to taking part in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, and it moved toward these with haste. The emigration of hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to Israel was seen in Damascus as near-treachery. Soviet trade with Israel increased several-fold. And reports of Soviet willingness to sell Israel Patriot-style systems to defend against ballistic missiles<sup>9</sup> surely raised profound doubts in Damascus about the future of its relations with the Kremlin.

Further, Soviet interest in the region plummeted as domestic problems multiplied and malaise took over; the foreign adventures of past decades gave way to a deep introspection. The Kremlin obviously had more urgent uses for its resources than the continued subsidy of the Syrian armed forces; and it had higher political priorities than the Arab war on Israel. In Moshe Arens' understated words, Assad "today knows that he no longer enjoys the same degree of across-the-board support from the Soviet Union that he enjoyed before."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>*Pravda*, April 25, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>*The Washington Post*, September 25, 1987.

<sup>8</sup>*The New York Times*, November 28, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>*Al-Hamishmar* and *Ha'aretz*, June 16, 1991.

<sup>10</sup>*Kol Yisrael*, December 28, 1989.

Like many others, the Syrian leadership sees the need to respond to changes in the Soviet Union by going beyond the Kremlin to establish bonds with new, emerging centers of power within the borders of the decaying Soviet empire. Their only natural constituency being the 55 million Muslims who make up one-fifth of the Soviet population, these have been the objects of Syrian attention. Visits were exchanged between Syrian officials and those of the six Muslim republics (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan); during them, the Syrians went out of their way to treat their counterparts as political forces in their own right.

### THE SOVIETS HANG ON

Yet, while changes in the Soviet-Syrian relationship are real and profound, they must not be exaggerated. Moscow remains engaged in the Middle East and Assad continues to be its principal ally in the region. In 1988, well into the era of new thinking, Assad granted the Soviets a lease without term to construct a naval base at the port city of Tartus, making this the only Soviet base in the Mediterranean and possibly the largest permanent Soviet naval base outside the USSR. NATO sources quoted in *Jane's Defence Weekly* noted that the Tartus base gave "a significant boost to the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean."<sup>11</sup> The base also gave the Syrians leverage over their Soviet patron—something that may have influenced the Kremlin decision to cancel \$1 billion in Syrian debt.

Nor is that all. Some 2,500 Soviet military advisors continue to work in Syria and advanced Soviet *materiel* still arrives. In May 1990, Assad indicated he had Kremlin assurances to "help Syria to modernize its armed forces."<sup>12</sup> The reported \$2 billion deal for Soviet arms in early 1991 may have been carried out in the context of those assurances. Given the many billions Damascus already owes Moscow, this is a noteworthy commitment.

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<sup>11</sup>*Jane's Defence Weekly*, July 29, 1989. The Soviets admitted only to "small repairs and replenishment of water and food" in Tartus (*TASS*, August 31, 1988).

<sup>12</sup>Radio Damascus, May 7, 1990.

Relations remain thick. For example, three top Syrian officials—Defense Minister Mustafa Tallas, Foreign Minister Faruq Sharaa, and Vice-President ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam—each led a delegation to Moscow in early 1991. The two states continue to praise each other and affirm their intention to work together, sometimes going to the extent of cheerfully pretending that it’s business as usual. Assad maintained that “our relations with the USSR have not changed” and that the bond “is as firm as it has always been.”<sup>13</sup> In reply, Mikhail Gorbachev assured Assad of continued support: “While the Soviet Union has seen a good many changes, one thing that will not change is our relations with Syria.”<sup>14</sup>

The two states continue to adopt similar stands on a range of Middle East issues. Both opposed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, yet both had reservations about the coalition’s use of force and tried to avoid a ground war. With regard to the U.S.-brokered peace process, as recently as May 1991, the foreign ministers declared their views to be “largely identical.”<sup>15</sup> Moscow’s attitude toward Syrian aggression is murky, to say the least. In a late 1989 interview, for example, Zotov publicly announced that his government would provide the Syrians only with “reasonable defensive sufficiency,”<sup>16</sup> only to follow this with a press conference to deny his statement. Moscow did not protest Syrian hegemony in Lebanon.

Assad may have reached the same conclusion as have some Americans: while Soviet intentions are presently uncertain, a country with a long imperial tradition, 30,000 nuclear weapons, the world’s largest air force, and the second largest army and navy cannot be counted out. If this is his view, then it is in his interest not only to keep lines to Moscow open, but to remain loyal to Soviet interests.

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<sup>13</sup>Radio Damascus, February 27, March 8, 1990.

<sup>14</sup>Syrian Vice-President Khaddam, quoting Gorbachev in *Al-Ittihad al-Ushu‘i*, July 12, 1990.

<sup>15</sup>Radio Damascus, May 10, 1991.

<sup>16</sup>*The Washington Post*, November 20, 1989.

## SYRIAN CHANGES BEFORE AUGUST 1990

Well before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Assad responded to the decline of Soviet power in the Middle East by compromising some long-standing positions. 'Adnan Sa'd ad-Din, the Muslim Brethren leader, explained Assad's motives: "The authorities in Syria have started to understand very well that change is inevitable and, therefore, they are trying to effect change cautiously and in a very limited way."<sup>17</sup>

Already in 1989, three lawyers were released from long terms in prison and government officials agreed to meet with Amnesty International. Mothers and wives of the "disappeared" were allowed to demonstrate in front of the Presidential Palace. March 1990 saw the lifting of emergency law provisions instituted twenty-eight years earlier (and suspended only briefly in 1973-74), immediately after the Ba'ath Party reached power. Syrians in exile received invitations to return home and mosque preachers found they could criticize the regime.

In a characteristically despotic act of liberalization, the government called parliamentary elections on May 22, 1990 and permitted independents to increase their share of the successful candidates. Previously, independents filled only 18 percent of the seats in the National Assembly; now they took one-third, or 84 out of 250 seats. (Permitting candidates to win percentages of a rubber-stamp parliament neatly sums up the state of democracy in Syria.)<sup>18</sup> Other parties remained banned but did run candidates. For example, the long-banned Syrian Social Nationalist Party (the SSNP, whose doctrines call for the creation of a Greater Syria) claimed to have put up fifty candidates. If the scheduled election of independents was hardly democratic, the fact that opposition figures received permission to address public gatherings did represent a concession.

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<sup>17</sup>*Al-Yawm as-Sabi'*, March 5, 1990.

<sup>18</sup>The remaining two-thirds of the seats were precisely allotted to the ruling Progressive National Front: 134 to the Ba'ath Party, 8 each to the Communist Party and the Socialist Union Party, 7 to the Socialist Unionists Party, 5 to the Arab Socialist Party, and 4 to the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party.



These minuscule improvements did not, however, impress the U.S. State Department. The 1989 edition of the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* noted that "there was little change in the overall human rights situation in 1989." The 1990 volume echoed those words: "Human rights remained tightly restricted in virtually all categories, and there was no significant improvement in 1990."<sup>19</sup>

The year before the Iraqi invasion also witnessed a number of changes in foreign policy. Perhaps the most dramatic of these was an announcement on December 27, 1989, just days after the Ceausescu's death, that full diplomatic ties with Egypt had been restored. After more than a decade of abuse directed at Egyptian leaders for having signed the Camp David agreement with Israel, this move suggested a major realignment. Other changes on the intra-Arab level included better ties with Morocco; promotion of the Ta'if Accords to find a political solution to the Lebanese *imbroglio*; and improved relations with Yasser Arafat, with no attempt to block his probes toward a political resolution with Israel.

A series of statements by Assad also softened the Syrian position vis-a-vis Israel, so that even before the Iraqi invasion, some movement on the Syrian-Israeli front appeared to be underway. In early 1990, he told Senator Arlen Specter (Republican of Pennsylvania) of his willingness to reduce the Syrian stockpile of chemical weapons. The Syrians "are proposing peace negotiations," Shimon Peres informed the Israeli parliament in March 1990, using information from an unnamed authoritative source. Soon after, Assad alerted former president Jimmy Carter of his willingness to talk to the Israelis under certain conditions. According to Carter, "Once the international peace conference is convened, it would rapidly be adjourned, and then President Assad authorized me to say that he would be very glad to have bilateral talks to resolve the differences between Syria and this country [Israel]."<sup>20</sup> After meeting with Hosni Mubarak in July 1990, Assad announced: "We are ready to join the peace process," assuming that other

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<sup>19</sup>Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1989* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 1579. The quotation from the 1990 report is on p. 1646.

<sup>20</sup>*The New York Times*, March 19, 1990.

demands are fulfilled.<sup>21</sup> The Syrian authorities no longer mentioned "strategic parity", for years the keystone of their strategy vis-a-vis Israel. Assad also improved relations with the West. To appease American and European sentiments, he allowed some young, single Syrian Jewish women to emigrate, reduced anti-Western propaganda, re-established diplomatic relations with Great Britain, granted ready access to American diplomats, and co-ordinated some policies in Lebanon with the U.S. government. He stopped terrorist attacks against Western targets in early 1989 and removed Muhammad al-Khuli, Syria's longtime terror mastermind, from his top position at military intelligence.

In all, Assad made changes here and there, adapting to his newly straitened circumstances while leaving fundamentals as much as possible intact. An unnamed Syrian put it pithily to *Le Monde*: "Things are changing but the government and the party are trying to make the movement nearly imperceptible."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the best way to conceptualize the changes in Syria is to see them as a parallel to what occurred in Iraq in the mid-1980s. In each case, a despot has, for obvious reasons having to do with external conditions, slightly eased up domestically and turned to the West. As the Iraqi case suggests, this is a tactical move which can at any moment be reversed.

Then, just as the Soviet earthquake settled down a bit, Saddam Hussein took it into his head to invade Kuwait.

## THE KUWAIT CRISIS: MINUSES AND PLUSES

Fully to understand the Iraqi deed's impact on Syria, it needs to be seen in the context of relations between Baghdad and Damascus. Bad for years, these had steadily deteriorated before August 1990. The war of words was frightful: Damascus called Saddam Hussein an "executioner thirsty for Arab blood" and his government a "fascist regime."<sup>23</sup> The Iraqi authorities

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<sup>21</sup>*The New York Times*, July 17, 1990.

<sup>22</sup>*Le Monde*, May 22, 1990.

<sup>23</sup>*Al-Ba'ith*, June 12, 1989; Muhammad Zuhayr Mashariqa, Radio Damascus, October 6, 1988.

replied by denouncing Assad as a “slave of charlatans” and called for the overthrow of his “traitorous regime.”<sup>24</sup> With the end of the Iraq-Iran war, the two countries faced off in Lebanon, with the Iraqis supporting Michel ‘Aoun’s bid for power. Baghdad even called on the Syrian military to topple the regime. This tense mood helps understand why Assad joined the coalition against Saddam Hussein.

(But Assad’s contribution to the coalition, it bears noting, was limited to his diplomatic support: Coalition planes were not allowed to traverse Syrian airspace and Syrian soldiers took no part in offensive actions against Iraq. Foreign Minister Sharaa announced during the fighting that the Syrian forces based in Saudi Arabia would “under no circumstance. . . enter Iraq or participate in an offensive against Iraq.”)<sup>25</sup>

The Iraqi invasion had immense implications for Syria, some negative. Whatever his differences with Saddam Hussein, Assad publicly regarded Iraqi arms as “an asset for the Arab nation”<sup>26</sup> and a component of its strategic reserve. As he explained on the eve of war, “any harm that befalls Iraq will in the end harm Syria and the Arab nation in one way or another.”<sup>27</sup> However much the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus loathe each other, they hate Israel more. Thus, Defense Minister Tallas confessed to feelings of “overwhelming joy” as Iraqi missiles fell on Israeli civilians.<sup>28</sup> At the same time that the Iraqi arsenal was destroyed, Saddam Hussein was not; he presumably resents Assad more than ever; to gain revenge, he might well be preparing some terrible blow against Assad.

The disastrous showing of Iraqi arms against American weaponry once again confirmed the deficiency of Soviet-based technology as compared to Israel’s. More broadly, it pointed to the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Third World and

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<sup>24</sup>*Ath-Thawra*, October 21, 1988; *Al-Iraq*, December 22, 1988.

<sup>25</sup>British Broadcasting Corporation Television, February 6, 1991.

<sup>26</sup>*Ruz al-Yusif*, December 10, 1990.

<sup>27</sup>Radio Damascus, January 12, 1991.

<sup>28</sup>*Ath-Thawra*, January 21, 1991.

First World forces. To Assad's dismay, the international attention being lavished on the crisis of the Persian Gulf relegated his special cause, the struggle with Israel, to the back burner; in his mind, this amounted to an "Arab catastrophe" and the prospect of Arabs returning to a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (for which he used the Islamic term *jahiliya*).<sup>29</sup> Assad expressly joined the coalition "to get these foreigners out of the Arab land," and as of this writing they have not left; this embarrasses him and, should it persist, could haunt him in the years ahead. Some of those foreign forces (such as the strike force based in Turkey) are uncomfortably close to the Syrian border. Further, victory over Saddam confirmed and extended American power in the Middle East, compelling Assad to pay more attention than ever to Washington's wishes.

But these problems, however worrisome, paled alongside the Kuwait crisis' many benefits to the Assad regime. To begin with, the Iraqi invasion brought Syria a large infusion of hard currency, beginning with a rise in the price of oil that brought Syria a sharp, if short-lived, windfall of some \$200 million. Funds came pouring in from the coalition partners: the European Community contributed \$200 million to Syria and the Japanese sent a loan of \$500 million. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states (Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) pledged more than \$2 billion.

This massive infusion of funds gave Assad and his compatriots much relief from Syria's crushing economic problems. Stanley Reed, an American journalist, commented on some of its benefits a few months after the war's end: "Damascus is usually a tense, dour city," he reported,

but the Syrian capital is brimming with easy self-confidence these days. In the cool evenings, neon-lit cafes along the Barada River are thronged with young men playing cards and puffing on water pipes. At the best hotels, Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs disgorge elegant couples, with women dressed in clinging gowns and spike heels, for nights of disco dancing. President al-

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<sup>29</sup>Syrian Arab Television, September 12, 1990.

Hafez al Assad sets the tone in Syria, and he is enjoying one of his finest hours.<sup>30</sup>

The crisis enhanced Syria's international position by allowing Assad to slough off old ties and build new ones. Joining a coalition with Egypt and Saudi Arabia brought residual Syrian isolation in Arab politics to a complete end. Just days after the war's conclusion, on March 6, 1991, this cooperation was formalized and perpetuated at a meeting in the Syrian capital. The Damascus Declaration, signed by the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council along with Egypt and Syria, called for the continued presence of Egyptian and Syrian forces in Saudi Arabia in return for the formation of an "economic group" of the eight countries.<sup>31</sup> On April 22, 1991, the GCC voted to create a fund (initial capitalization: \$10 billion) for a ten-year period, most of which was to be funneled to the Egyptian and Syrian governments. Getting munificently paid to keep soldiers in the Persian Gulf region must have been a sublime prospect for Assad, for he would at the same time increase his leverage over some very rich countries, serve as a counterweight to the Western presence, and add to his reputation as a Pan-Arab nationalist leader. Unfortunately for Assad, the Gulf Arabs woke up to these realities too, got cold feet, and at the time of this writing no longer appeared inclined to have Egyptian and Syrian soldiers remain on their territories.

Assad may have publicly rued the destruction of Iraq's military capabilities, but he also gained in important ways by the virtual elimination of his chief rival's offensive power. With Saddam deprived of offensive capabilities, Syrian arms loom large in Arab politics; with the exception of Egypt, no other government could compete for influence. This has many implications for Arab politics. King Hussein of Jordan, for example, no longer has an Arab counterweight against Damascus, nor do Yasser Arafat or the Saudis.

But these are the routine changes of Arab politics; far more noteworthy was Assad's joining a U.S.-led coalition. While Syrian troops contributed very little to the fighting, their

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<sup>30</sup>*Business Week*, June 10, 1991.

<sup>31</sup>Radio Damascus, March 6, 1991.

presence had a powerful symbolic importance, for they blessed the coalition with the sanction of a radical anti-American regime. Their presence made it harder for Saddam Hussein and his partisans to portray the war as an imperialist one, or to disparage the Arab partners of the United States as stooges. Syrian sanction was widely appreciated in Washington, so much so that to some the U.S. government is in the Syrian debt.

Assad was not shy about proclaiming his importance. He explicitly told visiting American officials, "I am your cover," then requested a *quid pro quo*: financial aid, Syria's removal from the list of states sponsoring terrorism (which would offer a variety of benefits, including access to technology), political pressures on Israel, and a guarantee that Israel would not use force against Syria (much as the Soviet Union provided such a guarantee in years past).

In all, then, Assad's stand against Saddam Hussein won him an infusion of funds, new Arab friends, and an enhanced regional stature. It allowed him, in a single and stunningly deft maneuver, to switch from the anti-American to the pro-American camp. He achieved this on his own terms, with his dignity fully intact, with implicit forgiveness for past transgressions, and without concessions. For Assad the Iraqi invasion was a providential event, easing several of his worst dilemmas and rescuing him from the *cul de sac* of Soviet clientship.

## RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS

The Kuwait crisis had a mixed effect on Syria's relations with its immediate neighbors. Damascus became stronger vis-a-vis the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Iraq, and Lebanon; but it grew weaker in relation to Jordan, Turkey, and Israel. We shall briefly consider the first five of these cases, then dwell at some length on Syrian relations with Israel.

*The Palestine Liberation Organization.* Assad used the Kuwait crisis to further his influence over the PLO by showing tactical flexibility without forsaking policy (i.e., that Palestinians and their nationalist movements should come under Damascus' control). Syrian forces had fought the PLO on several occasions in the past (most notably in Lebanon in 1976 and 1983) and the Syrian government had steadily backed radical Palestinian

groups hostile to Yasser Arafat (such as those led by George Habash, Naif Hawatma, Ahmad Jibril, Abu Nidal, and Abu Musa).

Assad offered to repair the split in April 1991 by having some of the Damascus-based groups re-enter the PLO. In effect, he proposed a deal: if the Syrians won increased influence within the PLO, they would call off their effort to create an alternative to the PLO. To increase the pressure, Assad forwarded Khalid al-Fahum, the former speaker of the Palestine National Council, as his candidate to succeed Arafat as PLO leader. Fahum, of course, lived in Syria and was beholden to the Syrian authorities. The PLO accepted this deal, agreeing to "forget the past."<sup>32</sup> Further, it adopted the Syrian diplomatic stance as its own; with regard to a peace conference, for example, Yasser Arafat announced that "the Palestinian and Syrian viewpoints are identical." He also announced that the PLO would not go to a conference without Syrian participation.<sup>33</sup>

Assad revealed his long-term goals in June when the Palestine National Salvation Front, the umbrella organization for his Palestinian clients, called for a "fateful alliance" of Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians to be effected.<sup>34</sup>

*Iraq.* Assad's major effort to exploit the postwar turmoil in Iraq consisted of allowing the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani to cross the border into Iraq and lead rebel efforts against Saddam's rule in March 1991. Should he ever wish to attempt something more ambitious, Assad has two obvious vehicles, the PUK and the Ba'ath Party. The former has for years been partially sponsored by Damascus; and while Saddam has extirpated Syrian influence in the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, Assad could probably exploit the current turmoil to gain a foothold in a sister party. Given today's balance of power, he just might succeed. What ends he might have in mind must remain speculative: his realistic goal might be to reorient Iraqi politics in a direction more favorable to himself; and his dream might be to make Iraq, like Lebanon, a client

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<sup>32</sup>Radio Monte Carlo, May 26, 1991.

<sup>33</sup>*Sawt ash-Sha'b*, June 2, 1991.

<sup>34</sup>Syrian Arab News Agency, June 4, 1991.

state. Mustafa Tallas alluded to this possibility in February 1991, when he noted that if Syrians and Iraqis “who are in fact just one—unite, the Western countries would be very worried. We are still suffering the consequences of the Sykes-Picot agreement.”<sup>35</sup>

*Lebanon.* From the creation of modern Lebanon in 1920 until the present, most Syrians have never accepted Lebanon as a sovereign and independent state. For many years, however, there was little they could do about it. Only with the outbreak of Lebanon’s civil war in 1975 did an opportunity to do something finally present itself. While the story since then is extremely complex, involving many actors and some strange reversals of policy, Syrian influence over the country consistently increased from one year to the next. By the mid-1980s, some 40,000 Syrian troops controlled roughly two-thirds of Lebanon’s territory. The final third eluded Assad’s grip, due to a combination of international pressure and the Maronite fighters’ determination not to succumb to Syrian domination.

The Persian Gulf crisis both absorbed international attention and prevented Saddam Hussein from aiding the military efforts of Michel ‘Aoun, his Lebanese protege. Assad wasted no time. Fifteen years of effort culminated on October 13, 1990, when in a mere three hours—less time than Saddam needed in Kuwait—Assad’s air force, artillery, and ground troops staged an assault on Michel ‘Aoun’s forces and gained control of much of Beirut.<sup>36</sup> The operation was bloody; in

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<sup>35</sup> *Le Figaro*, February 18, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> It is by now widely assumed—despite denials on both sides—that the U.S. government, grateful for Syrian help against Iraq, gave a “green light” to the Syrian invasion of Lebanon. Secretary Baker supposedly signalled American agreement to Assad during his visit to Damascus in September. For instance, Charles Glass writes that he actually agreed to this use of force (*The Spectator*, February 2, 1991.) Alternatively, Israel is held responsible; thus, Pierre Beylau and Issa Goraieb conclude that a green light “was given by the Hebrew state via the Americans” (*Le Point*, October 22, 1991).

But this line of reasoning is not convincing. Suppose Assad had adopted a neutral or even a pro-Iraq position, and the U.S. government had been less well disposed toward him: would it have stopped him from going into Beirut? Clearly not. American soldiers had already spent one and a half years in Lebanon during the Assad years, only to leave the country ignominiously in April 1984. From that moment on, the



addition to battle deaths, 700 or so persons were massacred, including Maronite leader Dany Chamoun and his family. Like Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait, Syrian soldiers systematically pillaged the area they conquered, including even the president's palace at Baabda. With this move, the Lebanese intelligence files and the great majority of the country came under direct Syrian control—all but the Israeli “security zone” in the south and a few small patches here and there.

In May 1991, the Syrians initiated a rapid<sup>37</sup> series of steps to give the Ta'if Accords of 1989 a permanent and legal basis, culminating in the “Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination” signed by the Syrian and Lebanese presidents on May 22. (See Appendix II for the complete public text).<sup>38</sup> This agreement—the first treaty ever signed between the two countries since they won their independence in the mid-1940s, as well as the first unequivocal Syrian recognition of Lebanon's independence—codified and greatly extended the “privileged relations” set out in the Ta'if Accords. It expressed a shared intent to work together in the political, military, economic, cultural and scientific realms; the establishment of a Supreme Council made up of the president and three other officials from each country, as well as a host of lesser bodies, including a secretariat; and a formal request (with several conditions) for Syrian troops to remain without term on Lebanese soil.

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U.S. government had no important role in Lebanon, disengaging itself diplomatically and providing neither money nor arms; the notion of a forceful American response to the Syrian takeover is highly implausible. Further, it was plainly inconceivable that, at a moment when all American attention was focused on the Persian Gulf, President Bush would have taken serious steps to undo the Syrian conquest of East Beirut. Even in May 1991, when the war with Iraq was long over, Washington barely responded to the virtual Syrian annexation of Lebanon.

The quiet response to the Syrian invasion testifies not to American agreement but to Assad's exquisite sense of timing.

<sup>37</sup>So rapid was the process that the two presidents signed the treaty into law three days before the Lebanese or Syrian parliaments could vote on it; and when the Lebanese parliament did finally get a chance to vote, it spent a mere twenty-five minutes on the procedure!

<sup>38</sup>The treaty may include secret clauses and protocols.

To appease Lebanese sensitivities, words such as “unity” and “integration” were not used in the text. Instead, the standard formulation became, as Lebanese president Elias Hrawi put it at the signing ceremony, “one people in two separate states.”<sup>39</sup> Still, the text did include a reference to the “two countries’ foreign policy,” with the word *policy* in the singular.

The ostensible purpose of this coordination is to formulate mutually agreeable policies; the real point is to subject Lebanese decision making to Syrian wishes. Foreign Minister Sharaa claimed that while a majority of Lebanese and Syrians would welcome a union of their two countries, his government was not “for the time being” seeking this.<sup>40</sup> Mustafa Tallas—the bombastic defense minister who often states publicly what other Syrian leaders only think, and who represents a significant strand of Sunni Arab thought in Syria—confirmed this in an interview predicting that unity with Lebanon might be achieved “soon, or at least in our generation.”<sup>41</sup>

Critics shared this expectation. Both Raymond Eddé the Maronite politician, and the Israel government spokesman now called Lebanon a “Syrian colony.”<sup>42</sup> Others referred to the event as Syria’s *Anschluss* of Lebanon. With the exception of the Maronite patriarch, there was almost no criticism of the treaty in Lebanon, suggesting that Syrian control of that country was already a reality. (The assassination of Michel Salhab, a prominent critic of the treaty, one day after its signing, conveyed this message even more forcefully.) In a bitter irony for many Lebanese, the first formal Syrian recognition of their independence came simultaneously with the effective extinction of that independence.

Looking to the future, there is reason to think that the treaty will become permanent. It is without time limit and no mechanism for abrogation is provided. Further, there is reason to think that the treaty’s implementation will lead to a further

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<sup>39</sup>*As-Safir*, May 22, 1991.

<sup>40</sup>*Tishrin*, May 24, 1991.

<sup>41</sup>*Al-Hayat* (London), May 9, 1991.

<sup>42</sup>*An-Nahar*, May 22, 1991; Israeli Government Press Office, May 21, 1991.

exodus of Christians from Lebanon, especially Maronites; and without them, there is little reason for an independent Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> If schools, the media, and the economy in Lebanon all come to resemble what exists in Syria, it seems likely that the Christians will flee the country in even larger numbers than they have in recent years. In other words, the treaty's emphasis on bringing the two countries' institutions into line suggests a long-term intent to emasculate Lebanese nationalism.

Assad gains in several ways from *de facto* hegemony in Lebanon. He has managed to strangle the free press there, shutting down a main avenue of expression for his opponents; he gains from the drug revenues (on which, see Appendix III); he gains a possible new military front versus Israel; and he exercises close control over events in Lebanon. (One example: when Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader, resigned from the Lebanese cabinet, Syrian agents threatened his family; he got the message, and quickly rejoined.)

*Jordan.* From a Syrian perspective, things are looking worse with regard to Jordan. Close ties established in late 1985 implied a virtual Syrian veto power over Jordanian foreign policy. Amman hardly dared to differ from Damascus on a critical issue like the future of the West Bank or the desirability of an international conference. According to Yohanan Ramati, in late 1985 or 1986 Damascus and Amman may have reached "a tacit agreement" whereby the king accepted Syrian hegemony in Lebanon and Palestine in return for a Syrian pledge not to meddle in Jordanian affairs.<sup>44</sup>

This influence dissolved early in the Kuwait crisis when King Hussein (unlike Hafez al-Assad) listened to the sentiments of his subjects and adopted a pro-Iraqi policy. Given the high stakes involved, including the monarchy's future and

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<sup>43</sup>A separate Lebanon can be traced back as far as the end of the sixteenth century, when the Druze leader Fakhr ad-Din II carved out a polity in this region. A Maronite entity, called the Mutasarrifiya, came into existence in the Mount Lebanon region in 1860. Succumbing to Maronite pressure, the French government doubled Lebanon's size in 1920, creating the modern borders still in place today.

<sup>44</sup>Yohanan Ramati, "Moscow and Damascus," *Global Affairs*, Spring 1989, p. 99.

even the existence of Jordan as a state, Syrian protests were barely audible in Amman.

But Syrian influence was soon reestablished. When the Saudis, piqued by the king's pro-Iraqi stance, cut off oil supplies to Jordan, Assad took up the slack. With the war's end, and Amman's retreat from its Iraqi orientation, Syrian power grew quickly. Its extent became obvious to the outside world when the king was asked in May whether the absence of Syria would cause him to refuse to attend a U.S.-sponsored peace conference. Hussein sidestepped: "I haven't said that," he replied. Reversing the question, and asked if that meant he would attend without Syria, the king turned red and replied, "I haven't said that either."<sup>45</sup> More eloquent than any words, this royal flush signalled Assad's regaining an effective veto over Jordanian participation in the peace process. Further influence is likely to follow, especially in the wake of Syrian success in Lebanon and the increasingly open and turbulent political environment in Jordan.

*Turkey.* For decades, hostile acts initiated by Damascus—including an overt claim to Hatay (a province in southeastern Turkey) and support for terrorist activities by such organizations as the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)—have poisoned Syrian-Turkish relations. Bellicose Syrian actions made matters worse; for example, Syrian forces shot down a Turkish civilian airplane over Hatay on October 21, 1989 and opened gunfire across the Hatay border on November 6, 1989.

Then Syrian aggressiveness slightly decreased. The Turkish decision to fill the Ataturk dam in early 1990, thereby cutting off Euphrates River waters to Syria, had a sobering effect in Damascus; and the Kuwait crisis found the two governments in the same coalition. As a result of these changes, the Syrian foreign minister distanced himself from a half-century's claims to Hatay ("Turkey had in the past a large map, Syria also had a large map not long ago").<sup>46</sup> The PKK

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<sup>45</sup>Associated Press, May 14, 1991. A month later, President Mubarak addressed an Israeli audience and stripped away the king's ambiguity; neither Egypt nor Jordan, he told them, would participate in a peace conference without Syria (Israel Television, June 13, 1991).

<sup>46</sup>Radio Damascus, March 18, 1991.

found its activities unexpectedly limited; Abdullah Ocalan, its leader resident in Damascus, was even briefly detained. After stalling for one and a half years, Damascus agreed to pay damages for the airplane shot down.

While these and other signs pointed to more of a good neighborly spirit in Damascus, Iraq's military defeat opened a new round of hostile actions. Syrian-based operatives of Dev Sol, the left-wing group, had already been engaged in terrorist operations in Turkish cities during the war. The PKK opened new camps in Syria near the Turkish border and launched a major organizing campaign in Turkey. The poor showing of Kurdish groups in Iraq led to unprecedented PKK ambitions to extend its reach to Iraq as well.

Then there are Syrian relations with Israel, which are of a complexity and international importance beyond those with any other neighbor.



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### III CONFLICT WITH ISRAEL

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#### THE CENTRALITY OF SYRIA

With the rise of Palestinianism—a belief that Palestinians are the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict—the Arab states on occasion almost disappear from many Western eyes. Some analysts go so far as to see the Palestinian-Israeli issue as separate from the state conflict. For example, Amos Perlmutter foresees a resolution of the Palestinian question only on condition of “decoupling it from the whole Arab-Israeli conflict.”<sup>1</sup>

But this is not possible, for Arab states are in most respects more fundamental to the conflict than Palestinians. The states made war on the nascent Israeli state in 1948. On losing, they decided to keep the issue alive by preventing the Arab refugees, unlike the many other refugees of that period (including Jews, Germans, Indians, Pakistanis, and Koreans), the opportunity to be resettled. Arab kings, emirs, and presidents founded the PLO at a summit meeting in 1964, hoping thereby to control the Palestinian movement. Arab states, not Palestinians, fought the 1967 and 1973 wars. States transformed a local communal conflict into an issue of international import, one touching on religion, oil, the United Nations, and great power relations. Through four decades,

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<sup>1</sup>Amos Perlmutter, “Israel’s Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1989/90, p. 132.

Palestinians have been the pawns of Cairo, Baghdad, Amman and Damascus—and not the other way around.

Of the states confronting Israel, Egypt was long the most important, due to its military power, its size, its active leadership, and its geographic centrality. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, Egypt led both in war and in peace. This primary role came to a sudden end in 1979 with the signing of a peace treaty with Israel, which had the effect of removing Egypt from the fray; since then, Cairo has essentially been on the sidelines of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Action central has moved to Damascus, the second most powerful of Israel's neighbors. Militarily, the Arab-Israeli conflict boils down to a Syrian-Israeli confrontation. So long as Assad refuses to come to terms with Israel, the conflict continues. Were he willing to do so, the international dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict would rapidly shrink; the Palestinian issue would become a local problem, terrible for those immediately involved but of minor importance to the outside world. The two other neighbors of Israel cannot take the lead. The Lebanese learned this lesson when they signed an American-sponsored accord with Israel in May 1983, only to abrogate it less than a year later under Syrian pressure. The Jordanians don't need to have this lesson spelled out, for they know that openly recognizing Israel would provoke Syrian anger, and possibly jeopardize the Hashemite monarchy. The PLO has learned to defy Damascus only at its peril.

The Syrians see themselves, and not the Palestinians, as the key party to any negotiations with Israel. They explicitly declare as much from time to time. For example, Mustafa Tallas observed that "it is totally unimportant" whether or not Arafat participates in an international peace conference. "What is important is that the conference is attended by that man who is able to prevent a peace conference from deviating from its aims—that is our President Hafez al-Assad."<sup>2</sup> More broadly, Damascus has repeatedly claimed that "there can be no peace without Syria."

Those who disagree with this view point to Syrian negativism and argue against giving Damascus a veto. Former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, for example, argues that Israelis "only reached agreements with the Arabs when we followed

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<sup>2</sup>Vienna Television, September 22, 1987.



two basic principles—starting with Egypt and leaving Syria to the end.” Including Syrians, it is argued, only forces the Palestinians and Jordanians to look over their shoulders at Damascus.<sup>3</sup> But Rabin ignores the fact that even if Assad is excluded, weak actors such as the Palestinians and Jordanians must still worry about his reactions. Assad has a proven record of scuttling diplomatic initiatives which run contrary to his interests, and he can do so again. Contrarily, as Damascus’ role in the current round of peace process diplomacy suggests, a positive answer from Syria allows the other Arabs to go forward.

## SECONDARY ISSUES

Israelis see Syrians somewhat the way Kuwaitis see Iraqis—as barbaric foes who would destroy their country and their way of life. This outlook is based on years of Syrian aggression, both rhetorical (a vicious anti-Zionism) and actual (Israeli prisoners of war have been treated horribly). Moreover, nearly all successive governments in Damascus since the 1930s have consistently rejected diplomacy with Zionists; understandably, Israelis despair of improvements in Syria. Jewish Israelis are nearly incapable of envisaging good relations with Damascus or seeing any possible reason to give up the Golan Heights.

Despite widespread and deep hostility between Syrians and Israelis, their interests are reasonably compatible on several issues, including the PLO, Lebanon, functional issues, and even (in some ways) the Golan Heights. On the other hand, the question of recognizing Israel finds the two states at loggerheads.

Palestinian issues inspire a strange tactical synchrony between Damascus and Jerusalem. For opposite but parallel reasons, both governments despise Yasser Arafat and both want to marginalize the PLO. The PLO stands equally in the way of Syrian and Israeli claims to the territory west of the Jordan River. For his part, Assad deems Arafat weak and treacherous because he is willing to sell out his patrimony for a deal with Israel (and also because he does not accept Syrian authority); Yitzhak Shamir despises him as a terrorist and a liar who

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<sup>3</sup> *The Jerusalem Report*, July 4, 1991.

would trick Israelis into a deal, then stab them in the back. Parallel attitudes lead to parallel treatment. The Israelis forced Arafat out of southern Lebanon in 1982 and the Syrians did the same in northern Lebanon a year later. Both states are continually trying to find an alternate Palestinian leadership to Arafat. While there is little likelihood of the two governments agreeing on a candidate to replace him, they effectively work together to limit his area of maneuver. For example, in April 1991, American officials are said to have brokered a deal by which Syrian forces won Israeli permission to move further to the Zahrani and Sidon areas of southern Lebanon to wrest those precincts from PLO control.<sup>4</sup>

As this example implies, both sides know the rules in Lebanon. The Syrians usually stay away from regions deemed essential to Israeli security while the Israelis acquiesce to Syrian control of more distant areas—so long as the troops stay away and advanced weapon systems are not introduced into Lebanon. This is not to say that there are no clashes between Syrians and Israelis in Lebanon; but that each party knows full well what the other will or will not accept.<sup>5</sup> Skirmishes occur because they are sought, and they are sought because Lebanon, unlike the Golan Heights, offers a theater in which either side can make a point without much worry about escalation.

A number of practical issues, water and arms control foremost among them, could be settled through negotiation. While Israel-Jordan water cooperation, specifically the construction of a proposed dam on the Yarmuk River, is helpful, it can only go so far without Syrian involvement. The Israelis are also eager for Damascus to work out the sharing of Litani River water. Arms control agreements offer an obvious arena of potential cooperation. They could involve a range of confidence-building measures as well as demilitarized zones,

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<sup>4</sup>*Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 11, 1991.

<sup>5</sup>According to Yitzhak Rabin, the understanding includes five elements: Syrian forces stay away from the Lebanon-Israel border; Syrian surface-to-air missiles keep out of Lebanon; Syrian combat planes also keep out; the Israeli "security zone" in south Lebanon goes unchallenged; and the South Lebanon Army controls the Jezzín enclave (*The Jerusalem Post*, May 21, 1991).

and troop and arms reductions. However practical such steps would be, they have not occurred, for Assad sees them as a tacit acceptance of Israel's right to exist, and therefore as a capitulation.

## THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

The Golan Heights—500 square miles of volcanic highlands won by Israel from Syria during the 1967 war—present more of a problem. Israelis are deeply reluctant to part with the territory, yet Syrians demand it as an absolute condition to any diplomatic progress. Even here, however, some agreement exists.

Israeli reticence results from several factors. To begin with, Syrian guns on the Golan regularly shelled the farms of northern Israel for almost twenty years, 1948 to 1967, raining destruction on a vulnerable Israeli population; vowing not to let those unhappy circumstances return, Israelis insist on keeping the Golan as a buffer zone. They also point to the vital strategic depth it provided in 1973, when a surprise attack by the Syrians almost succeeded in entering Israel proper. "Without the Golan," an Israeli resident of that region recently explained, "we would have probably lost the whole of northern Israel."<sup>6</sup> In addition, much of Israel's water comes from sources in the Golan. Unlike the West Bank, with its large and hostile population, the Golan has clear value for Israel.

Although not part of the Palestine Mandate, the region arguably constitutes part of Eretz Yisrael, the historic Land of Israel. (Archeological efforts have unearthed some thirty ancient synagogues and other Jewish sites.) Over 12,000 Israelis, many of them affiliated with the Labor Party, have settled in thirty-five rural settlements and the town of Katzrin since 1967. Israel has paid little price to keep the Golan Heights. The Syrian-Israeli front has been quiet since the disengagement accord of 1974. Syrian nationals in the region are few in number (about 16,000) and they give the Israeli authorities few headaches. That they are nearly all Druze also makes life easier for the Israelis, as Druze, like 'Alawis, are members of a secretive sect deriving from Islam but not

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<sup>6</sup>*Der Spiegel*, March 25, 1991.

recognized by mainstream Muslims, with the result that they fit about as well in Israel as in Syria.

Finally, while politicians and media in Damascus bellow occasionally about the need for the Golan to be returned to the homeland, they never make this the core issue in their conflict with Israel. Quite the contrary, it usually sounds like an afterthought, in part perhaps because the region was so neglected while under Damascus' control. Assad some years ago made this explicit to a PLO meeting: "Syria wants Palestine as much as it wants the Golan . . . We want Palestine first and the Golan second."<sup>7</sup> The unusual Syrian policy of downplaying the loss of their own lands and instead emphasizing the plight of the Palestinians has helped relegate the Golan territorial issue to the side for almost a quarter-century.

In combination, these factors make it tempting for Israelis to see the Golan territory as their own. Polls show that over 90 percent of the Israeli electorate consistently favors retaining the Golan, regardless. (This percentage approaches the consensus on keeping Jerusalem; in contrast, a mere half of the electorate wants to keep the West Bank.) The leadership is firm also. Prime Minister Shamir has said that "Israel has no intention of giving up territory on the Golan Heights during future negotiations with Syria," while Defense Minister Moshe Arens adds that the Golan constitutes "an inseparable part of the state."<sup>8</sup> The Labor Party (which established the very first settlement in occupied territory on the Golan just a month after the Six Day War) is equally adamant. Yitzhak Rabin speaks for the majority of his party in saying: "Even in the context of peace with Syria, we should not go down from the Golan Heights."<sup>9</sup> Mapam, a left-wing party very sympathetic to Palestinian concerns, is tough on the Golan. Despite this solid block of Israeli opinion, it should be noted that some 83 percent

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<sup>7</sup>Radio Damascus, April 1, 1981.

<sup>8</sup>IDF Radio, March 18, 1991; Radio Jerusalem, March 20, 1991. Shamir has also stated that UN Security Council Resolution 242 "has nothing to do with the Golan" (Israel Television, March 18, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>Radio Jerusalem, April 9, 1991.

of the Israeli electorate believes that negotiations with Syria should be launched without preconditions.<sup>10</sup>

Syrian attitudes toward the Golan Heights remaining in Israeli hands are mixed. True, this is a matter of national humiliation as well as a source of intense personal embarrassment to Assad (who was Syria's defense minister when the territory fell in 1967).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the territory is marginal demographically and economically; and Israeli control of the territory serves some purpose for Assad. That his alliance with Moscow has long been based on military confrontation with Israel made the territory useful. As an open sore, it usefully deflects much of his people's political hostilities from him to an external enemy. We have already noted in Chapter 1 that Assad's weak domestic base makes him depend on anti-Zionism as a means for reaching out to the majority Sunni population. Eager to present himself as the Arab stalwart in the battle against Israel, he shepherds Syrian nationalist sentiments against this obvious target. Israeli occupation keeps Assad on the front line of confrontation with Israel, thereby enhancing his pan-Arab nationalist credentials. Also, were Assad to get the Golan back before the Palestinian issue were resolved, this might weaken his influence over the Palestinians.

In brief, the Syrians are willing tacitly to work with Israel (with regard to the PLO, Lebanon, and even the Golan), but they refuse explicitly to cooperate on issues of concern to the two states. This being so, it stands to reason that Damascus will not be forthcoming about accepting the existence of Israel, and that is exactly the case.

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<sup>10</sup> *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, March 8, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> The speed of the Syrian loss continues to haunt Assad. Khalil Mustafa, a Syrian intelligence officer present when the Golan Heights fell to Israel in June 1967 wrote an influential book, *The Fall of the Golan (Suqut al-Jawlan* [Amman: Dar al-Yaqin, 1969]) in which he claimed that Assad evacuated the Golan in collusion with the Israelis. The charge stuck, and for more than twenty years, Assad's enemies have made this an article of faith. Thus, the Iraqi government recently vented its anger toward Assad by calling him "the seller of the Golan" (*An-Nida'* [Kuwait], September 16, 1990).

## RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL: OLD STANDS

Since 1973, Assad has simultaneously maintained deep hostility to Israel while doing everything to avoid a major clash. Dan Schueftan has neatly summed this up as a “prudently-implemented radical policy.”<sup>12</sup>

Assad’s longstanding position on Israel, repeated thousands of times over the years, privately and publicly, consisted of five no’s:

*No talks before withdrawal.* Jerusalem must return all the territories won in 1967 before Damascus will negotiate.

*No partial solutions.* An Israeli withdrawal must precede confidence-building measures, ending the economic boycott, water arrangements, and the like. (The 1974 Golan disengagement agreement is considered an exception.)

*No direct, bilateral negotiations with Israel.* Negotiations with Israel are acceptable only in the framework of an international conference based on United Nations resolutions and at a meeting convened by the UN.

*No separate deal for the Golan Heights.* Israel must also withdraw from the other territories won in the 1967 war (the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza) and guarantee self-determination for the Palestinians.

*No formal peace treaty.* Should the Israelis meet all his demands, Assad would sign only a non-belligerency agreement. He offers Israel no war, nothing more—not diplomatic relations or other normal ties.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*The Jerusalem Post*, April 4, 1991.

<sup>13</sup>The May 1974 disengagement accord between Syria and Israel emphasizes this point. It begins with the assertion that “This agreement is not a peace agreement.”

These demands suggested a lack of genuine interest in reaching an agreement with Israel, for each one is unacceptable to both Likud and Labor. To an unusual degree, Israelis concur that face-to-face negotiations must precede the evacuation of territory; that a UN-sponsored conference is unacceptable; that interim measures must precede the return of land; that Jerusalem is an integral part of the Jewish state; and that any return of Arab lands must be rewarded by a full peace treaty. In other words, Assad can offer these terms with complete confidence in their rejection.

Further, Assad has on occasion gone out of his way to confirm Israeli fears through his own bellicosity. In 1977 he told a foreign visitor that "if Israel were to withdraw from the territories and the national rights of the Palestinians were restored, Israel would cease to exist."<sup>14</sup> In 1985, he threatened to place the Golan in the middle of Syria; and other aggressive statements in recent years have reinforced Israeli apprehensions.

Over the years, Israeli rejection of Syrian terms suited Assad just fine. Are there reasons to think that major changes in thinking have taken place in Damascus? The evidence is mixed.

#### CHANGE OR CONTINUITY?

On the positive side, it appears that Syria no longer has a viable war option. In part, the military balance looks worse with the defeat of Iraq. Along these lines, Patrick Seale, the British journalist who often serves as a quasi-official spokesman for Damascus, holds that "all hopes of an Eastern front have been shattered."<sup>15</sup> In part, the international context has changed. Before, Assad's sponsor in Moscow saw virtue in Syrian bellicosity; but the potential new one in Washington would be most displeased by a resort to force.

Assad considerably improved the atmosphere. After twelve years of steady, bitter antagonism toward the Camp David

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<sup>14</sup>*Jerusalem Post International Edition*, March 16, 1991.

<sup>15</sup>*The Jerusalem Report*, March 28, 1991.

accords, he met President Husni Mubarak of Egypt in early April 1991 and agreed with him on a joint formula with regard to the Arab-Israeli peace process, one that came much closer to Egyptian than to traditional Syrian positions. With this little-noted meeting, Assad apparently adopted a strikingly new policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. There are other signs too. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German foreign minister, came out of meetings in Damascus reporting a Syrian awareness that Palestinian self-determination implies that "Israel's right to exist is recognized and secured."<sup>16</sup> Foreign Minister Sharaa is especially forthcoming, privately telling Western visitors that his government is "genuinely anxious to bring about an end to the state of belligerency" with Israel.<sup>17</sup> Publicly, he stated in April that "there is every possibility now" to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>18</sup> And on July 14, 1991, in response to Secretary Baker's efforts, Assad signalled his willingness to join in a U.S.-sponsored peace conference with Israel.

Further, several of Damascus' traditional no's have been modified:

*No talks before withdrawal.* This has changed. As noted, on July 14, Assad accepted President Bush's initiative as "an acceptable base,"<sup>19</sup> signalling a willingness to join in a U.S.-sponsored peace conference with Israel.

*No partial solutions.* Foreign Minister Sharaa told Secretary Baker in March 1991 that ending the

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<sup>16</sup>*The New York Times*, February 14, 1991. This assertion, it bears noting, was made by Genscher, and not by a Syrian official. Indeed, the Syrians distanced themselves from Genscher's statement, both by ignoring it and refuting it (the Syrian ambassador to Tehran, for example, declared that his government "will never agree to recognize Israel").

<sup>17</sup>British foreign minister Douglas Hurd, quoting Faruq ash-Shar', *Insight*, April 15, 1991.

<sup>18</sup>"Dispatches," ITV Television, April 3, 1991.

<sup>19</sup>Syrian Arab News Agency, July 14, 1991.



state of war or taking other steps before an Israeli withdrawal “is like putting the cart before the horse.”<sup>20</sup> Two months later he explicitly rejected the Americans’ two-track diplomacy (which links solution of the Palestinian problem with settlement of the Arab states’ conflict with Israel), announcing that his government “does not accept a separate peace between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and the Palestinians.”<sup>21</sup>

*No direct, bilateral negotiations with Israel.* Assad has publicly agreed to “separate negotiations” with Israel on condition that they take place under the auspices of a UN-sponsored conference.<sup>22</sup>

*No separate deal for the Golan.* In theory, the Palestinian issue is even more urgent than before, for Assad now demands a solution of the Palestinian problem before ending the state of belligerency, or, as a newspaper commentary indicated, “what happens to Palestine happens to Syria.”<sup>23</sup> Assad would not make a separate peace with Israel, even for the sake of the Golan, if that meant abandoning the Palestinians. Whether or not Assad will stick to this position is unclear.

*No formal peace treaty.* Talk of peace is dismissed in Damascus as premature. At most, the Syrians are willing to offer Israel a non-belligerency agreement in return for the Golan Heights alone (and drop the other territories); this permits Assad to win back captured Syrian territory without accepting the permanent existence of a Jewish state.

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<sup>20</sup> *Agence France Presse*, March 22, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> *Le Monde*, May 11, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> *Tishrin*, April 16, 1991.

While flexibility on the first, third, and last issues is counterbalanced by a seemingly hardened position on the fourth, Damascus' basic diplomatic position has overall been significantly changed.

On the negative side, there is reason to doubt whether Assad has actually given up on a war option. If he has, why does Damascus continue to devote 30 percent of gross domestic product and 55-60 percent of the government budget to military-related expenses? Syrian forces number 400,000; why did Assad use the precious hard currency serendipitously received from his new friends to reactivate an army division previously placed on reserve status? Syrian fortifications along its Lebanese and Israeli borders are possibly the strongest anywhere in the world; yet recent arms purchases from the Soviet Union have included yet more and newer surface-to-air missile batteries (including SAM-11s, 13s, and 16s). As for surface-to-surface missiles, over 100 Scud-C missile launchers arrived from North Korea in March 1991 and Assad is reportedly contemplating the purchase of at least another 50. The M-9, a new (and possibly not yet produced) Chinese missile, is the object of considerable Syrian attention. With 620 combat planes, why purchase 48 MiG-29s and 24 Sukhoi-24s? With 4,200 tanks, why were 300 hundred more T-72s and T-74s bought from Eastern Europe at bargain-basement prices?<sup>24</sup> And why yet another 2,300 artillery pieces? In addition, two Syrian factories (near Damascus and Homs) produce several hundred metric tons of chemical gas year after year and the gas has been weaponized on surface-to-surface missiles, including the Scud-Cs.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>The Syrians often drove a hard bargain to get these arms. In the case of Czechoslovakia, for instance, they threatened not to repay their roughly \$1 billion in debt unless allowed to purchase 160 T-72 tanks, worth \$200 million.

<sup>25</sup>*Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 2, 1988; *Ma'ariv*, December 9, 1990; *60 Minutes*, March 10, 1991; *The Jerusalem Report*, March 28, 1991; *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 3, 1991; *Insight*, April 15, 1991; *Foreign Report*, May 2, 1991; Yosef Olmert, Government Press Office, May 22, 1991; *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 1991.

In part, the buildup manifests Assad's sense of vulnerability; but it also has offensive implications. Indeed, it is possible to conjure up circumstances even today in which Assad might use this arsenal against Israel.<sup>26</sup> Although the Syrians lack the strength to attack Israel proper, they could launch a surprise *Blitzkrieg* against the Golan Heights. In this case, helicopter-borne troops would probably try to seize part or all of the Golan within a single day to thirty hours, ending their operations before the Israeli reserves could be mobilized. To impede mobilization, the Syrians could deploy chemical weapons; unlike the Iraqi Scuds, which traveled long distances before landing in Israel, and therefore carried small payloads, each Scud from Syria could deliver enough chemical gas to blanket an area of 16 square miles. The simultaneous launching of chemical gas against selected Israeli targets could substantially interfere with Israel's mobilization of its 400,000 reserve soldiers. Or the Syrians would count on international pressure to prevent Israel from taking back the territory by force. This option is not likely, but two circumstances increase its probability: either Syria is diplomatically strong and Israel isolated; or the Syrian leadership is in desperate straits and does something dramatic to save its skin.

Although Syrian support of terrorism has diminished, it too remains a concern. Terrorist incidents attributable to Damascus have gone down rapidly since 1986, especially those against Westerners, but they have not come to an end (the major example being Syrian involvement in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988). The real problem lies in continued Syrian sponsorship of terrorist groups.<sup>27</sup> According to Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK leader living in Damascus, the Syrian government supports some seventy-three terrorist organizations,<sup>28</sup> ranging from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party to the Polisario, from the Pattani United

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<sup>26</sup>It is even easier to devise uses for the weapons against Assad's four other, less powerful neighbors.

<sup>27</sup>This is also the U.S. government view; see *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1991), pp. 35-36.

<sup>28</sup>*Milliyet*, March 23, 1991.

Liberation Organization of Thailand to the Red Army of Japan. Some of these groups (such as Abu Nidal's and Ahmed Jibril's) moved their headquarters to Iraq after August 2, 1990, but most of the infrastructure remains in place, ready to be activated.<sup>29</sup>

Noting these changes, some analysts are optimistic about change in Syria. Ann M. Lesch flatly holds that "the doctrine of strategic parity has yielded to the doctrine of diplomatic parity."<sup>30</sup> Graham Fuller of RAND observed in February 1991 that there is now more possibility of strategic change in Syria than ever because Assad may be tempted by a Palestinian-Israeli peace process as a way to enshrine his name as the sponsor of the second round of Arab-Israeli negotiations. Along these same lines, Moshe Ma'oz, the author of a well-regarded biography of the Syrian president, is quoted as saying that Assad "has adopted the Camp David model."<sup>31</sup>

Many in Israel have been skeptical of a change in Syria. News reports indicate that Israeli intelligence termed the softening in the Syrian line "cosmetic."<sup>32</sup> Yosef Olmert, director of Israel's Government Press Office (and a specialist on Syria in his own right) summed up the official position: "There is nothing new in what Assad said, but what is interesting is the lack of war talk."<sup>33</sup>

#### ASSESSMENT: NO WAR, NO PEACE

Arab leaders have looked to Moscow for the means to make war on Israel, to Washington for the means to make peace.

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<sup>29</sup>Assad reportedly asked Bush in their November 1990 meeting to remove Syria from the list of states sponsoring terrorism; the White House would only confirm that Assad complained about being on the list (*The Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1990). When the 1991 list came out, however, Syria was still on it, less because Damascus had engaged in terrorist operations and more because its structures remained in place.

<sup>30</sup>Ann M. Lesch, "Foreward," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Winter 1990, p. v.

<sup>31</sup>*Jerusalem Post International Edition*, November 10, 1990.

<sup>32</sup>*Davar*, April 2, 1991.

<sup>33</sup>*The Independent*, July 18, 1990.

Over time, they have realized that getting territory from Israel is more likely through diplomacy than war; as a result they have, one by one, turned to Washington. Following King Hussein, Anwar as-Sadat, and Yasser Arafat, Hafez al-Assad seems to have made the shift: does this mean that he is prepared to reach a diplomatic solution with Israel?

By way of an answer, it is helpful to note that two models of Arab negotiation with Israel now exist, the Sadat model and the Arafat model. Sadat was essentially sincere; even if he did harbor some Machiavellian ideas about undermining Israel by accepting it, he nonetheless changed his policy, resolved problems with Israel, and signed a peace treaty. Arafat, to the contrary, was insincere, using his dialogue with the United States as an end in itself (to change Israeli public opinion, divide Washington from Jerusalem, enhance his position) while experiencing no change of heart about accepting Israel.

So far, Assad more closely fits the Arafat model. Though he looks at Israel in an instrumental fashion, rather than as a zealot, and in this resembles Sadat, he emulates Arafat in seeing negotiations as an alternate means to destroy the enemy. Unlike Sadat, who abandoned Moscow because he changed strategies, Assad retains the war strategy and is looking to Washington because the Soviets are no longer there as they used to be.

Assad has shown no interest in settling with Israel. Joining the anti-Iraq coalition in no way implied reduced hostility to Israel; quite the contrary, the fundamentals of Syrian policy toward Israel remain in place, as do the motives—living down the 'Alawi legacy, tapping Sunni anti-Zionism, fulfilling Ba'ath ideology. Further, a settlement would make Israel just another regional power, like Iran, and so a likely participant in the coalitions that shape Middle East diplomacy. Were this the case, Jerusalem would surely find more in common with Cairo and Amman than with Damascus, and it would join their efforts to limit Syrian power. Israel's leverage in Lebanon might increase. The Syrian leadership, in other words, has good reason to work against Israel's integration into regional politics.

For another, the Kuwait crisis in one important way made Syrian accommodation less likely. Assad takes pride in his reputation as an unremitting pan-Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist. Yet the crisis found him ranged against Iraq and

on the same side as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. This is hardly the moment to expect the man further to tarnish his anti-Zionist credentials. In short, despite the changes of the moment, there remains little reason to be optimistic about Assad reaching an accord with Israel soon.

At the same time, a major flare-up is unlikely, for the two governments communicate with each other. They have found in Lebanon a relatively safe forum in which to confront each other, keeping the far more explosive Golan Heights completely quiet. Within Lebanon they understand each other's "red lines." For instance, they avoided escalation during heightened tensions in the spring of 1986. Further, according to *Foreign Report* (May 2, 1991), Israeli and Syrian representatives, mostly high-level diplomats and military officers, met no less than eleven times between May 1987 and August 1990. Whether this information is fully accurate or not, Damascus and Jerusalem clearly can do limited business with each other.

What next? Not much. Looking at Syria and Israel in purely geopolitical terms, ignoring ideologies and passions, helps understand why. These are the two pre-eminent regional powers who have just been strengthened by the defeat of a rising foe (Iraq). This leaves them a choice: either to join forces (impossible under the circumstances) or to compete in their region (Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinians), without making concessions to each other.

Both sides find the present situation tolerable; bad as it is, it is preferable to making unacceptable changes. Assad will probably stick to non-violent means in his relations with Israel rather than spoil Damascus' still precarious relations with the West or risk military humiliation; but he is not likely to go further. The Syrians would rather not pay the political price of resolution with Israel; the Israelis would rather not take the security risk of giving up the Golan Heights.

So, while there is every reason for the U.S. government to pursue a peace process between Syria and Israel, it must be undertaken with modest expectations, patience, and a sense of limits. Further, it is likely to succeed only if Americans remember not to carry water for Syria. Should they pressure Israel for concessions, the leadership in Damascus will have no incentive to give up anything of importance, much less to come to terms with Israel.

This raises an obvious question: if Assad defied the wishes of his populace and made peace with Israel, would he manage to stay in power? More broadly, is he a powerful dictator who can ignore Syrian public opinion or is he the leader of a precarious minority government who must acquiesce on key issues? The evidence is mixed, but the recent crisis offers some clues.





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## IV ASSAD'S FREEDOM OF MANEUVER

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When it comes to making policy, Hafez al-Assad professes to disdain the views of his countrymen, announcing (in classic authoritarian style) that "it's not public opinion that makes the government but the government that makes public opinion."<sup>1</sup> This, however, is sheer bravado; Assad is too good a politician to ignore his populace, no matter how effective the regime's repressive instruments or how omnipresent its propaganda. More than most, the ruler ever in search of legitimacy knows the value of goodwill and popularity.

Still, when Assad considers it imperative, he does defy the public and impose his will on the country. This happened in 1974, when he signed an unpopular disengagement agreement with Israel; in 1976, when he initially backed in Lebanon a Christian coalition against Muslims and Palestinians; in 1980, when he supported Iran in its war with Iraq; and in 1990, when he joined the anti-Iraq coalition. The latter episode is worth a close look, for it offers an unusual opportunity to study the dialectic of public disaffection and regime response.

As in other parts of the Middle East, many in Syria fell under Saddam's spell in August 1990, and disagreed vehemently with their government's guardedly pro-Western policy. Pro-Saddam demonstrations erupted in the eastern towns of Syria, including Al-Hasaka, Dayr az-Zawr and Abu Kamal, as protestors chanted pro-Iraqi slogans, waved Iraqi

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<sup>1</sup>*Jeune Afrique*, February 13-19, 1991.

flags, and carried pictures of the man their state-run media called “the butcher of Baghdad.” Graffiti and anonymous leaflets criticizing the government’s position appeared almost overnight. In the south of Damascus, some protestors went so far as to deface posters of Assad—an act of extreme provocation and danger. Preachers inside the country called for God to make “Islam and the Arabs triumph”<sup>2</sup>—leaving unsaid but perfectly clear to whom they were referring; outside the country, the Muslim Brethren strongly condemned Syrian policy. Intellectuals condemned the fighting against Iraq as a “criminal war intended to destroy the Arabs and give America a free hand to control the globe.”<sup>3</sup> Some of the Palestinian organizations based in Damascus proclaimed a readiness to help Saddam resist his enemies. Most alarming of all were the indications that disaffection had reached the Syrian military. For example, rumors surfaced that three army officers took the highly unusual step of turning down the opportunity to become division commanders, not wanting to become too closely implicated with the Assad regime’s policy in the Persian Gulf.

After the war’s end, Assad admitted in private discussions that “our Syrian masses were deceived” by Iraqi arguments and that a “heated dialogue” took place. In September 1990, Syrians and foreign diplomats estimated that 75 percent of the Syrian population backed Saddam; in December, Syrian authorities put the number at 85 percent; according to one estimate, that number reached 90 percent during the war; and a month after hostilities ceased, reports from Syria indicated that Iraq’s popularity had hardly diminished.<sup>4</sup> In brief, Saddam’s popularity among Syrians roughly matched what it was among Jordanians. King Hussein felt compelled to appease this sentiment, thereby risking his relations with the West and even his kingdom, while Assad overrode it.

Assad used both force and propaganda to have his way. Some 50,000 troops violently repressed the protests of late

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<sup>2</sup>*Jeune Afrique*, February 13-19, 1991.

<sup>3</sup>*The Spectator*, February 2, 1991.

<sup>4</sup>*The Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 1990; *Time*, December 3, 1991; *The Christian Science Monitor* March 28, 1991; *Insight* August 5, 1991.

August, killing dozens. Palestinian organizations based in Damascus received strict instructions to toe the government's line. A BBC correspondent who reported riots in Syria was sent packing the same day. The government purchased jammers and used them extensively to block pro-Saddam television broadcasts from Jordan and CNN transmissions out of Lebanon. Soon after hostilities began, it prohibited Jordanians suspected of pro-Saddam activities from entering Syria.

The regime also tried to win over public opinion. Ba'ath Party officials toured the country, giving talks justifying the government's position. Interestingly, while the media and other official fora were censored, grumbling in private appears to have been sanctioned. Actually, Assad's carefully orchestrated shift in policy was not the only message coming out of Damascus. Whether by design or not, Defense Minister Tallas presented a very different—and more traditionally Syrian—picture of American motives in the Persian Gulf, complete with conspiracy theory. Tallas' byzantine explanation bears note because it probably represents a common view in Syria. He began with two main assumptions. First, Saddam Hussein is an American agent, a man who “has dreamed and still dreams of becoming the U.S. policeman in the Gulf.” Second, the American response to the Iraqi invasion resulted entirely from the Arab-Israeli conflict. “Syria believes that the furor America has raised over the Gulf crisis is aimed at deception, to divert the attention of the world, and especially the Arab nation, away from the grave designs against us by Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Tallas went on to interpret recent events in this light: Saddam initially believed that his invasion of Kuwait “would serve the U.S. He expected that Washington would tolerate the invasion as the price paid in return for services rendered,” especially the diversion of the Arab nation's attention from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Saddam saw Kuwait as his reward for executing what Tallas terms Iraq's “unjust war against Iran.” But Saddam miscalculated: once Iraq “swallowed Kuwait in one gulp,” the U.S. government could not keep quiet about this episode, “even though it was carried out by one of its own stooges.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Syrian Arab News Agency, October 26, 1990.

<sup>6</sup>*Al-Majalla*, January 9-15, 1991.

Public statements out of Damascus in August and September inched their way to a coherent policy; implicitly they seemed to respond to popular sentiments. Between the initial stance and the final position the authorities adopted some odd positions. Here is a sampling (the “translations” are my interpretation of what the authorities really meant):

August 3: Damascus votes for an Arab League resolution “categorically to reject any foreign intervention or attempt to intervene in Arab affairs.”<sup>7</sup>

*Translation: No Western troops welcome.*

August 4: The Foreign Ministry demands the “immediate, unconditional withdrawal” of Iraqi troops from Kuwaiti territory and calls for an immediate Arab summit to deal with the invasion.<sup>8</sup>

August 6: *Al-Ba’th*, a Damascus newspaper, editorializes that “it is a fatal mistake to allow any international party, irrespective of which, to interfere in internal Arab affairs . . . Dialogue is the productive way to solve the existing dispute between Iraq and Kuwait.”

*Translation: Do something quick, Saddam, before Western troops arrive.*

August 8: ‘Abdallah al-Ahmar, a top Ba’ath Party functionary, warns that “the doors are wide open to the possibility of foreign interference” and that foreign forces are trying to exploit the Iraqi invasion “to tighten their grip on the Arab region and its wealth.”<sup>9</sup>

*Translation: We don’t like it, but it’s a fact that Western troops are on their way.*

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<sup>7</sup>Middle East News Agency, August 3, 1990.

<sup>8</sup>Radio Damascus, August 4, 1990.

<sup>9</sup>Syrian Arab News Agency, August 8, 1990.

August 10: Damascus votes for an Arab League resolution "to support the measures the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf [i.e., Persian Gulf] states take in implementation of the right of legitimate defense."<sup>10</sup>

*Translation: Western troops are acceptable.*

August 10: Damascus announces that "token forces" will be dispatched to Saudi Arabia and that the troops will be drawn from the Lebanese theater. Syrian officials deny that these have any connection to the U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia. The Syrian forces, rather, will serve as a deterrent "to Iraqi expansion southward and to any American move toward Kuwait."<sup>11</sup>

*Translation: We will keep an eye on the Western troops and keep peace between the two sides.*

August 14: The first Syrian forces arrive in Saudi Arabia.

*Al-Hayat*, a London newspaper, quotes Syrian sources that the "major aim" of the Arab expeditionary force is to "prevent U.S. military intervention."

The official Syrian media simultaneously make a cryptic point. *Al-Ba'th* newspaper editorializes that because the Iraqis did not withdraw from Kuwait, "Syria has to stand on the side of right regardless of circumstances." Similarly, the radio announces that "whatever the circumstances, Syria had to take its stand alongside justice."

*Translation: We don't like the Western troops but our principles force us to accept them.*

August 20: Assad tells an Arab summit meeting: "The foreigners who came to the region were not

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<sup>10</sup>Middle East News Agency, August 10, 1990.

<sup>11</sup>*Al-Hayat* (London), August 13, 1990.

responsible for the event; the event brought them to the region. If we want these foreigners to be out as soon as possible, we have to find a solution to this event as soon as possible.”<sup>12</sup>

*Translation: Western troops can stay so long as Iraq occupies Kuwait.*

August 21: Radio Damascus: “It is possible for Arab forces to replace foreign forces gradually and with the passage of time.”

*Translation: Expect Western troops to stay.*

August 28: Radio Damascus: The issue is not restoring a ruling family to power but “entrenching, complying with, and acting upon pan-Arab values and principles.”

*Translation: Western troops are forwarding Pan-Arab nationalist goals.*

August 31: *Al-Ba’th* calls on Iraqis to “get rid of those who imposed this impasse on them.”

September 12: Assad: “Syria is not for the presence of foreign forces anywhere in the Arab homeland. . . Let us resolve our problem and then say, ‘O, foreigners, we have resolved our problem, which you said you came here for. Now leave our countries’. . . They will undoubtedly withdraw. If they do not withdraw, we will then be one Arab rank without any differences at all . . . to get these foreigners out of the Arab land. If they do withdraw, Arab forces will replace them.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Syrian Arab Television Network, August 20, 1990.

<sup>13</sup>Syrian Arab Television Network, September 12, 1990. Assad forcefully reiterated this point just before the war began, when he pledged to Saddam Hussein (in an open letter) that if Iraq is attacked after the withdrawal of its forces from Kuwait, Syria would stand “in one trench” alongside it (Radio Damascus, January 12, 1991).

*Translation: If Western troops don't leave  
with dispatch, we will join Iraq.*

The September 12 speech also contained interesting references to those who disagreed with Assad's pro-coalition stance. He showed considerable understanding for this outlook. While some should know better, he acknowledged that "many who fall into this mistake . . . are innocent people lacking the knowledge and experience to understand the situation." At another point, Assad referred to those who wonder "how Arab forces can be present on Saudi Arabia territories while foreign troops are there," then proceeded to explain this strange occurrence.

The unpopularity of Syrian participation helps explain why the Syrian military stayed out of the actual fighting against Iraqi forces. Even more noteworthy was that Syrian media virtually ignored the fact that some 18,000 Syrian soldiers were being deployed in Saudi Arabia, effectively operating under U.S. command.<sup>14</sup> This achingly careful treatment of antagonistic public opinion, to the point of allowing Tallas to let off steam in public and hiding thousands of Syrian troops in a battle zone, suggests a sense of vulnerability. At the same time, its defiance of pro-Saddam public opinion signals Assad's confidence.

Assad lives in a volatile environment; although unable to eliminate risk, he can nonetheless minimize his exposure through careful calculation. This double pattern points to a rule: on essential issues, he overrides popular opinion; on other matters, he tries to heed public sentiments. Because domestic decisions are generally more critical to the regime's survival, Assad regularly imposes his will here (for example, appointing his fellow 'Alawis to most critical positions). But even here he shows flexibility where possible: he bends to the popular will by taxing citizens very lightly. On foreign policy, he seems more willing to go along with the majority opinion; hence the regime's Greater Syria orientation and its anti-Zionism.

Assad could probably make peace with Israel if the right incentives were in place; for example, if coming to terms with Israel were the alternative to a major threat to his rule or a

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<sup>14</sup>Conversely, Saudi media heavily stressed the presence of Syrian troops as part of their pretense that the 540,000 American soldiers did not exist!

disastrous war, he would move in that direction. On the other hand, if improved relations with the West do not require major changes toward Israel, the hard-line policies will undoubtedly stay in place.

Can anything be done to alter Assad's calculus? If so, it would have to be the United States that does so, and this brings us to our final topic—U.S. government policy toward Syria.



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## V U.S. POLICY

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Two of the questions raised in the introduction have in effect been answered. The Kuwait crisis has not engendered a fundamental shift in Syrian politics; Damascus is making the best of a difficult situation. There has been no change of heart toward the Zionist enterprise and Israel, but some timely, tactical adjustments. The third question remains: Should the U.S. government build on the new quasi-alliance or distance itself from Assad's tyranny?

### GUIDELINES

Before getting into the details of policy, three guidelines for U.S. policy toward the Assad government might be reiterated:

*Expect few major changes in Damascus so long as Assad and the minority 'Alawis rule.* The Assad regime has a permanently besieged quality; the leadership constantly weighs odds and chooses the least risky route for itself, its clans, and the 'Alawi people. It takes no unnecessary chances. An 'Alawi successor to Assad may lack the same skills as the master but he will no doubt pursue similar aims. Major changes in Syria are more likely when the Sunnis regain control of power; and the more broadly-based that regime is, the greater the likelihood of change.

*The economy is Assad's weak spot.* With the Soviet bloc no longer supplying aid as it once did and with most oil-rich Middle East states cooperating with the United States, Washington now exerts a much greater potential influence than before over the outside income that pays for the military

strength undergirding Assad's aggressive foreign policy. Without that outside income, the regime would quickly lose its ability to continue the military buildup so essential to its external strength. Syrian troublemaking would then decline precipitously.

*Syria is central to the Arab-Israeli conflict.* Rampant Palestinianism tends to obscure this fact, but some analysts and politicians understand it. Henry Kissinger, for example, has observed that "No [Arab-Israeli] peace is possible without Syria"; Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy holds that for his country "the entire danger is now concentrated in Syria."<sup>1</sup> The centrality of Syria suggests that attempting a full-scale peace process without Syria is unrealistic. The other parties cannot make the key decisions of war and peace; they are intimidated by Damascus and will not be able to sustain their accords with Israel without Syrian acquiescence.

This contradicts the hitherto common assumption of American diplomats that they could isolate Assad and thereby force him (out of fear of being left behind) to join the diplomatic process. But reality is the reverse. Like the old British headline, "Fog Over Channel, Continent Cut Off," this confuses who's isolated. Were the other Arab leaders to negotiate with Israel against Assad's wishes, they would fear him more than the other way around. Assad would leave them alone (as he did with Yasser Arafat from December 1988 on) if he did not fear a settlement. But if Assad did fear one, he would do his very best to prevent it, as he did in 1983-84, and he would most likely prevail, even at the cost of confronting both the U.S. and Israeli governments.

## A LEGACY OF CONCILIATION

America's soft touch with the Assad regime predates the Kuwait crisis by nearly seven years. In December 1983, U.S. fighter planes pounded Syrian positions in Lebanon to intimidate Assad; one American pilot lost his life and another was taken captive. To extricate the latter, the Reverend Jesse Jackson traveled to Syria, praised Assad, and won the airman's release. This was a turning point in U.S. policy toward Syria; at no time since has Washington adopted a tough line toward the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 1983; *Al-Ahram*, April 23, 1991.

Assad regime. Instead, policy has been premised on the hope that Assad might be cooperative concerning American hostages in Lebanon, terrorism, relations with Israel, and a range of lesser issues.

By mid-1984, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy was already praising Assad, calling him a “helpful player” in Lebanon<sup>2</sup>—a truly stunning appraisal. In 1985, the Reagan Administration excluded Syria from the list of states engaged in terrorism. In 1986, Murphy noted that “Syria has too much to gain from and has an important role in achieving a lasting peace in the region.”<sup>3</sup> In 1987, Vernon Walters, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, travelled to Damascus intent on convincing Assad to give up terrorism. In 1988, American officials actually engaged in negotiations with Damascus over selecting a president for Lebanon. During the Gulf War of 1991, the White House refused to press for access to Syrian airspace.

Assad hardly ever pays for his trespasses. The Bush Administration has not publicly protested the recent Syrian arms buildup, resisting some tempting opportunities. On March 13, 1991, for example, the day of Secretary Baker’s first-ever visit to Syria, a shipment of Scud-Cs arrived at the Syrian port of Latakia; the Pentagon urged a strong protest against Syrian military escalation, but the State Department nixed the idea, saying it was “not the right time.”<sup>4</sup> Washington’s response to Assad’s virtual annexation of Lebanon in May 1991 was quiet, to say the least;<sup>5</sup> and on the very day the Syria-Lebanon treaty was signed, the U.S. government authorized the release of almost \$4 million of non-lethal military equipment to Lebanon that had been impounded since the early 1980s. Assad cleverly assured American silence by

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<sup>2</sup>*The New York Times*, July 26, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, January 28, 1986.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Steven Emerson, “The Postwar Scud Boom,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 1991.

<sup>5</sup>Spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler’s remarkable statement of May 24, 1991 can be found in Appendix II.

making his move on Lebanon during the peace process negotiations; as one White House official put it, "this is no time to get into a pissing match with Assad."

To the contrary, Assad is repeatedly praised in Washington. On almost every occasion that American hostages in Lebanon win their freedom, U.S. officials lavish public gratitude on him,<sup>6</sup> even when his regime had nothing to do with their release—or when it was actually complicit in their detention. And while the U.S. government has delivered no ultimata about Syrian support for terrorism, Secretary of State Baker expressly thanked the Syrians for helping prevent terrorism against Western targets during the Gulf War, presumably because they could have allowed terrorism had they wished.

This soft approach has been less than a resounding success. Adding the 281 Marines killed in Beirut to the 259 passengers killed over Lockerbie (nearly all of them Americans), plus other victims here and there, Assad had a role in the deaths of some 540 Americans during the 1980s—far more than Saddam Hussein or anyone else. American hostages remain in Lebanon, while the Syrian terrorist network probably extends to the United States. (In October 1987, for example, three members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party were apprehended while bringing explosives from Canada into the United States.)<sup>7</sup> Syrian efforts to dominate the PLO and intimidate Jordan have proceeded apace.

The Kuwait crisis then exposed even more clearly the failure of this policy. In the initial aftermath of victory, when American politicians stressed a "window of opportunity," Assad made no real change in his policy toward Israel. On the other hand, he did exploit opportunities to the hilt—conquering Lebanon, using new funds to build military strength, making new efforts to dominate the Palestinians.

One small incident shows the chasm between American expectations and Syrian realities. Overriding the reluctance of

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<sup>6</sup>One example: George Bush called the Syrian president when Robert Polhill was released in April 1990 and expressed his "sincere gratitude" for Assad's personal efforts (Radio Damascus, April 23, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>*The New York Times*, January 28, and May 18, 1988; *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 1988; *The Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1988.

the intelligence community to expose its informants, Baker reportedly presented evidence to the Syrians about their involvement in a plot to kill Roger G. Harrison, the U.S. ambassador to Jordan. His premise was optimistic to the point of Pollyannism: if Assad were shown what was being done, he would put a stop to it. But Assad took the evidence and used it to ferret out and kill Syrian agents in Jordan's intelligence service, at least one of whom had to be a double agent. So much for the new relationship.

Appeasement has run its dismal course: the time has come for a tougher policy toward Syria.

### NEXT STEPS

Is Washington about to repeat with Assad the same mistake—overly friendly relations lasting too long—it made with Saddam? Has a temporary coincidence of interests been puffed into something too large? Two considerations, one having to do with the Middle East and the other with Washington, give rise to fears that this is a real danger. The Middle East hosts many Frankenstein states—governments courted and armed by an outside power which then turn against that patron. Sadat did this to the Soviets, Khomeini to the Americans, Saddam Hussein to both. Given a chance, Assad will turn on Washington too.

On the American side, the trouble lies with politicians who imbue tactical alliances with a friendship that is not reciprocated. The result is a pattern of coalitions which do not end when their rationale no longer exists. Americans expected Stalin to cooperate after 1945 as he had during the confrontation with Hitler: Eastern Europe was the casualty. Americans experienced cooperation with the Peoples Republic of China in the late 1970s as something much warmer (and thus longer lasting) than did the Chinese. Similarly, U.S. ties to Saddam Hussein should have shut down in 1988, along with the Iraq-Iran war, but they foolishly continued for another two years. The same mistake may now be repeated with Syria. It was appropriate in November 1990 for George Bush to bind Syria tightly to the U.S.-led alliance by telling Assad what he wanted to hear (Bush's interest in Syrian "security concerns"

and "vital interests").<sup>8</sup> With the war over, the time has come for a more demanding U.S. position.<sup>9</sup> In effect, the U.S. government needs to impose on Assad the dilemmas that he escaped thanks to Saddam Hussein's stupidity.

Current policy in Washington emphasizes the Arab-Israel peace process; thus Syrian participation is the highest priority in relations with Damascus. This policy has, of this writing, borne fruit; yet it leaves unaddressed Syria's fundamentally malevolent presence in the region. I propose instead a policy that pays less attention to the Israeli dimension and more to other aspects of Syrian state behavior, both foreign (such as relations with the Soviet Union, Turkey, Lebanon) and internal (human rights, democracy, the rule of law). Damascus needs to be put on notice that improved relations depend on changes in behavior with respect to a wide array of concerns. Widening our angle of vision allows us to see the regime in its totality, and this facilitates the formulation of sound policy.

That policy, to begin with, should have American officials reminding Assad (and themselves) that in the final analysis lasting ties between states depend on common values and a shared vision. Early on, Secretary Baker did tell reporters after meetings in Syria that "We can have close relations only with countries that share our fundamental values", adding "that is not to say we cannot improve relations where we have a common goal and a common interest, as we have in this case."<sup>10</sup> More generally, you can usually tell what kind of neighbor you have by the way he treats the people in his own house. This critical point will come back to haunt American leaders should they happen to forget it.

Specifically, Washington should demand across-the-board changes as the price for its continued and future cooperation. Of this writing, Damascus has signalled its willingness to

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<sup>8</sup>*Al-Hayat*, November 28, 1990.

<sup>9</sup>For a forceful argument to the contrary, arguing for a "Golan II" agreement, see Anthony Rusonik, "Syria's Prospective Role in the Middle East Peace Process," *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 13 (1991): 15-39. Rusonik spells out his plan on p. 35.

<sup>10</sup>*The Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1990.

enter into an Arab-Israel peace process, albeit in a highly circumscribed and inscrutable way. This is a good start toward better relations, but not enough. In addition, Assad must now show flexibility and seriousness of purpose in those negotiations. He also needs to take steps which would alter the very nature of his regime:

Make major improvements in human rights and establish some sort of political process within Syria (for specific suggestions proposed by Middle East Watch, see Appendix IV);

Repay the over \$1 billion owed to the West currently in arrears (a burden much facilitated by oil export revenues);

End the military buildup and instead devote more resources to raising the Syrian standard of living;

Arrest and prosecute terrorists; expel the dozens of terrorist groups operating out of Syria or Syrian-held territory; and end direct Syrian involvement in terrorism;

Phase out Syrian troops from Lebanon; and

End Syrian involvement in and sponsorship of the Lebanese drug trade.

Too, a variety of symbolic and good faith gestures would go far to improve the atmosphere:

Compensate the American victims of Syrian-sponsored terrorist attacks;

Allow Western scholars and journalists to enter Syria, do not unduly restrict their access, and do not censor their reports;

Help win the release of all American hostages in Lebanon;

Release the approximately 4,000 remaining Jews from captivity in Syria;<sup>11</sup> and

Extradite to the West such figures as Alois Brunner (the highest-ranking Nazi still at-large and a man deemed by Simon Wiesenthal “the worst ever” of the Third Reich criminals)<sup>12</sup> and Ahmed Jibril, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command.

Some of these demands may be unrealistic in the short-term. Still, they are worth asserting, for they mark enduring American positions. As we have seen elsewhere in the world, American stands which seem hopelessly idealistic for decades on end can of a sudden become cutting-edge policies.

It is realistic to expect the implementation of these steps because none of them harms Syrian national interests; more to the point, with the exception of human rights improvements, neither do they infringe on the Assad regime’s ability to retain power. Assad should be made to understand that rejection of these changes implies lack of serious interest in improving relations with the United States; to the extent he accepts them, Washington should respond positively.

How can the U.S. government get satisfaction on these points? The most promising is to exert pressure on Damascus’ most glaring weakness—the pocketbook. A variety of means exist, both direct and indirect. In the first place, Damascus should be held accountable for its policies. For example, it remains a beneficiary of the Generalized System of Preferences, a program which allows poor countries to export manufactured goods with reduced duties to the United States, despite provisions concerning workers’ rights and terrorism. The Syrian government, needless to say, conspicuously fails both standards, a matter brought to the U.S. Trade

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<sup>11</sup>The Israelis have apparently made this a central issue in their relationship with Damascus; Foreign Minister David Levy stated that “there can be no talk of a peace process while Syrian Jews are being held hostage” (Kol Yisrael, May 29, 1991).

<sup>12</sup>Bills were introduced in both the U.S. House and Senate in July 1991 urging President Bush to intercede to secure Brunner’s extradition.



Representative's attention by the AFL-CIO in 1988; consistent with the policy of appeasement, the USTR has refused to give rule on the issue due to a "lack of information."<sup>13</sup> In the interim, Damascus retains full GSP privileges.

Second, the Syrians should be required to reciprocate for commercial benefits they already enjoy. American oil management companies manage the tricky Syrian oil fields, in part because no one else has their level of petroleum expertise; Syrian plans to expand oil production gives Washington a leverage that begs to be used for political ends.

Third, the Syrians seek a variety of economic ties—borrowing money on the American financial markets, American commercial investment in Syria, and trade—which should be denied pending improvements in Syrian regime behavior. In addition, credits should be withheld, as well as most favored nation status and government-backed insurance.

Ideally, American friends, both Western and Arab, will take similar steps; and if they do not, Washington should exert pressure on them. At the very minimum, they can be induced not to subsidize the Syrian economy. Indeed, as Patrick Clawson observes, "the West's best opportunity to influence Assad is to make it clear to the Soviets, Saudis, and Kuwaitis that they must accept responsibility for the actions of the Syrian government that they are bankrolling."<sup>14</sup> If this strategy appeared remote when written in 1989, events of the past two years make it newly feasible.

Should American leaders decide to make the taming of Syria a higher priority, it can adopt a variety of other steps to pressure Assad, including a reduction in Syrian diplomatic missions, the imposition of travel restrictions on Syrian nationals, and pressure on nearby states to take a tougher stand vis-a-vis Syria. With regard to the last point, it is worth noting that both Turkey and Israel would very much look forward to a less bellicose regime in Damascus.

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<sup>13</sup>*Near East Report*, July 22, 1991.

<sup>14</sup>Patrick Clawson, *Unaffordable Ambitions: Syria Military Build-Up and Economic Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989), p. 46.

Most ambitiously, Assad's Syrian enemies can be helped to unseat him. According to the Syrian opposition, two million Syrians have fled their native country; even if the actual number is much smaller, it still constitutes an active and talented group of people, many of them devoted to a change of regime in Damascus. Were Sunnis to rule in Damascus, greater flexibility would not necessarily follow, but it would certainly be possible. Depending less on conflict with Israel to prove their Arab and Muslim credentials, Sunnis would probably pay more attention to the economic, social, and political costs of the conflict. Just as Charles de Gaulle could withdraw from Algeria and Richard Nixon could open relations with China, so it will probably be a Sunni who ends the belligerency with Israel.<sup>15</sup>

This is not the moment to decide among such options, but Americans should keep in mind the dangers posed by Damascus. Assad is a formidable opponent; influencing Syrian policy requires a steady hand and a willingness to endure setbacks. Above all, U.S.-Syrian bilateral ties are profoundly unequal; Assad needs to win U.S. favor more than the reverse. Yet Assad will try to induce Washington to pay him for allowing himself to be helped; this must not happen. U.S.-Syrian relations can prosper only if American officials stick to positions that are morally grounded and politically sound.

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<sup>15</sup>I have considered these options at greater length in "Comment contrer le 'Brejnev Syrien'" *Politique Internationale*, Summer 1990, pp. 161-74.

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## APPENDIX I: THE ISRAEL-SYRIA MILITARY BALANCE

### ARMY

COUNTRY	Personnel (thousands)			Divisions			Independent Brigades			Tanks	APCs & ARVs	Guns & Mortars	ATGM Launchers	SSM Launchers
	Reg.	Res.	Total	Armor	Mech.	Inf.	Armor	Mech.	Inf./ Para./ Com./ Terr.					
ISRAEL	133	365	498	12	—	4	—	—	13	3860	8100	1300	+	12
SYRIA	306	—	406	6	3	1	1	1	7	4200	3800	2300	2000	60

### AIR FORCE AND AIR DEFENSE

COUNTRY	Personnel (thousands)			Interceptors		Strike Multi-Role Aircraft		Total Combat	Transport Aircraft	Helicopters			Military Airfields	Long- range SAM Batteries
	Reg.	Res.	Total	High Quality	Others	High Quality	Others			Attack	Transport + ASW	Total		
ISRAEL	31	55	86	171	—	24	443	638	91	77	141	218	11	+
SYRIA	80	37.5	117.5	65	275	20	260	620	32	115	175	290	21	108

### NAVY

COUNTRY	Personnel (thousands)			Sub- marines	MFPBs	Missile Destroyers Frigates & Corvettes	SSMs	ASW Vessels	Mine Warfare Vessels	Patrol Craft	Landing Craft	Hover- Craft	Naval Bases
	Reg.	Res.	Total										
ISRAEL	10	10	20	3	23 + 2 Hydro- foil	—	Gabriel, Harpoon	—	—	46	13	2	3
SYRIA	4	2.5	6.5	3	21	—	Styx	2	7	7	3	—	3

Reprinted with Permission From: *The Middle East Military Balance, 1989-90*, edited by Joseph Alpher (Boulder, Colorado: Jerusalem Post and Westview Press, 1990), pp. 376-77.

Note: plus sign indicates precise number unknown; minus sign indicates no entry.

## APPENDIX II: TREATY OF BROTHERHOOD, COOPERATION, AND COORDINATION

The Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic,

By virtue of the distinctive brotherly ties that bind them,<sup>1</sup> deriving their strength from the roots of kinship, history, single affiliation, common destiny and common interests;

Convinced that the achievement of the broadest cooperation and coordination between them will: serve their interests; provide the means to guarantee their development; ensure their progress and security, both Pan-Arab (*qawmi*) and national (*watani*); enable them to confront all regional and international developments; and meet the aspirations of the peoples in the two states;

In keeping with the Lebanese National Charter [i.e., the Ta'if Accords], approved by the Lebanese [Parliament] on November 5, 1989,

Agree on the following:

### *ARTICLE ONE*

The two states will strive to realize the highest degree of cooperation and coordination in all political, economic, security, cultural, scientific and other fields in pursuit of the interests of the two brotherly countries within the framework of the sovereignty and independence of each of them, so as to enable the two countries to utilize their political, economic and security strengths to provide prosperity and stability, ensure their Pan-Arab and national security, expand and strengthen their common interests, affirm their brotherly relations, and guarantee their common destiny.

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to singular and the plural forms, the Arabic language also has a dual. Starting with the second sentence, this rarely used feature recurs throughout the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination, and it gives the document a more forceful quality than can be conveyed in English. Grammar itself has political significance as verbs and pronouns collude to emphasize the tight bond between Lebanon and Syria.

*ARTICLE TWO*

The two states will strive to achieve cooperation and coordination in the fields of economics, agriculture, industry, commerce, transportation, communications, customs, the initiation of joint projects, and the coordination of development plans.

*ARTICLE THREE*

The interrelationship of the two countries' security requires that Lebanon not become a threat to Syria's security, and vice-versa, under any circumstance. Therefore, Lebanon shall not allow itself to be a passageway or a base for any force, state, or organization that seeks to undermine either its security or Syria's. Syria, which cherishes Lebanon's security, independence, unity, and domestic harmony, shall not allow any action that threatens Lebanon's security, independence and sovereignty.

*ARTICLE FOUR*

The Syrian and Lebanese governments shall, after approving the political reforms in a constitutional manner, as the Lebanese National Charter provides, and after the expiration of deadlines specified in the Charter, decide on the redeployment of the Syrian forces in the Bekaa region and the Bekaa's western approach in Dahr al-Baydar up to the Hammana—Al-Mudayrij—'Ayn Dara line and, if necessary, in other posts to be determined by a joint Lebanese-Syrian military committee. The two governments shall also arrive at an agreement that determines the size of the Syrian forces and the duration of their presence in these areas and the relationship of these forces to the Lebanese state.

*ARTICLE FIVE*

The two countries' foreign policy, Arab and international, shall be based on the following principles:

1. Lebanon and Syria are Arab states committed to the Charter of the League of Arab States, Arab joint defense and economic cooperation pacts, and all other agreements ratified in the framework of the League. They are both members of the

United Nations and committed to its Charter. They are also both members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

2. The two countries share a common destiny and common interests.

3. In keeping with the provisions of this treaty, each country shall support the other in matters relating to its security and its national (*watani*) interests.

Accordingly, the governments of the two countries shall coordinate their Arab and international policies, cooperate to the fullest extent possible in Arab and international institutions and organizations, and coordinate their positions on regional and international issues.

#### *ARTICLE SIX*

The following agencies shall be formed to achieve the objectives of this treaty. Other agencies can be established by a decision from the Supreme Council.

1. The Supreme Council:

A. Shall be composed of the President of the Republic of each of the two contracting states, as well as:

—From the Syrian Arab Republic: the Speaker of the People's Council [parliament], the Prime Minister, and the Deputy Prime Minister;

—From the Lebanese Republic: the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies [Parliament], the Prime Minister, and the Deputy Prime Minister.

B. Shall meet once a year and when the need arises, at a venue to be agreed upon.

C. Shall define the general policy for coordination and cooperation between the two states in the political, economic, security, military and other fields, and shall oversee the implementation of this policy. It shall also approve the plans and decisions of the Follow-up and Coordination Commission, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Economic and Social Affairs Committee, the Defense and Security Affairs Committee, and any other committee yet to be created.

D. The Supreme Council's decisions are binding and applicable within the framework of each of the two countries' constitutional rules and principles.

E. Shall determine the topics on which the specialized committees are authorized to make decisions that are implemented on issuance in accordance with the constitutional rules and principles in each of the two countries, if they do not conflict with those rules and principles.

2. The Follow-up and Coordination Commission:

Shall consist of the Prime Ministers of the two countries and a number of ministers concerned with relations between them. This body shall assume the following tasks:

A. Follow up on the implementation of the decisions of the Supreme Council and report to the Council on implementation.

B. Coordinate the recommendations and decisions of the specialized committees and refer their suggestions to the Supreme Council.

C. Hold meetings with the specialized committees, when necessary.

D. Shall meet once every six months and when the need arises, at a venue to be agreed upon.

3. The Foreign Affairs Committee:

A. Shall be composed of the Foreign Ministers of the two countries.

B. Shall meet at least once every two months and when the need arises in the two countries' capitals on a rotating basis.

C. Shall strive to coordinate the foreign policies of the two states in their relations with all states; coordinate their activities and positions in Arab and international organizations; and, for that purpose, prepare plans for approval by the Supreme Council.

4. The Economic and Social Affairs Committee:

A. Shall be composed of the ministers concerned with the economic and social sectors in the two countries.

B. Shall meet once every two months, and when the need arises, in the two countries' capitals on a rotating basis.

C. Shall strive for economic and social coordination between the two states and shall prepare recommendations to that end.



D. Recommendations of the Economic and Social Affairs Committee shall go into effect, in keeping with the constitutional principles of each of the two countries, when approved by the Supreme Council.

5. The Defense and Security Affairs Committee:

A. Shall be composed of the Ministers of Defense and the Interior of the two countries.

B. Shall be responsible for studying the means by which the two states' security can be preserved and for proposing joint measures to confront any aggression or threat to their national (*qawmi*) security or any disturbances that jeopardize their internal security.

C. All plans and recommendations prepared by the Defense and Security Affairs Committee shall be referred to the Supreme Council for approval, in keeping with the constitutional principles of each of the two countries.

6. The Secretariat General:

A. Shall be created to follow up on the implementation of the provisions of this treaty.

B. Shall be headed by a Secretary General who will be appointed by the Supreme Council.

C. The headquarters, jurisdiction, staff, and budget of the Secretariat General shall be determined by the Supreme Council.

CLOSING PROVISIONS

1. Special agreements shall be concluded by the two countries in the fields covered by this treaty, such as the economic, security, defense and other fields, in accordance with the constitutional principles of each of the two countries. These are considered a complementary part of this treaty.

2. This treaty shall take effect upon being ratified by the authorities of the two countries in accordance with their constitutional provisions.

3. Each of the two states shall abrogate any law or regulation not in conformity with this treaty. The abrogation will be done in a way that does not violate any constitutional provision in either country.

Damascus, 22 May 1991,

For the Lebanese Republic:  
Elias Hrawi  
President of the Lebanese Republic

For the Syrian Arab Republic:  
Hafez al-Assad  
President of the Syrian Arab Republic

STATE DEPARTMENT REGULAR BRIEFING, 24 MAY  
1991.

*Margaret Tutwiler.* United States policy towards Lebanon has long been based on supporting Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. That remains our goal today. We have also been strong and consistent supporters of the Ta'if agreement. Our measure of this treaty will be based on whether its implementation is consistent with these principles and the Ta'if Accords. We will be closely following that process.

*Question:* From the agreement that you've read so far, does it look like Lebanon is now going to become part of Greater Syria?

*Margaret Tutwiler.* No, we do not characterize it that way. And, as I just said, this was called for in the Ta'if Accords. It's my understanding that Lebanon and Syria have been working on such a type of agreement for six or seven years. It is my understanding that out of a cabinet that I believe consists of thirty individuals in Lebanon, twenty-eight supported this. As you know, over the last six or seven months many of the militias in Lebanon have been disbanding and disarming. And we support the Ta'if Accords. And we have said, however, that we will be watching this closely, meaning the implementation of this.

*Question:* Do you think this agreement is a way to get Syrian troops out of Lebanon?

*Margaret Tutwiler.* We've been calling for all foreign troops to leave Lebanon. That is still our policy. I don't know if this is a way to facilitate that or not, but I know that our policy remains the same . . . The true measure of the treaty will be in its implementation. It should further Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. These objectives are clearly in the interest of all states in the region, including Israel.

## APPENDIX III: SYRIA AND DRUG TRAFFICKING

The Syrians turned Lebanon into a major center of narcotics growing, refining, and trafficking. In 1976, when the Syrians took control of the Bekaa Valley, a mere 10 percent of that region's acreage was devoted to raising marijuana; by 1982 it had expanded to nearly 90 percent. Also, the crop shifted from the less-profitable hemp to the more-profitable poppy. Today, the Lebanese grow over 200,000 pounds of hashish. In good years, they grow 100,000 pounds of opium, which turns into 20,000 pounds of heroin; and the 2,500 pounds of heroin that make it to the United States constitute about one-fifth of the American consumption of that drug.

Drugs have become the mainstay of the Lebanese economy, bringing in profits estimated at \$4 billion a year, or about one-half the country's foreign income. They are the principal source of funds for the Lebanese government and the means by which the Lebanese civil war has been funded. The drug industry is closely linked to terrorism, providing funds for Palestinian and other groups to pursue operations. Rachel Ehrenfeld goes so far as to write that "modern narco-terrorism began in Lebanon."<sup>1</sup>

The Syrian regime appears to be directly complicit in the raising and exporting of drugs, down to the stationing of Syrian soldiers at checkpoints in villages producing drugs. Indeed, Uzi Berger, chief of the Israeli police Criminal Investigation Department, holds that the Syrian leadership itself has for years been involved in drug trafficking; officials at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) note that Syrian commanders charge traffickers between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per kilo to get the drugs past Syrian military checkpoints in the Bekaa Valley.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Syrian officers compete to serve in the Bekaa Valley. On occasion,

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<sup>1</sup>Rachel Ehrenfeld, *Narco-Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>*The Jerusalem Post*, April 26, 1990; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 7, 1991.

they extort money by threatening to destroy opium crops, only relenting on the payment of a sizeable bribe.

Many reports link the drug trade to the international airport in Damascus; for example, Robert Fisk of *The Independent* tells how his trip to the Bekaa Valley spurred a return visit to Beirut by two members of a hashish-growing family. When he showed no interest in exporting drugs, they assured him that they could get any amount out “through Damascus International Airport—to the country of your choice.”<sup>3</sup> The DEA estimates that trafficking brings about \$1 billion a year to the Syrian authorities.

The following excerpts derive from the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* for 1991. From the chapter on Lebanon (p. 301):

We believe that Syria tolerates and profits from the drug production and trafficking in the areas [of Lebanon] over which it exercises control.

From the chapter on Syria (pp. 304-06):

Syria is a transit point for illicit drugs as well as a refiner of heroin. Lebanese-produced hashish and heroin destined for Europe and the U.S. transit Syria . . .

Much of Syria’s trafficking activity stems from Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, where Syria maintains a military presence but fails to enforce anti-narcotics controls. Of greatest concern are numerous credible reports of the involvement of some Syrian officers and soldiers in facilitating the Bekaa drug trade through bribes and other corruption . . .

The USG has reliable reports that individual Syrian soldiers and other officials stationed in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, as well

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 123.

as higher-level Syrian military officials, are involved in the drug trade. While this is in clear violation of Syrian and Lebanese law, there is no evidence that any of these military officers or soldiers has been prosecuted for this activity. Such activities cause skepticism about Syria's professed interest in narcotics control

...

No known illicit cultivation takes place in Syria. The USG has received unverified reports that there are heroin laboratories in the vicinity of Aleppo which process opium grown in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

## APPENDIX IV: MIDDLE WATCH RECOMMENDATIONS

There are signs that Americans are becoming engaged in the human rights abuses of the Syrian regime. Amnesty International ran a full-page ad in March 1990 showing a group of blackened silhouettes, each with a name attached, and the following text: "These 30 Syrian citizens were seized and imprisoned by their government, and are probably being tortured. And they're the lucky ones."<sup>1</sup> Here is a comprehensive list of human rights-related recommendations proposed by Middle East Watch:<sup>2</sup>

To the Government of Syria:

Abolish the State of Emergency, remaining aspects of Martial Law and all exceptional legislation.

Abolish all special courts, including the Exceptional Military Courts, the State Security Courts and the Front-Line Field Tribunals.

Immediately release all prisoners held for their peaceful expression or association, as well as family members detained in lieu of persons sought by authorities, or detained in retaliation for their flight.

Promptly bring to trial all others held by the security forces.

Guarantee to all those arrested, for whatever reason, immediate access to family, to lawyers, and to medical care.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*, March 27, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990), pp. 135-36.

Allow international organizations and private human rights groups access to Syrian territory, to investigate charges of human rights violations and to verify human rights conditions.

Abolish all censorship, including control of the publication and circulation of newspapers, books, and periodicals, control of the cinema, control over universities and schools, and all other controls, *de jure* and *de facto*, over the expression of ideas.

Allow public meetings to be held without prior control.

Allow full freedom of association, including the formation of private organizations, professional associations, trade unions, and political parties without state interference.

Institute equality of rights and status for all political parties.

Treat all citizens equally, irrespective of their religion, language or nationality, and especially:  
—take all necessary steps to assure citizens that no one community in Syria is the recipient of acts of favoritism.

—give Kurds full freedom of language, celebration of holidays and other expressions of identity. Review the claims of those deprived of citizenship in 1962.

—allow Jews full freedom to travel and to emigrate, equally with all other Syrians. Abolish special mention of their religious or ethnic affiliation on identity documents, and end all other discriminatory treatment.

—allow Palestinians freedom of expression, of travel and of organization, equally with all Syrians, and cease all extraordinary security measures directed at this community.



To the United States Government and the Congress:

Keep in place existing sanctions. Broaden their significance, making them contingent on improvements in Syria's human rights.

Publicly condemn the Syrian government for its human rights violations as documented in the State Department's own annual report on human rights.

Work for resolutions in the United Nations and in the UN Commission on Human Rights condemning Syria for its gross rights violations.

Seek to engage the Syrian government in a dialogue on these human rights concerns.

Distance itself from relations with Syria, either directly or through its allies, which tend to give Syria political, economic or strategic support until such time as it proves that it has curbed its gross human rights abuses.

Conduct public hearings in Congress on human rights violations in Syria.

To the International Community:

The international community should bring pressure to bear on the Syrian government by political and other means to persuade it to cease its serious rights violations, including public statements of concern, support for multilateral sanctions, support for UN resolutions, and the like.

The United Nations and its various agencies should do everything in their power to focus attention on Syrian rights violations, and to call attention to Syria's commitments under the UN-sponsored international rights covenants.

Assad's looking to the West offers some reason to hope that Syrian atrocities will diminish. Damascus claimed to have released over sixty political prisoners in May 1991 and scattered rumors of a general amnesty for another fifteen thousand political prisoners, some of whom had languished in jail for the entire duration of Assad's presidency.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Al-Hayat* (London), May 24, 1991.

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